

CHAPTER XL

Two days after Sir John had been taken into confidence, Philip received a visit from Lady Bellamy that caused him a good deal of discomfort. After talking to him on general subjects for awhile, she rose to go.

"By the way, Mr. Caresfoot," she said, "I really had almost forgotten the object of my visit. You may remember a conversation we had together some time ago, when I was the means of paying a debt owing to you?"

Philip nodded.

"Then you will not have forgotten that one of the articles of our little verbal convention was, that if it should be considered to the interest of all the parties concerned, your daughter's old nurse was not to remain in your house?"

"I remember."

"Well, do you know, I cannot help thinking that it must be a bad thing for Angela to have so much of the society of an ill-educated and not very refined person like Pigott. I really advise you to get rid of her."

"She has been with me for twenty years, and my daughter is devoted to her. I can't turn her off."

"It is always painful to dismiss an old servant--almost as bad as discarding an old dress; but when a dress is worn out it must be thrown away. Surely the same applies to servants."

"I don't see how I am to send her away."

"I can quite understand your feelings; but then, you see, an agreement implies obligations on both sides, doesn't it? especially an agreement 'for value received,' as the lawyers say."

Philip winced perceptibly.

"I wish I had never had anything to do with your agreements."

"Oh! if you think it over, I don't think that you will say so. Well, that is settled. I suppose she will go pretty soon. I am glad to see you looking so well--very different from your cousin, I assure you. I don't think much of his state of health. Good-bye; remember me to Angela. By the way, I don't know if you have heard that George has met with a repulse in that direction; he does not intend to press matters any more at present; but, of course, the agreement holds all the same. Nobody knows what the morrow may bring forth."

"Where you and my amiable cousin are concerned, I shall be much surprised if it does not bring forth villany," thought Philip, as soon as he heard the front door close. "I suppose that it must be done about Pigott. Curse that woman, with her sorceress face. I wish I had never put myself into her power; the iron hand can be felt pretty plainly through her velvet glove."

Life is never altogether clouded over, and that morning Angela's horizon had been brightened by two big rays of sunshine that came to shed their cheering light on the grey monotony of her surroundings. For of late, notwithstanding its occasional spasms of fierce excitement, her life had been as monotonous as it was miserable. Always the same anxious grief, the same fears, the same longing pressing hourly round her like phantoms in the mist--no, not like phantoms, like real living things peeping at her from the dark. Sometimes, indeed, the presentiments and intangible terrors that were gradually strengthening their hold upon her would get beyond her control, and arouse in her a restless desire for action--any action, it did not matter what--that would take her away out of these dull hours of unwholesome mental growth. It was this longing to be doing something that drove her, fevered physically with the stifling air of the summer night, and mentally by thoughts of her absent lover and recollections of Lady Bellamy's ominous words, down to the borders of the lake on the evening of George's visit to her father, and once there, prompted her to try to forget her troubles for awhile in the exercise of an art of which she had from childhood been a mistress.

The same feeling it was too, that led her to spend long hours of the day and even of the night, when by rights she should have been asleep, immersed in endless mathematical studies, and in solving, or attempting to solve, almost impossible problems. She found that the strenuous effort of the brain acted as a counter-irritant to the fretting of her troubles, and though it may seem an odd thing to say, mathematics alone, owing to the intense application they required, exercised a soothing effect upon her. But, as one cannot constantly sleep induced by chloral without paying for it in some shape or form, Angela's relief from her cares was obtained at no small cost to her health. When the same brain, however well developed it may be, has both to study hard and suffer much, there must be a waste of tissue somewhere. In Angela's case the outward and visible result of this state of things was to make her grow thinner, and the alternate mental effect to increasingly rarefy an intellect already too ethereal for this work-a-day world, and to plunge its owner into fits of depression which were rendered dreadful by sudden forebodings of evil that would leap to life in the recesses of her mind, and for a moment cast a lurid glare upon its gloom, such as at night the lightning gives to the blackness which surrounds it.

It was in one of the worst of these fits, her "cloudy days" as she would call them to Pigott, that good news found her. As she was dressing, Pigott brought her a letter, which, recognizing Lady Bellamy's bold handwriting, she opened in fear and trembling. It

contained a short note and another letter. The note ran as follows:

"Dear Angela,

"I enclose you a letter from your cousin George, which contains what I suppose you will consider good news. _For your own sake_ I beg you not to send it back unopened as you did the last.

"A. B."

For a moment Angela was tempted to mistrust this enclosure, and almost come to the determination to throw it into the fire, feeling sure that a serpent lurked in the grass and that it was a cunningly disguised love-letter. But curiosity overcame her, and she opened it as gingerly as though it were infected, unfolding the sheet with the handle of her hair-brush. Its contents were destined to give her a surprise. They ran thus:

"Isleworth Hall, September 20.

"My dear Cousin,

"After what passed between us a few days ago you will perhaps be

surprised at hearing from me, but, if you have the patience to read this short letter, its contents will not, I fear, be altogether displeasing to you. They are very simple. I write to say that I accept your verdict, and that you need fear no further advances from me. Whether I quite deserved all the bitter words you poured out upon me I leave you to judge at leisure, seeing that my only crime was that I loved you. To most women that offence would not have seemed so unpardonable. But that is as it may be. After what you said there is only one course left for a man who has any pride--and that is to withdraw. So let the past be dead between us. I shall never allude to it again. Wishing you happiness in the path of life which you have chosen,

"I remain,

"Your affectionate cousin,

"George Caresfoot."

It would have been difficult for any one to have received a more perfectly satisfactory letter than this was to Angela.

"Pigott," she called out, feeling the absolute necessity of a confidant in her joy, and forgetting that that worthy soul had nothing but the most general knowledge of George's advances, "he has given me up; just think, he is going to let me alone. I declare that I feel quite fond of him."

"And who might you be talking of, miss?"

"Why, my cousin George, of course; he is going to let me alone, I tell you."

"Which, seeing how as he isn't fit to touch you with a pair of tongs, is about the least as he can do, miss, and, as for letting you alone, I didn't know as he ever proposed doing anything else. But that reminds me, miss, though I am sure I don't know why it should, how as Mrs. Hawkins, as was put in to look after the vicarage while the Reverend Fraser was away, told me last night how as she had got a telegraft the sight of which, she said, knocked her all faint like, till she turned just as yellow as the cover, to say nothing of four-and-six portorage, the which, however, she intends to recover from the Reverend--Lord, where was I?"

"I am sure I don't know, Pigott, but I suppose you were going to tell me what was in the telegram."

"Yes, miss, that's right; but my head does seem to wool up somehow so at times that I fare to lose my way."

"Well, Pigott, what was in the telegram?"

"Lord, miss, how you do hurry one, begging your pardon; only that the

Reverend Fraser--not but what Mrs. Hawkins do say that it can't be true, because the words warn't in his writing nor nothing like, as she has good reason to know, seeing that----"

"Yes, but what about Mr. Fraser, Pigott? Isn't he well?"

"The telegraft didn't say, as I remembers, miss; bless me, I forget if it was to-day or to-morrow."

"Oh, Pigott," groaned Angela, "do tell me what was in the telegram."

"Why, miss, surely I told you that the thing said, though I fancy likely to be in error----"

"What?" almost shouted Angela.

"Why, that the Reverend Fraser would be home by the midday train, and would like a beefsteak for lunch, not mentioning, however, anything about the onions, which is very puzzling to Mrs.----"

"Oh, I am glad; why could you not tell me before? Cousin George disposed of and Mr. Fraser coming back. Why, things are looking quite bright again; at least they would be if only Arthur were here," and her rejoicing ended in a sigh.

As soon as she thought that he would have finished his beefsteak, with

or without the onions, Angela walked down to the vicarage and broke in upon Mr. Fraser with something of her old gladsome warmth. Running up to him without waiting to be announced, she seized him by both hands.

"And so you are back at last? what a long time you have been away. Oh, I am so glad to see you."

Mr. Fraser, who, it struck her, looked older since his absence, turned first a little red and then a little pale, and said,

"Yes, Angela, here I am back again in the old shop; it is very good of you to come so soon to see me. Now, sit down and tell me all about yourself whilst I go on with my unpacking. But, bless me, my dear, what is the matter with you, you look thin, and as though you were not happy, and--where has your smile gone to, Angela?"

"Never mind me, you must tell me all about yourself first. Where have you been and what have you been doing all these long months?"

"Oh, I have been enjoying myself over half the civilized globe," he answered, with a somewhat forced laugh. "Switzerland, Italy, and Spain have all been benefited by my presence, but I got tired of it, so here I am back in my proper sphere, and delighted to again behold these dear familiar faces," and he pointed to his ample collection of classics. "But let me hear about yourself, Angela. I am tired of No. 1, I can assure you."

"Oh, mine is a long story, you will scarcely find patience to listen to it."

"Ah, I thought that there was a story from your face; then I think that I can guess what it is about. Young ladies' stories generally turn upon the same pivot," and he laughed a little softly, and sat down in a corner well out of the light. "Now, my dear, I am ready to give you my best attention."

Angela blushed very deeply, and, looking studiously out of the window, began, with many hesitations, to tell her story.

"Well, Mr. Fraser, you must understand first of all--I mean, you know, that I must tell you that--" desperately, "that I am engaged."

"Ah!"

There was a something so sharp and sudden about this exclamation that Angela turned round quickly.

"What's the matter, have you hurt yourself?"

"Yes; but go on, Angela."

It was an awkward story to tell, especially the George complication

part of it, and to any one else she felt that she would have found it almost impossible to tell it, but in Mr. Fraser she was, she knew, sure of a sympathetic listener. Had she known, too, that the mere mention of her lover's name was a stab to her listener's heart, and that every expression of her own deep and enduring love and each tone of endearment were new and ingenious tortures, she might well have been confused.

For so it was. Although he was fifty years of age, Mr. Fraser had not educated Angela with impunity. He had paid the penalty that must have resulted to any heart-whole man not absolutely a fossil, who had been brought into close contact with such a woman as Angela. Her loveliness appealed to his sense of beauty, her goodness to his heart, and her learning to his intellectual sympathies. What wonder that he learnt by imperceptible degrees to love her; the wonder would have been if he had not.

The reader need not fear, however; he shall not be troubled with any long account of Mr. Fraser's misfortune, for it never came to light or obtruded itself upon the world or even upon its object. His was one of those earnest, secret, and self-sacrificing passions of which, if we only knew it, there exist a good many round about us, passions which to all appearance tend to nothing and are entirely without object, unless it to be make the individuals on whom they are inflicted a little less happy, or a little more miserable, as the case may be, than he or she would otherwise have been. It was to strive to conquer

this passion, which in his heart he called dishonourable, that Mr. Fraser had gone abroad, right away from Angela, where he had wrestled with it, and prayed against it, and at last, as he thought, subdued it. But now, on his first sight of her, it rose again in all its former strength, and rushed through his being like a storm, and he realized that such love is of those things that cannot die. And perhaps it is a question if he really wished to lose it. It was a poor thing indeed, a very poor thing, but his own. There is something so divine about all true love that there lurks a conviction at the bottom of the hearts of most of us that it is better to love, however much we suffer, than not to love at all. Perhaps, after all, those really to be pitied are the people who are not capable of any such sensation.

But what Mr. Fraser suffered listening that autumn afternoon to Angela's tale of another's love and of her own deep return of that love, no man but himself ever knew. Yet still he heard and was not shaken in his loyal-heartedness, and comforted and consoled her, giving her the best advice in his power, like the noble Christian gentleman that he was; showing her too that there was little need of anxiety and every ground for hope that things would come to a happy and successful issue. The martyr's abnegation of self is not yet dead in the world.

At last Angela came to the letter that she had that very morning received from George. Mr. Fraser read it carefully.

"At any rate," he said, "he is behaving like a gentleman now. On the whole, that is a nice letter. You will be troubled with him no more."

"Yes," answered Angela, and then flushing up at the memory of George's arguments in the lane, "but it is certainly time that he did, for he had no business, oh, he had no business to speak to me as he spoke, and he a man old enough to be my father."

Mr. Fraser's pale cheeks coloured a little.

"Don't be hard upon him because he is old, Angela--which by the way he is not, he is nearly ten years my junior--for I fear that old men are just as liable to be made fools of by a pretty face as young ones."

From that moment, not knowing the man's real character, Mr. Fraser secretly entertained a certain sympathy for George's sufferings, arising no doubt from a fellow-feeling. It seemed to him that he could understand a man going very far indeed when his object was to win Angela: not that he would have done it himself, but he knew the temptation and what it cost to struggle against it.

It was nearly dark when at length Angela, rising to go, warmly pressed his hand, and thanked him in her own sweet way for his goodness and kind counsel. And then, declining his offer of escort, and saying that she would come and see him again on the morrow, she departed on her homeward path.

The first thing that met her gaze on the hall-table at the Abbey House was a note addressed to herself in a handwriting that she had seen in many washing bills, but never before on an envelope. She opened it in vague alarm. It ran as follows:

"Miss,--Yore father has just dismissed me, saying that he is too pore to keep me any longer, which is a matter as I holds my own opinion on, and that I am too uneddicated to be in yore company, which is a perfect truth. But, miss, not feeling any how ekal to bid you good-bye in person after bringing you up by hand and doing for you these many years, I takes the liberty to write to you, miss, to say good-bye and God bless you, my beautiful angel, and I shall be to be found down at the old housen at the end of the drift as my pore husband left me, which is fortinately just empty, and p'raps you will come and see me at times, miss.

"Yore obedient servant,

"Pigott.

"I opens this again to say how as I have tied up your things a bit afore I left leaving mine till to-morrow, when, if living, I shall send for them. If you please, miss, you will find yore clean night-shift in the left hand drawyer, and sorry am I that I can't be there to lay it out for you. I shall take the liberty to send

up for your washing, as it can't be trusted to any one."

Angela read the letter through, and then sank back upon a chair and burst into a storm of tears. Partially recovering herself, however, she rose and entered her father's study.

"Is this true?" she asked, still sobbing.

"Is what true?" asked Philip, indifferently, and affecting not to see her distress.

"That you have sent Pigott away?"

"Yes, yes, you see, Angela----"

"Do you mean that she is really to stop away?"

"Of course I do, I really must be allowed, Angela----"

"Forgive me, father, but I do not want to listen to your reasons and excuses." Her eyes were quite dry now. "That woman nursed my dying mother, and played a mother's part to me. She is, as you know, my only woman friend, and yet you throw her away like a worn-out shoe. No doubt you have your reasons, and I hope that they are satisfactory to you, but I tell you, reasons or no reasons, you have acted in a way

that is cowardly and cruel;" and casting one indignant glance at him she left the room.

Philip quailed before his daughter's anger.

"Thank goodness she's gone, and that job is done with. I am downright afraid of her, and the worst of it is she speaks the truth," said Philip to himself, as the door closed.

Ten days after this incident, Angela heard casually from Mr. Fraser that Sir John and Lady Bellamy were going on a short trip abroad for the benefit of the former's health. If she thought about the matter at all, it was to feel rather glad. Angela did not like Lady Bellamy, indeed she feared her. Of George she neither heard nor saw anything. He had also gone away.