

CHAPTER LIII

By return of post Angela received her strange agreement, duly copied and signed, and after this the preparations for the marriage went on rapidly. But where such a large transaction is concerned as the sale of between three and four thousand acres of land, copyhold and freehold, together with sundry rent-charges and the lordship of six manors, things cannot be done in a minute.

Both George and Philip and their respective lawyers--Sir John would have nothing to do with the matter--did their best to expedite matters, but unfortunately some legal difficulty arose in connection with the transfer, and who can hurry the ponderous and capricious machinery of the law?

At length it became clear to all concerned, except Angela, that it would be impossible for the marriage to take place before the eighth of June, and it also became clear that that was the last possible day on which it could take place. George begged Philip (by letter, being too ill to come and see him) to allow the marriage to be gone through with at once, and have the business transactions finished afterwards. But to this Philip would not consent; the title-deeds, he said, must be in his possession before it took place, otherwise he would have no marriage. George had therefore no option but to accept his terms.

When Angela was told of the date fixed for the ceremony--she would not

allow the word marriage to be mentioned in connection with it--she at first created considerable consternation by quietly announcing that she would not have it performed until the tenth of June. At last, however, when matters were growing serious, and when she had treated all the pressure that it was possible to put upon her with quiet indifference--for, as usual, her father declined to interfere, but contented himself with playing a strictly passive part--she suddenly of her own mere motion, abolished the difficulty by consenting to appear before the registrar on the eighth of June, as George wished.

Her reasons for having objected to this date in the first instance will be easily guessed. It was the day before the anniversary of Arthur's departure, an anniversary which it was her fancy to dedicate solely to his memory. But as the delay appeared--though she could not altogether understand why--to put others to great inconvenience, and as George's state of health had become such as to render postponement, even for a couple of days of doubtful expediency, and as, moreover, she decided on reflection that she could better give her thoughts to her dead lover when she had gone through with the grim farce that hung over her, she suddenly changed her mind.

Occasionally they brought her documents to sign, and she signed them without a question, but on the whole she treated the affair with considerable apathy, the truth being that it was repugnant to her mind, which she preferred to occupy with other and very different thoughts. So she let it go. She knew that she was going to do a thing

which was dreadful to her, because she believed it to be her duty, but she comforted herself with the reflection that she was amply secured against all possible contingencies by her previous agreement with George. Angela's knowledge of the marriage-law of her country and of what constituted a legal document was not extensive.

For this same reason, because it was distasteful, she had never said anything of her contemplated marriage to Pigott, and it was quite unknown in the neighbourhood. Since the Miss Lee scandal and his consequent disinheritance, nobody had visited Philip Caresfoot, and those who took interest in him or his affairs were few. Indeed the matter had been kept a dead secret. But on the seventh of June, being the day previous to the ceremony, Angela went down to her nurse's cottage and told her what was about to be done, suppressing, however, from various motives, all mention of her agreement with George. It added to her depression to find that Pigott was unaccountably disturbed at the news.

"Well, miss," she said,--"Lord, to think that I sha'n't be able to call you that no longer--I haven't got nothing in particular to say agin it, seeing that sure enough the man's a-dying, as I has on good authority from my own aunt's cousin, her that does the servants' washing up at the Hall, and mighty bad she does it, begging of her pardon for the disparagement, and so he won't trouble you for long, and somehow it do seem as though you hadn't got no choice left in the matter, just as though everybody and everything was a-quietly pushing

you into it. But, miss, somehow I don't like it, to be plain; a marriage as ain't no marriage ain't altogether natural like, and in an office, too, along with a man as you would not touch with a pair of tongs, and that man on his last leg. I'm right down sorry if I makes you feel uncomfortable, dearie; but, bless me, I don't know how it is, but, when a thing sticks in my mind, I'm as bound to hawk it up as though it were a bone in my throat."

"I don't like it any more than you do, nurse, but perhaps you don't understand all about the property being concerned, and about its having to pass away from my father, if I don't do this. I care nothing about the property, but he left it to 'my generosity!' Arthur is dead; and he left it to 'my generosity,' nurse. What could I do?"

"Well, miss, you're acting according to what you thinks right and due to your father, which is more nor I does; and poor, dead Mr. Arthur up in Heaven there will make a note of that, there ain't no manner of doubt. And somehow it do seem that things can't be allowed to go wrong with you, my dear, seeing how you're a-sacrificing of yourself and of your wishes to benefit others."

This conversation did not tend to put Angela into better spirits, but she felt that it was now too late to recede.

Whilst Angela was talking to Pigott, Sir John and Lady Bellamy were paying a call at Isleworth. They found George lying on the sofa in the

dining-room, in which, though it was the first week in June, a fire was burning on the hearth. He bore all the signs of a man in the last stage of consumption. The hollow cough, the emaciation, and the hectic hue upon his face, all spoke with no uncertain voice.

"Well, Caresfoot, you scarcely look like a bridegroom, I must say," said little Sir John, looking as pleased as though he had made an eminently cheerful remark.

"No, but I am stronger than I look; marriage will cure me."

"Humph! will it? Then you will be signally fortunate."

"Don't croak, Bellamy. I am happy to-day--there is fire dancing along my veins. Just think, this time to-morrow Angela will be my legal wife!"

"Well, you appear to have given a good price for the privilege, if what Anne tells me is correct. To sell the Isleworth estates for fifty thousand, is to sell them for a hundred and fifty thousand less than they are worth. Consequently, the girl costs you a hundred and fifty thousand pounds--a long figure that for one girl."

"Bah! you are a cold-blooded fellow, Bellamy. Can't you understand that there is a positive delight in ruining oneself for the woman one loves? And then, think how she will love me, when she comes to

understand what she has cost me. I can see her now. She will come and kiss me--mind you, kiss me of her own free will--and say, 'George, you are a noble fellow; George, you are a lover that any woman may be proud of; no price was too heavy for you.' Yes, that is what she will say, that sort of thing, you know."

Sir John's merry little eye twinkled with inexpressible amusement, and his wife's full lips curled with unutterable contempt.

"You are counting your kisses before they are paid for," she said.

"Does Philip come here this afternoon to sign the deeds?"

"Yes; they are in the next room. Will you come and see them?"

"Yes, I will. Will you come, John?"

"No, thank you. I don't wish to be treated to any more of your ladyship's omens. I have long ago washed my hands of the whole business. I will stop here and read the Times."

They went out, George leaning on Lady Bellamy's arm.

No sooner had they gone than Sir John put down the Times, and listened intently. Then he rose, and slipped the bolt of that door which opened into the hall, thereby halving his chances of interruption. Next, listening at every step, his round face, which was

solemn enough now, stretched forward, and looking for all the world like that of some whiskered puss advancing on a cream-jug, he crept on tiptoe to the iron safe in the corner of the room. Arrived there, he listened again, and then drew a little key from his pocket, and inserted it in the lock; it turned without difficulty.

"Beau-ti-ful," murmured Sir John; "but now comes the rub." Taking another key, he inserted it in the lock of the subdivision. It would not turn. "One more chance," he said, as he tried a second. "Ah!" and open came the lid. Rapidly he extracted two thick bundles of letters. They were in Lady Bellamy's handwriting. Then he relocked the subdivision, and the safe itself, and put the keys away in his trousers and the packets in his coat-tail pockets, one in each, that they might not bulge suspiciously. Next he unbolted the door, and, returning, gave way to paroxysms of exultation too deep for words.

"At last," he said, stretching his fat little fist towards the room where George was with Lady Bellamy, "at last, after twenty years of waiting, you are in my power, my lady. Time has brought its revenge, and if before you are forty-eight hours older you do not make acquaintance with a bitterness worse than death, then my name is not John Bellamy. I will repay you every jot, and with interest, too, my lady!"

Then he calmed himself, and, ringing a bell, told the servant to tell Lady Bellamy that he had walked on home. When, an hour and a half

later, she reached Rewtham House, she found that her husband had been suddenly summoned to London on a matter of business.

That night in her desolation Angela cast herself upon the floor with outstretched arms and wept for her dead lover, and for the shame which overshadowed her. And the moon travelling up the sky, struck her, shining coldly on her snowy robe and rounded form--glinting on the stormy gold of her loosed hair--flooding all the room with light: till the white floor gleamed like a silver shrine, and she lay there a weeping saint. Then she rose and crept to such rest as utter weariness of body and mind can give.

All that night, too, George Caresfoot paced, hungry-eyed, up and down, up and down the length of his great room, his gaze fixed on the windows which commanded Bratham, like that of some caged tiger on a desired prey.

"To-morrow," he kept muttering; till the first ray of the rising sun fell blood-red upon his wasted form, and then, bathing his thin hands in its beams, he sank down exhausted, crying exultingly, "not to-morrow, but _to-day_."

That night Lady Bellamy sat at an open window, rising continually to turn her dark eyes upon the starry heavens above her.

"It is of no use," she said at last, "my knowledge fails me, my calculations are baffled by a quantity I cannot trace. I am face to face with a combination that I cannot solve. Let me try once more! Ah, supposing that the unknown quantity is a directing will which at the crisis shatters laws, and overrides even the immutability of the unchanging stars! I have heard of such a thing. Let me change the positions of our opposing planets, and then, see, it would all be clear as day. George vanishes, that I knew before. She sails triumphant through overshadowing influences towards a silver sky. And I, is it death that awaits me? No, but some great change; there the pale light of my fading star would fall into her bright track. Bah, my science fails, I can no longer prophesy. My knowledge only tells me of great events, of what use is such knowledge as that? Well, come what may, fate will find one spirit that does not fear him. As for this," and she pointed towards the symbols and calculations, "I have done with it. Henceforth I will devote myself to the only real powers which can enlighten us. Yet there is humiliation in failure after so many years of study. It is folly to follow a partial truth of which we miss the keynote, though we sometimes blunder on its harmonies."