

CHAPTER LII

Three days after her conversation with Lady Bellamy, Angela received the following letter:--

"Isleworth Hall, Roxham, May 2.

"Dear Cousin Angela,

"My kind and devoted friend, Lady Bellamy, has told me that she has spoken to you on a subject which is very near to my heart, and that you have distinctly declined to have anything to do with it. Of course I know that the matter lies entirely within your own discretion, but I still venture to lay the following points before you. There have, I am aware, been some painful passages between us --passages which, under present circumstances, had much better be forgotten. So, first, I ask you to put them quite out of your mind, and to judge of what I have to propose from a very different point of view.

"I write, Angela, to ask you to marry me it is true (since, unfortunately, my health will not allow me to ask you in person), but it is a very different offer from that which I made you in the lane when you so bitterly refused me. Now I am solely anxious that the marriage should take place in order that I may be enabled to

avoid the stringent provisions of your grandfather's will, which, whilst forbidding me to leave these estates back to your father or his issue, fortunately does not forbid a fictitious sale and the settlement of the sum, or otherwise. But I will not trouble you with these legal details.

"In short, I supplanted your father in youth, and I am now anxious to make every reparation in my power, and at present I am quite unable to make any. Independently of this, it pains me to think of the estate passing away from the old stock, and I should like to know that you, who have been the only woman whom I have felt true affection for, will one day come into possession of it. Of course, as you understand, the marriage would be nothing but a form, and if, as I am told, you object to its being gone through with the ceremonies of the Church, it could be made equally legal at a registry office.

"But please understand, Angela, that I do not wish to press you: it is for you to judge. Only you must judge quickly, for I am a fast-dying man, and am anxious to get this matter off my mind one way or other, in order that I may be able to give it fully to the consideration of subjects of more vital importance to one in my condition, than marrying and giving in marriage.

"Ever, dear cousin Angela,

"Affectionately yours,

"George Caresfoot."

"P.S.--Remember you have your father to consider in this matter as well as yourself."

The receipt of this letter plunged Angela into the greatest distress of mind. It was couched in a tone so courteous and so moderate that it carried with it conviction of its sincerity and truth. If she only had been concerned, she would not long have hesitated, but the idea of her duty to her father rose up before her like a cloud. What was her true duty under the circumstances? there was the rub!

She took the letter to Mr. Fraser and asked his advice. He read it carefully, and thought a long while before he answered. The idea of Angela being united to anybody in marriage, even as a matter of form, was naturally abominable to him, but he was far too honourable and conscientious a man to allow his personal likes or dislikes to interfere with whatever he considered to be his duty. But in the end he found it impossible to give any fixed opinion.

"My dear," he said, "all that I can suggest is that you should take it to your father and hear what he has got to say. After all, it is he who must have your true welfare most at heart. It was into his hands that I heard your mother, in peculiarly solemn words, consign you and your interests. Take it to your father, dear, there is no counsel like

that of a father."

Had Mr. Fraser been the father, this would, doubtless, have been true enough. But though he had known him for so many years, and was privy to much of his history, he did not yet understand Philip Caresfoot. His own open and guileless nature did not easily suspect evil in another, more especially when that other was the father of her whom he looked upon as the earthly incarnation of all that was holy and pure.

Angela sighed and obeyed--sighed from doubt, obeyed from duty. She handed the letter to Philip without a word--without a word he read it.

"I want your opinion, father," she said. "I wish to do what is right. You know how painful what has happened has been for me. You know--or, if you do not know, you must have guessed--how completely shattered my life is. As for this marriage, the whole thing is repugnant to me; personally, I had rather sacrifice fifty properties than go through it, but I know that I ought to think of others. Mr. Fraser tells me that it is my duty to consult you, that you will naturally have my interest most at heart, that it was into your hands and to your care that my mother consigned me on her deathbed. Father"--and she clasped her hands and looked him full in the face with her earnest eyes--"Mr. Fraser is right, it must be for you to decide. I will trust you entirely, and leave the burden of decision to your honour and generosity; only I say, spare me if you can."

Philip rose and went to look out of the window, that he might hide the evident agitation of his face and the tremor of his limbs. He felt that the crucial moment had come. All his poor sophistry, all his miserable shuffling and attempts to fix the responsibility of his acts on others, had recoiled upon his own head. She had come to him and laid the burden on his heart. What should he answer? For a moment the shades--for with him they were only shades--of good angels gained the upper hand, and he was about to turn and look her in the face--for then he felt he could have looked her in the face--and bid her have nothing to do with George and his proposals. But, even in the act of turning to obey the impulse, his eyes fell upon the roof of Isleworth Hall, which, standing on an eminence, could easily be seen from the Abbey House, and his mind, quicker than the eye, flew to the outlook place upon that roof where he had so often climbed as a boy, and surveyed the fair champaign country beyond it; meadow and wood, fallow and cornland, all of which were for him involved in that answer. He did not stop turning, but--so quick is the working of the mind--he changed the nature of his answer. The real presence of the demon of greed chased away the poor angelic shadows.

"It would not be much of a sacrifice for you, Angela, to go through this form; he is a dying man, and you need not even change your name. The lands are mine by right, and will be yours. It will break my heart to lose them, after all these years of toiling to save enough to buy them. But I do not wish to force you. In short, I leave the matter to your generosity, as you would have left it to mine."

"And suppose that I were to marry my cousin George, and he were not to die after all, what would be my position then? You must clearly understand that, to save us all from starvation, I would never be his wife."

"You need not trouble yourself with the question. He is a dead man; in two months' time he will be in the family vault."

She bowed her head and left him--left him with his hot and glowing greed, behind which crept a terror.

Next morning, George Caresfoot received the following letter:

"Bratham Abbey, May 5.

"Dear Cousin George,

"In reply to your letter, I must tell you that I am willing to go through the form of marriage with you--at a registry-office, not in church--in order to enable you to carry out the property arrangements you wish to make. You must, however, clearly understand that I do not do this on my own account, but simply and solely to benefit my father, who has left the matter to my 'generosity.' I must ask you as a preliminary step to make a copy

of and sign the enclosed letter addressed to me. Our lives are in the hand of God, and it is possible that you might be restored to health. In such an event, however improbable it may seem, it cannot be made too plain that I am not, and have never in any sense undertaken to be, your wife.

"Truly yours,

"Angela Caresfoot."

The enclosure ran as follows:

"I, George Caresfoot, hereby solemnly promise before God that under no possible circumstance will I attempt to avail myself of any rights over my cousin, Angela Caresfoot, and that I will leave her as soon as the formal ceremony is concluded, and never again attempt to see her except by her own wish; the so-called marriage being only contemplated in order to enable me to carry out certain business arrangements which, in view of the failing state of my health, I am anxious to enter into."

This letter and its curious enclosure, surely the oddest marriage contract which was ever penned, George, trembling with excitement, thrust into the hands of Lady Bellamy. She read them with a dark

smile.

"The bird is springed," she said, quietly. "It has been a close thing, but I told you that I should not fail, as I have warned you of what will follow your success. Sign this paper--this waste-paper--and return it."