

CHAPTER XLIX

Presentiments are no doubt foolish things, and yet, at the time that Angela was speaking of hers to Mr. Fraser, a consultation was going on in a back study at Isleworth that might almost have justified it. The fire was the only light in the room, and gathered round it, talking very low, their features thrown alternately into strong light and dark shadow, were George Caresfoot and Sir John and Lady Bellamy. It was evident from the strong expression of interest, almost of excitement, on their faces that they were talking of some matter of great importance.

Sir John was, as usual, perched on the edge of his chair, rubbing his dry hands and eliciting occasional sparks in the shape of remarks, but he was no longer merry; indeed, he looked ill at ease. George, his red hair all ruffled up, and his long limbs thrust out towards the fire, spoke scarcely at all, but glued his little bloodshot eyes alternately on the faces of his companions, and only contributed an occasional chuckle. But the soul of this witches' gathering was evidently Lady Bellamy. She was standing up, and energetically detailing some scheme, the great pupils of her eyes expanding and contracting as the unholy flame within them rose and fell.

"Then that is settled," she said, at last.

George nodded, Bellamy said nothing.

"I suppose that silence gives consent. Very well, I will take the first step to-morrow. I do not like Angela Caresfoot, but, upon my word, I shall be sorry for her before she is twenty-four hours older. She is made of too fine a material to be sold into such hands as yours, George Caresfoot."

George looked up menacingly, but said nothing.

"I have often urged you to give this up; now I urge no more--the thing is done in spirit, it may as well be done in reality. I told you long ago that it was a most dreadfully wicked thing, and that nothing but evil can come of it. Do not say that I have not warned you."

"Come, stop that devil's talk," growled George.

"Devil's talk!--that is a good word, George, for it is of the devil's wages that I am telling you. Now listen, I am going to prophecy. A curse will fall upon this house and all within it. Would you like to have a sign that I speak the truth? Then wait." She was standing up, her hand stretched out, and in the dim light she looked like some heathen princess urging a bloody sacrifice to her gods. Her forebodings terrified her hearers, and, by a common impulse, they rose and moved away from her.

At that moment a strange thing happened. A gust of wind, making its

way from some entrance in the back of the house, burst open the door of the room in which they were, and entered with a cold flap as of wings. Next second a terrible crash resounded from the other end of the room. George turned white as a sheet, and sank into a chair, cursing feebly. Bellamy gave a sort of howl of terror, and shrank up to his wife, almost falling into the fire in his efforts to get behind her. Lady Bellamy alone, remaining erect and undaunted, laughed aloud.

"Come, one of you brave conspirators against a defenceless girl, strike a light, for the place is as dark as a vault, and let us see what has happened. I told you that you should have a sign."

After several efforts, George succeeded in doing as she bade him, and held a candle forward in his trembling hand.

"Come, don't be foolish," she said; "a picture has fallen, that is all."

He advanced to look at it, and then benefited his companions with a further assortment of curses. The picture, on examination, proved to be a large one that he had, some years previously, had painted of Isleworth, with the Bellamys and himself in the foreground. The frame was shattered, and all the centre of the canvass torn out by the weight of its fall on to a life-sized and beautiful statue of Andromeda chained to a rock, awaiting her fate with a staring look of agonized terror in her eyes.

"An omen, a very palpable omen," said Lady Bellamy, with one of her dark smiles. "Isleworth and ourselves destroyed by being smashed against a marble girl, who rises uninjured from the wreck. Eh, John?"

"Don't touch me, you sorceress," replied Sir John, who was shaking with fear. "I believe that you are Satan in person."

"You are strangely complimentary, even for a husband."

"Perhaps I am, but I know your dark ways, and your dealings with your master, and I tell you both what it is; I have done with the job. I will have nothing more to do with it. I will know nothing more about it."

"You hear what he says," said Lady Bellamy to George. "John does not like omens. For the last time, will you give it up, or will you go on?"

"I can't give her up--I can't indeed; it would kill me," answered George, wringing his hands. "There is a fiend driving me along this path."

"Not a doubt of it," said Sir John, who was staring at the broken picture with chattering teeth, and his eyes almost starting out of his head; "but if I were you, I should get him to drive me a little

straighter, that's all."

"You are poor creatures, both of you," said Lady Bellamy; "but we will, then, decide to go on."

"Fiat 'injuria' ruat coelum," said Sir John, who knew a little Latin; and, frightened as he was, could not resist the temptation to air it.

And then they went and left George still contemplating the horror-stricken face of the nude marble virgin whose eyes appeared to gaze upon the ruins of his picture.

Next morning, being Christmas Day, Lady Bellamy went to church, as behoves a good Christian, and listened to the Divine message of peace on earth and good-will towards men. So, for the matter of that, did George, and so did Angela. After church, Lady Bellamy went home to lunch, but she was in no mood for eating, so she left the table, and ordered the victoria to be round in half an hour.

After church, too, Angela and Mr. Fraser ate their Christmas dinner. Angela's melancholy had to some extent melted beneath the genial influence of the Christmas-tide, and her mind had taken comfort from the words of peace and everlasting love that she had heard that morning, and for awhile, at any rate, she had forgotten her forebodings. The unaccustomed splendour of the dinner, too, had diverted her attention, for she was easily pleased with such things,

and altogether she was in a more comfortable frame of mind than she had been on the previous evening, and was inclined to indulge in a pleasant talk with Mr. Fraser upon various subjects, mostly classical and Arthurian. She had already cracked some filberts for him, plucked by herself in the autumn, and specially saved in a damp jar, and was about to settle herself in a chair by the fire, when suddenly she turned white and stood quite still.

"Hark!" she said, "do you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Lady Bellamy's horse--the big black horse that trots so fast."

"I can hear nothing, Angela."

"But I can. She is on the high-road yet; she will be here very soon; that horse trots fast."

"Nonsense, Angela; it is some other horse."

But, as he spoke, the sound of a powerful animal trotting very rapidly became distinctly audible.

"It has come--the evil news--and she has brought it."

"Rubbish, dear; somebody to see your father, no doubt."

A minute elapsed, and then Mrs. Jakes, now the only servant in the house, was heard shuffling along the passage, followed by a firm, light step.

"Don't leave me," said Angela to Mr. Fraser. "God give me strength to bear it," she went on, beneath her breath. She was still standing staring vacantly towards the door, pale, and her bosom heaving. The intensity of her anxiety had to some extent communicated itself to Mr. Fraser, for there are few things so catching as anxiety, except enthusiasm; he, too, had risen, and was standing in an attitude of expectancy.

"Lady Bellamy to see yer," said Mrs. Jakes, pushing her head through the half-opened door.

Next second she had entered.

"I must apologize for disturbing you at dinner, Angela," she began hurriedly, and then stopped and also stood still. There was something very curious about her reception, she thought; both Mr. Fraser and Angela might have been cut out of stone, for neither moved.

Standing thus in the silence of expectancy, the three made a strange picture. On Lady Bellamy's face there was a look of stern

determination and suppressed excitement such as became one about to commit a crime.

At last she broke the silence.

"I come to bring you bad news, Angela," she said.

"What have you to say? tell me, quick! No, stop, hear me before you speak. If you have come here with any evil in your heart, or with the intention to deceive or betray, pause before you answer. I am a lonely and almost friendless woman, and have no claim except upon your compassion; but it is not always well to deal ill with such as I, since we have at last a friend whose vengeance you too must fear. So, by the love of Christ and by the presence of the God who made you, speak to me only such truth as you will utter at his judgment. Now, answer, I am ready."

At her words, spoken with an earnestness and in a voice which made them almost awful, a momentary expression of fear swept across Lady Bellamy's face, but it went as quickly as it came, and the hard, determined look returned. The mysterious eyes grew cold and glittered, the head erected itself. At that moment Lady Bellamy distinctly reminded Mr. Fraser of a hooded cobra about to strike.

"Am I to speak before Mr. Fraser?"

"Speak!"

"What is the good of this high-flown talk, Angela? You seem to know my news before I give it, and believe me it pains me very much to have to give it. _He is dead, Angela._"

The cobra had struck, but as yet the poison had scarcely begun to work. There was only numbness. Mr. Fraser gave a gasp and half dropped, half fell, into his chair. The noise attracted Angela's attention, and pressing her hand to her forehead she turned towards him with a ghost of a laugh.

"Did I not tell you that this evil woman would bring evil news." Then addressing Lady Bellamy, "But stop, you forget what I said to you, you do not speak the truth. Arthur dead! How can Arthur be dead and I alive? How is it that I do not know he is dead? Oh, for shame, it is not true, he is not dead."

"This seems to me to be a thankless as well as a painful task," said Lady Bellamy, hoarsely, "but, if you will not believe me, look here, you know this, I suppose? I took it, as he asked me to do, from his dead hand that it might be given back to you."

"If Mr. Heigham is dead," said Mr. Fraser, "how do you know it, where did he die, and what of?"

"I know it, Mr. Fraser, because it was my sad duty to nurse him through his last illness at Madeira. He died of enteric fever. I have got a copy of his burial certificate here which I had taken from the Portuguese books. He seems to have had no relations living, poor young man, but Sir John communicated with the family lawyer. Here is the certificate," and she handed Mr. Fraser a paper written in Portuguese and officially stamped.

"You say," broke in Angela, "that you took this ring from his dead hand, the hand on which I placed it. I do not believe you. You beguiled it from his living hand. It cannot be that he is dead; for, if he were, I should have felt it. Oh, Arthur!" and in her misery she stretched out her arms and turned her agonized eyes upwards, "if you are dead, come to me, and let me see your spirit face, and hear the whisper of your wings. Have you no voice in the silence? You see he does not come, he is not dead; if he were dead, Heaven could not hold him from my side, or, if it could, it would have drawn me up to his."

"My love, my love," said Mr. Fraser, in a scared voice, "it is not God's will that the dead should come back to us thus----"

"My poor Angela, why will you not believe me? This is so very painful, do you suppose that I want to torture you by saying what is not true about your love? The idea is absurd. I had meant to keep it till you were calmer; but I have a letter for you. Read it and convince yourself."

Angela almost snatched the paper from her outstretched hand. It ran thus, in characters almost illegible from weakness:--

"Dearest,--Good-bye. I am dying of fever. Lady Bellamy will take back your ring when it is over. Try to forget me, and be happy. Too weak to write more. Good-bye. God----"

At the foot of this broken and almost illegible letter was scrawled the word, "ARTHUR."

Angela read it slowly, and then at length the poison did its work. She did not speak wildly any more, or call upon Arthur; she was stung back to sense, but all the light went out of her eyes.

"It is his writing," she said, slowly. "I beg your pardon. It was good of you to nurse him."

Then, pressing the paper to her bosom with one hand, with the other she groped her way towards the door.

"It is very dark," she said.

Lady Bellamy's eyes gave a flash of triumph, and then she stood

watching the pitiable exhibition of human misery as curiously as ever a Roman matron did an expiring gladiator. When Angela was near the door, the letter still pressed against her heart, she spoke again.

"The blow comes from God, Angela, and the religion and spiritual theories which you believe in will bring you consolation. Most likely it is a blessing in disguise--a thing that you will in time even learn to be thankful for."

Lady Bellamy had overacted her part. The words did not ring true, they jarred upon Mr. Fraser; much more did they jar upon Angela's torn nerves. Her pale cheek flushed, and she turned and spoke, but there was no anger in her face, nothing but sorrow that dignified, and unfathomable love lost in its own depths. Only the eyes seemed as sightless as those of one walking in her sleep.

"When your hour of dreadful trouble comes, as it will come, pray God that there may be none to mock you as you mock me." And she turned like a stricken thing, and went slowly out, blindly groping her way along.

Her last words had hit the victor hard. Who can say what hidden string they touched, or what prescience of evil they awakened? But they went nigh to felling her. Clutching the mantel-piece, Lady Bellamy gasped for air; then, recovering a little, she said:

"Thank God, that is over."

Mr. Fraser scarcely saw this last incident. So overwhelmed was he at the sight of Angela's agony that he had covered his face with his hand. When he lifted it again, Lady Bellamy was gone, and he was alone.