

## CHAPTER L

Three months had passed since that awful Christmas Day. Angela was heart-broken, and, after the first burst of her despair, turned herself to the only consolation which was left her. It was not of this world.

She did not question the truth of the dreadful news that Lady Bellamy had brought her, and, if ever a doubt did arise in her breast, a glance at the ring and the letter effectually quelled it. Nor did she get brain-fever or any other illness; her young and healthy frame was too strong a citadel to be taken out of hand by sorrow. And this to her was one of the most wonderful things in her affliction. It had come and crushed her, and life still went on much as before. The sun of her system had fallen, and yet the system was not appreciably deranged. It was dreadful to her to think that Arthur was dead, but an added sting lay in the fact that she was not dead too. Oh! how glad she would have been to die, since death had become the gate through which she needs must pass to reach her lover's side.

For it had been given to Angela, living so much alone, and thinking so long and deeply upon these great mysteries of our being, to soar to the heights of a noble faith. To the intense purity of her mind, a living heaven presented itself, a comfortable place, very different from the vague and formularised abstractions with which we are for the most part satisfied; where Arthur and her mother were waiting to greet

her, and where the great light of the Godhead would shine around them all. She grew to hate her life, the dull barrier of the flesh that stood between her and her ends. Still she ate and drank enough to support it, still dressed with the same perfect neatness as before, still lived, in short, as though Arthur had not died, and the light and colour had not gone out of her world.

One day--it was in March--she was sitting in Mr. Fraser's study reading the "Shakespeare" which Arthur had given to her, and in the woes of others striving to forget her own. But the attempt proved a failure; she could not concentrate her thoughts, they would continually wander away into space in search of Arthur.

She was dressed in black; from the day that she heard her lover was dead, she would wear no other colour, and as she gazed, with her hands idly clasped before her, out at the driving sleet and snow, Mr. Fraser thought that he had never seen statue, picture, or woman of such sweet, yet majestic beauty. But it had been filched from the features of an immortal. The spirit-look which at times had visited her from a child now continually shone upon her face, and to the sight of sinful men her eyes seemed almost awful in their solemn calm and purity. She smiled but seldom now, and, when she did, it was in those grey eyes that the radiance began: her features scarcely seemed to move.

"What are you thinking of, Angela?"

"I am thinking, Mr. Fraser, that it is only fourteen weeks to-day since Arthur died, and that it is very likely that I shall live another forty or fifty years before I see him. I am only twenty-one, and I am so strong. Even this shock has not hurt me."

"Why should you want to die?"

"Because all the beauty and light has gone out of my life; because I prefer to trust myself into the hands of God rather than to the tender mercies of the world; because he is there, and I am here, and I am tired of waiting."

"Have you no fear of death?"

"I have never feared death, and least of all do I fear it now. Why, the veriest coward would not shrink back when the man she loved was waiting for her. And I am not a coward, and if I were told that I must die within an hour, I could say, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace!' Cannot you understand me? If all your life and soul were wrapped up in one person, and she died, would you not long to go to her?"

Mr. Fraser made no reply for a while, but in his turn gazed out at the drifting snow, surely not more immaculately pure than this woman who could love with so divine a love. At length he spoke.

"Angela, do you know that it is wrong to talk so? You have no right to set yourself up against the decrees of the Almighty. In His wisdom He is working out ends of which you are one of the instruments. Who are you that you should rebel?"

"No one--a grain, an atom, a wind-tossed feather; but what am I to do with my life, how am I to occupy all the coming years?"

"With your abilities, that is a question easy to answer. Work, write, take the place in scholastic or social literature which I have trained you to fill. For you, fame and fortune lie in an inkstand; your mind is a golden key that will open to your sight all that is worth seeing in the world, and pass you into its most pleasant places. You can become a famous woman, Angela."

She turned upon him sadly.

"I had such ideas; for Arthur's sake I wished to do something great; indeed I had already formed a plan. But, Mr. Fraser, like many another, when I lost my love I lost my ambition too; both lie buried in his grave. I have nothing left to work for; I do not care for fame or money for myself, they would only have been valuable to give to him. At twenty-one I seem to have done with the world's rewards and punishments, its blanks and prizes, its satisfactions and desires, even before I have learnt what they are. My hopes are as dull and leaden as that sky, and yet the sun is behind it. Yes, that is my only

hope, the sun is behind it though we cannot see it. Do not talk to me of ambition, Mr. Fraser. I am broken-spirited, and my only ambition is for rest, the rest He gives to His beloved----"

"Rest, Angela! that is the cry of us all, we strive for rest, and here we never find it. You suffer, but do not think that you are alone, everybody suffers in their degree, though perhaps such as you, with the nerves of your mind bared to the roughness of the world's weather, feel mental pain the more acutely. But, my dear, there are few really refined men and women of sensitive organization, who have not at times sent up that prayer for rest, any rest, even eternal sleep. It is the price they pay for their refinement. But they are not alone. If the heart's cry of every being who endures in this great universe could be collected into a single prayer, that prayer would be, 'Thou who made us, in pity give us rest.'"

"Yes, we suffer, no doubt, all of us, and implore a peace that does not come. We must learn

"How black is night when golden day is done,  
How drear the blindness that hath seen the sun!"

"You can tell me that; but tell me, you who are a clergyman, and stronger to stand against sorrow than I, how can we win even a partial peace and draw the sting from suffering? If you know a way, however hard, tell it me, for do you know," and she put her hand to her head

and a vacant look came into her eyes, "I think that if I have to endure much more of the anguish which I sometimes suffer, or get any more shocks, I shall go mad? I try to look to the future only and to rise superior to my sorrows, and to a certain extent I succeed, but my mind will not always carry the strain put upon it, but falls heavily to earth like a winged bird. Then it is that, deprived of its higher food, and left to feed upon its own sadness and to brood upon the bare fact of the death of the man I loved--I sometimes think, as men are not often loved--that my spirit almost breaks down. If you can tell me any cure, anything which will bring me comfort, I shall indeed be grateful to you."

"I think I can, Angela. If you will no longer devote yourself to study, you have only to look round to find another answer to your question as to what you are to do? Are there no poor in these parts for you to visit? Cannot your hands make clothes to cover those who have none? Is there no sickness that you can nurse, no sorrow that you can comfort? I know that even in this parish there are many homes where your presence would be as welcome as a sunbeam in winter. Remember, Angela, that grief can be selfish as well as pleasure."

"You are right, Mr. Fraser, you always are right; I think I am selfish in my trouble, but it is a fault that I will try to mend. Indeed, to look at it in that light only, my time is of no benefit to myself, I may as well devote it to others."

"If you do, your labour will bring its own reward, for in helping others to bear their load you will wonderfully lighten your own. Nor need you go far to begin. Why do you not see more of your own father? You are naturally bound to love him. Yet it is but rarely that you speak to him."

"My father! you know he does not like me, my presence is always a source of irritation to him, he cannot even bear me to look at him."

"Oh, surely that must be your fancy; probably he thinks you do not care about him. He has always been a strange and wayward man, I know, but you should remember that he has had bitter disappointments in life, and try to soften him and win him to other thoughts. Do this and you will soon find that he will be glad enough of your company."

"I will try to do as you say, Mr. Fraser, but I confess I have only small hopes of any success in that direction. Have you any parish work I can do?"

Nor did the matter end there, as is so often the case where parish work and young ladies are concerned. Angela set to her charitable duties with a steady determination that made her services very valuable. She undertook the sole management of a clothing club, in itself a maddening thing to ordinary mortals, and had an eye to the distribution of the parish coals. Of mothers' meetings and other cheerful parochial entertainments, she became the life and soul.

Giving up her mathematics and classical reading, she took to knitting babies' vests and socks instead; indeed, the number of articles which her nimble fingers turned out in a fortnight was a pleasant surprise for the cold toes of the babies. And, as Mr. Fraser had prophesied, she found that her labour was of a sort which brought a certain reward.