

CHAPTER LI

On one point, however, Angela's efforts failed completely; she could make no headway with her father. He shrank more than ever from her society, and at last asked her to oblige him by allowing him to follow his own path in peace. Of Arthur's death he had never spoken to her, or she to him, but she knew that he had heard of it.

Philip had heard of it thus. On that Christmas afternoon he had been taking his daily exercise when he met Lady Bellamy returning from the Abbey House. The carriage stopped, and she got out to speak to him.

"Have you been to the Abbey House to pay a Christmas visit?" he asked.

"It is very kind of you to come and see us so soon after your return."

"I am the bearer of bad news, so I did not loiter."

"Bad news! what was it?"

"Mr. Heigham is dead," she answered, watching his face narrowly.

"Dead, impossible!"

"He died of enteric fever at Madeira. I have just been to break the news to Angela."

"Oh, indeed, she will be pained; she was very fond of him, you know."

Lady Bellamy smiled contemptuously.

"Did you ever see any one put to the extremest torture? If you have, you can guess how your daughter was 'pained.'"

Philip winced.

"Well, I can't help it, it is no affair of mine. Good-bye," and then, as soon as she was out of hearing; "I wonder if she lies, or if she has murdered him. George must have been putting on the screw."

Into the particulars of Arthur Heigham's death, or supposed death, he never inquired. Why should he? It was no affair of his; he had long ago washed his hands of the whole matter, and left things to take their chance. If he was dead, well and good, he was very sorry for him; if he was alive, well and good also. In that case, he would no doubt arrive on the appointed date to marry Angela.

But, notwithstanding all this unanswerable reasoning, he still found it quite impossible to look his daughter in the face. Her eyes still burnt him, ay, even more than ever did they burn, for her widowed dress and brow were agony to him, and rent his heart, not with remorse but fear. But still his greed kept the upper hand, though death by mental torture must result, yet he would glut himself with his desire.

More than ever he hungered for those wide lands which, if only things fell out right, would become his at so ridiculous a price. Decidedly Arthur Heigham's death was "no affair of his."

About six weeks before Angela's conversation with Mr. Fraser which ended in her undertaking parish work, a rumour had got about that George Caresfoot had been taken ill, very seriously ill. It was said that a chill had settled on his lungs, which had never been very strong since his fever, and that he had, in short, gone into a consumption.

Of George, Angela had neither seen nor heard anything for some time--not since she received the welcome letter in which he relinquished his suit. She had, indeed, with that natural readiness of the human mind to forget unpleasant occurrences, thought but little about him of late, since her mind had been more fully occupied with other and more pressing things. Still she vaguely wondered at times if he was really so ill as her father thought.

One day she was walking home by the path round the lake, after paying a visit to a sick child in the village, when she suddenly came face to face with her father. She expected that he would as usual pass on without addressing her, and drew to one side of the path to allow him to do so, but to her surprise he stopped.

"Where have you been, Angela?"

"To see Ellen Mim; she is very ill, poor child."

"You had better be careful; you will be catching scarlet fever or something--there is a great deal about."

"I am not at all afraid."

"Yes; but you never think that you may bring it home to me."

"I never thought that there was any likelihood of my bringing anything to you. We see so little of each other."

"Well, well, I have been to Isleworth to see your cousin George; he is very ill."

"You told me that he was ill some time back. What is it that is really the matter with him?"

"Gallop consumption. He cannot last long."

"Poor man, why does he not go to a warmer climate?"

"I don't know--that is his affair. But it is a serious matter for me. If he dies under present circumstances, all the Isleworth estates, which are mine by right, must pass away from the family forever."

"Why must they pass away?"

"Because your grandfather, with a refined ingenuity, made a provision in his will that George was not to leave them back to me, as he was telling me this afternoon he is anxious to do. If he were to die now with a will in my favour, or without any will at all, they would all go to some far away cousins in Scotland."

"He died of heart-disease, did he not?--my grandfather, I mean?"

Philip's face grew black as night, and he shot a quick glance of suspicion at his daughter.

"I was saying," he went on, without answering her question, "that George may sell the land or settle it, but must not leave it to me or you, nor can I take under an intestacy."

Angela did not understand these legal intricacies, and knew about as much about the law of intestacy as she did of Egyptian inscriptions.

"Well," she said, consolingly, "I am very sorry, but it can't be helped, can it?"

"The girl is a born fool," muttered Philip beneath his breath, and passed on.

A week or so afterwards, just when the primroses and Lent-lilies were at the meridian of their beauty and all the air was full of song, Angela heard more about her cousin George. Mr. Fraser was one day sent for to Isleworth; Lady Bellamy brought him the message, saying that George was in such a state of health that he wished to see a clergyman.

"I never saw a worse case," he said to Angela on his return. "He does not leave the house, but lies in a darkened room coughing and spitting blood. He is, I should say, going off fast; but he refuses to see a doctor. His frame of mind, however, is most Christian, and he seems to have reconciled himself to the prospect of a speedy release."

"Poor man!" said Angela sympathetically; "he sent and asked to see you, did he not?"

"Well--yes; but when I got there he talked more about the things of this world than of the next. He is greatly distressed about your father. I daresay you have heard how your cousin George supplanted your father in the succession to the Isleworth estates. Your grandfather disinherited him, you know, because of his marriage with your mother. Now that he is dying, he sees the injustice of this, but is prevented by the terms of your grandfather's will from restoring the land to your branch of the family, so it must pass to some distant cousins--at least, so I understand the matter."

"You always told me that it is easy to drive a coach and four through wills and settlements and legal things. If he is so anxious to do so, can he not find a way out of the difficulty--I mean, some honourable way?"

"No, I believe not, except an impossible one," and Mr. Fraser smiled a rather forced smile.

"What is that?" asked Angela carelessly.

"Well, that he should--should marry you before he dies. At least, you know, he says that that is the only way in which he could legally transfer the estates."

Angela started and turned pale.

"Then I am afraid the estates will never be transferred. How would that help him?"

"Well, he says he could then enter into a nominal sale of the estates to your father and settle the money on you."

"And why could he not do this without marrying me?"

"I don't know, I don't understand much about these things, I am not a

business man; but it is impossible for some reason or another. But of course it is absurd. Good night, my dear. Don't overdo it in the parish."

Another week passed without any particular news of George's illness, except that he was getting weaker, when one day Lady Bellamy appeared at the Abbey House, where she had not been since that dreadful Christmas Day. Angela felt quite cold when she saw her enter, and her greeting was as cold as herself.

"I hope that you bring me no more bad news," she said.

"No, Angela, except that your cousin George is dying, but that is scarcely likely to distress you."

"I am sorry."

"Are you? There is no particular reason why you should be. You do not like him."

"No, I do not like him."

"It is a pity though, because I have come to ask you to marry him."

"Upon my word, Lady Bellamy, you seem to be the chosen messenger of everything that is wretched. Last time you came to this house it was

to tell me of dear Arthur's death, and now it is to ask me to marry a man whom I detest. I thought that I had told both you and him that I will not marry him. I have gone as near marrying as I ever mean to in this world."

"Really, Angela, you are most unjust to me. Do you suppose that it was any pleasure to me to have such a sad duty to perform? However, it is refreshing to hear you talk so vigorously. Clearly the loss of your lover has not affected your spirits."

Angela winced beneath the taunt, but made no reply.

"But, if you will condescend to look at the matter with a single grain of common-sense, you will see that circumstances have utterly changed since you refused to marry George. Then, Mr. Heigham was alive, poor fellow, and then, too, George wanted to marry you as a wife, now he is merely anxious to marry you that he may be enabled to make reparation to your father. He is a fast-dying man. You would never be his wife except in name. The grave would be his only marriage-bed. Do you not understand the difference?"

"Perfectly, but do you not understand that whether in deed or in name I cannot outrage my dead Arthur's memory by being for an hour the wife of that man? Do you not know that the marriage service requires a woman to swear to 'Love, honour, and obey,' till death parts, whether it be a day or a lifetime away? Can I, even as a mere form,

swear to love when I loathe, honour when I despise, obey when my whole life would rise in rebellion against obedience! What are these estates to me that I should do such violence to my conscience and my memories? Estates, of what use are they to one whose future lies in the wards of a hospital or a sisterhood? I will have nothing to do with this marriage, Lady Bellamy."

"Well, I must say, Angela, you do not make much ado about ruining your father to gratify your own sentimental whims. It must be a comfortable thing to have children to help one in one's old age."

Angela reflected on Mr. Fraser's words about her duty to her father, and for the second time that day she winced beneath Lady Bellamy's taunt; but, as she returned no answer, her visitor had no alternative but to drop the subject and depart.

Before she went, however, she had a few words with Philip, urging the serious state of George's health and the terms of his grandfather's will, which prevented him from leaving the estates to himself, as a reason why he should put pressure on Angela. Somewhat, but not altogether to her surprise, he refused in these terms:

"I don't know to what depths you have gone in this business, and it is no affair of mine to inquire, but I have kept to my share of the bargain and I expect you to keep to yours. If you can bring about the marriage with George, well or ill, on the terms I have agreed upon

with him, I shall throw no obstacle in the way; but as for my trying to force Angela into it, I should never take the responsibility of doing so, nor would she listen to me. If she speaks to me on the subject I shall point out how the family will be advantaged, and leave the matter to her. Further I will not go."