

CHAPTER XLVIII

Reader, have you ever, in the winter or early spring, come from a hot-house where you have admired some rich tropical bloom, and then, in walking by the hedgerows, suddenly seen a pure primrose opening its sweet eye, and looking bravely into bitter weather's face? If so, you will, if it is your habit to notice flowers, have experienced some such sensation as takes possession of my mind when I pass from the story of Mildred as she was then, storm-tossed and loving, to Angela, as loving indeed, and yet more anxious, but simple-minded as a child, and not doubtful for the end. They were both flowers indeed, and both beautiful, but between them there was a wide difference. The one, in the richness of her splendour, gazed upon the close place where she queened it, and was satisfied with the beauty round her, or, if not satisfied, she could imagine none different. The limits of that little spot formed the horizon of her mind--she knew no world beyond. The other, full of possibilities, shed sweetness even on the blast which cut her, and looked up for shelter towards the blue sky she knew endured eternally above the driving clouds.

Whilst Sir John Bellamy's health was being recruited at Madeira, Angela's daily life pursued an even and, comparatively speaking, a happy course. She missed Pigott much, but then she often went to see her, and by way of compensation, if she had gone, so had George Caresfoot and Lady Bellamy. Mr. Fraser, too, had come back to fill a space in the void of her loneliness, and for his presence she was very

grateful. Indeed none but herself could know the comfort and strength she gathered from his friendship, none but himself could know what it cost him to comfort her. But he did not shrink from the duty; indeed, it gave him a melancholy satisfaction. He loved her quite as dearly, and with as deep a longing as Mildred Carr did Arthur; but how different were his ends! Of ultimately supplanting his rival he never dreamt; his aim was to assist him, to bring the full cup of joy, untainted, to his lips. And so he read with her and talked with her, and was sick at heart; and she thanked him, and consecrating all her most sacred thoughts to the memory of her absent lover, and all her quick energies to self-preparation for his coming, possessed her soul in patience.

And thus her young life began to bloom again with a fresh promise. The close of each departing day was the signal for the lifting of a portion of her load, for it brought her a day nearer to her lover's arms, subtracting something from the long tale of barren hours; since to her all hours seemed most barren that were not quickened by his presence. Indeed, no Arctic winter could be colder and more devoid of light and life than this time of absence was to her, and, had it not been for the warm splendour of her hopes, shooting its beautiful promise in unreal gleams across the blackness of her horizon, she felt as though she must have frozen and died. For hope, elusive as she is, often bears a fairer outward mien than the realization to which she points, and, like a fond deceiver, serves to keep the heart alive till the first bitterness is overpast, and, schooled in trouble, it can

know her false, and yet remain unbroken.

But sometimes Angela's mood would change, and then, to her strained and sensitive mind, this dead calm and cessation of events would seem to resemble that ominous moment when, in tropic seas, the fierce outrider of the tempest has passed howling away clothed in flying foam. Then comes a calm, and for a space there is blue sky, and the sails flap drearily against the mast, and the vessel only rocks from the violence of her past plunging, while the scream of the sea-bird is heard with unnatural clearness, for there is no sound nor motion in the air. Intenser still grows the silence, and the waters almost cease from tossing; but the seaman knows that presently, with a sudden roar, the armies of the winds and waves will leap upon him, and that a struggle for life is at hand.

Such fears, however, did not often take her, for, unlike Arthur, she was naturally of a hopeful mind, and, when they did, Mr. Fraser would find means to comfort her. But this was soon to change.

One afternoon--it was Christmas Eve--Angela went down the village to see Pigott, now comfortably established in the house her long departed husband had left her. It was a miserable December day, a damp, unpleasant ghost of a day, and all the sky was packed with clouds, while the surface of the earth was wrapped in mist. Rain and snow fell noiselessly by turns; indeed, the only sound in the air was the loud dripping of water from the trees on the dead leaves beneath. The whole

outlook was melancholy in the extreme. While Angela was in her old nurse's cottage, the snow fell in earnest for an hour or so, and then held up again, and when she came out the mist had recovered its supremacy, and now the snow was melting.

"Come, miss, you must be getting home, or it will be dark. Shall I come with you a bit?"

"No, thank you, Pigott. I am not afraid of the dark, and I ought to know my way about these parts. Good-night, dear."

The prevailing dismalness of the scene oppressed her, and she made up her mind to go and see Mr. Fraser, instead of returning at present to her lonely home. With this view, leaving the main road that ran through Rewtham, Bratham, and Isleworth to Roxham, she turned up a little bye-lane which led to the foot of the lake. Just as she did so, she heard the deadened footfall of a fast-trotting horse, accompanied by the faint roll of carriage-wheels over the snow. As she turned half involuntarily to see who it was that travelled so fast, the creeping mist was driven aside by a puff of wind, and she saw a splendid blood-horse drawing an open victoria trotting past her at, at least, twelve miles an hour. But, quickly as it passed, it was not too quick for her to recognize Lady Bellamy wrapped up in furs, her dark, stern face looking on straight before her, as though the mist had no power to dim her sight. Next second the dark closed in, and the carriage had vanished like a dream in the direction of Isleworth.

Angela shivered; the dark afternoon seemed to have grown darker to her.

"So she is back," she said to herself. "I felt that she was back. She makes me feel afraid."

Going on her way, she came to a spot where the path forked, one track leading to a plank with a hand-rail spanning the stream that fed the lake, and the other to some stepping-stones, by crossing which and following the path on the other side a short cut could be made to the rectory. The bridge and the stepping-stones were not more than twenty yards apart, but so intent was Angela upon her own thoughts and upon placing her feet accurately on the stones that she did not notice a little man with a red comforter, who was leaning on the hand-rail, engaged apparently in meditation. The little man, however, noticed her, for he gave a violent start, and apparently was about to call out to her, when he changed his mind. He was Sir John Bellamy.

"Better let her go perhaps, John," he said, addressing his own effigy in the water. "After all, it will be best for you to let things to take their course, and not to burn your own fingers or commit yourself in any way, John. You will trap them more securely so. If you were to warn the girl now, you would only expose them; if you wait till he has married her, you will altogether destroy them with the help of that young Heigham. And perhaps by that time you will have touched those

compromising letters, John, and made a few other little arrangements, and then you will be able to enjoy the sweets of revenge meted out with a quart measure, not in beggarly ones or twos. But you are thinking of the girl--eh, John? Ah! you always were a pitiful beggar; but tread down the inclination, decline to gratify it. If you do, you will spoil your own hand. The girl must take her chance--oh! clearly the girl must take her chance. But all the same, John, you are very sorry for her--very. Come, come, you must be off, or her ladyship and the gentle George will be kept waiting," and away he went at a brisk pace, cheerfully singing a verse of a comic song. Sir John was a merry little man.

In due course Angela reached the rectory, and found Mr. Fraser seated in his study reading.

"Well, my dear, what brings you here? What a dreary night!"

"Yes, it is dreadfully damp and lonesome; the people look like ghosts in the mist, and their voices sound hollow. A proper day for evil things to creep home," and she laughed drearily.

"What do you mean," he answered, with a quick glance at her face, which wore an expression of nervous anxiety.

"I mean that Lady Bellamy has come home; is she not an evil thing?"

"Hush, Angela; you should not talk so. You are excited, dear. Why should you call her evil?"

"I don't know; but have you ever noticed her? Have you never seen her creep, creep, like a tiger on its prey? Watch her dark face, and see the bad thoughts come and peep out of her eyes as the great black pupils swell and then shrivel, till they are no larger than the head of this black pin, and you will know that she is evil, and does evil work."

"My dear, my dear, you are upset to talk so."

"Oh! no, I am not upset; but did you ever have a presentiment?"

"Plenty; but never one that came true."

"Well, I have a presentiment now--yes, a presentiment--it caught me in the mist."

"What is it? I am anxious to hear."

"I don't know--I cannot say; it is not clear in my mind. I cannot see it, but it is evil, and it has to do with that evil woman."

"Come, Angela, you must not give way to this sort of thing; you will make yourself ill. Sit down, there is a good girl, and have some tea."

She was standing by the window staring out into the mist, her fingers alternately intertwining and unlacing themselves, whilst an unusual-- almost an unearthly expression, played upon her face. Turning, she obeyed him.

"You need not fear for me. I am tough, and growing used to troubles. What was it you said? Oh! tea. Thank you; that reminds me. Will you come and have dinner with me to-morrow after church? It is Christmas Day, you know. Pigott has given me a turkey she has been fattening, and I made the mincemeat myself, so there will be plenty to eat if we can find the heart to eat it."

"But your father, my dear?"

"Oh! you need not be afraid. I have got permission to ask you. What do you think? I actually talked to my father for ten whole minutes yesterday; he wanted to avoid me when he saw me, but I caught him in a corner. He took advantage of the opportunity to try to prevent me from going to see Pigott, but I would not listen to him, so he gave it up. What did he mean by that? Why did he send her away? What does it all mean? Oh! Arthur, when will you come back, Arthur?" and, to Mr. Fraser's infinite distress, she burst into tears.