

CHAPTER LIV

The arrangement for the morrow was that Angela and her father were to take a fly to Roxham, where the registry office was, and whither George was also to be conveyed in a close carriage; that the ceremony was then to be gone through, after which the parties were to separate and return to their respective homes. Mr. Fraser had been asked to attend, but had excused himself from doing so.

In pursuance of this programme, Angela and her father left the Abbey House about ten o'clock and drove in silence to the town. Strange as it may seem, Angela had never been in a town before, and, in the curious condition of her mind, the new sight of busy streets interested her greatly, and served to divert her attention till they reached the door of the office. She alighted and was shown with Philip into a waiting-room. And here, for some unexplained reason, a great fear took hold of her, a terror of this ceremony which now loomed large and life-like before her.

"Father," she said, suddenly, after a moment of irresolution, "I am going home. I will not go on with this business."

"What can you mean, Angela?"

"I mean what I say. I never realized how dreadful it all was till now; it has come upon me like a revelation. Come, I am going."

"Angela, don't be a fool. You forget that George will be here in a minute, and that the settlements are all signed."

"Then he can go back again and the settlements can be torn up. I will not go on with it."

Philip was by this time almost beside himself with anxiety. After having thus with thought and toil, and by the aid of a blessed chance, lifted this delicious cup to his lips, was it to be dashed from him? Were the sweet dreams so near approaching to realization, in which he had been wrapped for so many days, all to be dissipated into thin air? Was he to lose the land after all, after he had fingered--oh! how lovingly--the yellow title-deeds? For, alas! the sale depended on the marriage. It could not be, neither fate nor Angela could be so cruel. He turned upon her with the boldness of despair.

"Angela, you must not go on like this, after having agreed to the thing of your own free will. Think of what it involves for me. If you refuse to marry him now at the last moment, I shall lose the Isleworth estates. Heavens, to think that so much property should be dependent upon the mere whim of a girl! Cannot you have a little consideration for others beside yourself? Do you really mean to sacrifice the hopes of my whole life, to throw away the only opportunity I can ever have of righting my wrongs, in order to gratify a sentimental whim? For God's sake, think a little first before you sacrifice me. You promised

to do it."

Never before had Angela seen her father so strongly excited; he was positively shaking with agitation. She looked at him steadily, and with such contempt that, even in his excitement, he quailed before her.

"Very well, then, I will carry out my promise, dreadful as it is to me; but remember that it is only because you beg it, and that the responsibility of its consequences must always remain with you. Now, are you satisfied?--you will get your land."

Philip's dark face assumed a look of fervent gratitude, but before he had time to reply, a messenger came to say that "the gentleman" was waiting.

Her resolve once taken, Angela followed him with an untroubled face into the room where the registrar, a gentleman neatly dressed in black, was sitting at a sort of desk. Here the first thing her glance fell upon was the person of George Caresfoot. Although it was now the second week in June, he wore a respirator over his mouth and a scarf round his neck, and coughed very much. These were the first things she noticed. The next was that he was much thinner, so thin that the cheek-bones stood out from the level of his face, whilst the little blood-shot eyes seemed to protrude, giving to his general appearance, even with the mouth (his worst feature) hidden by the respirator, an

unusually repulsive look. He was leaning on the arm of Lady Bellamy, who greeted Angela with a smile which the latter fancied had something of triumph in it.

With the exception of the messenger, who played the part of clerk in this civil ceremony, there was nobody else in the room. No greetings were interchanged, and in another moment Angela was standing, dressed in her funeral black, by George's side before the registrar, and the ceremony had begun.

But from that moment, although her beautiful face preserved its composure, she scarcely saw or heard anything of what was going on. It was as though all the streams of thought in her brain had burst their banks and mingled in a great and turbulent current. She was filled with thought, but could seize upon no one idea, whilst within her mind she heard a sound as of the continuous whirring of broken machinery.

Objects and individuals, real and imagined, presented themselves before her mental vision, expanded till they filled the heavens with their bulk, and then shrank and shrank, and vanished into nothing. The word "wife" struck upon her ears, and seemed to go wailing away, "wife, wife, wife," through all the illimitable halls of sound, till they were filled with echoes, and sound itself fell dead against the silence of the stars.

It was done. She awoke to find herself a married woman. Lady Bellamy stepped forward with the same half-triumphant smile with which she had greeted Angela hovering about her lips.

"Let me congratulate you, _Mrs._ Caresfoot," she said; "indeed, I think I am privileged to do so, for, if I remember right, I was the first to prophesy this happy event;" and then, dropping her voice so that Angela alone could hear her, "Do you not remember that I told you that you would as certainly come to the altar rails within nine months with George Caresfoot as you would to your death-bed? I said that nine months ago to-day."

Angela started as though she had been stung.

"Events have been too strong for me," she murmured; "but all this is nothing but a form, a form that can now be forgotten."

Again Lady Bellamy smiled as she answered,

"Oh, of course, Mrs. Caresfoot, nothing but a form."

Angela's eye fell upon the ring on her finger. She tore it off.

"Take this back," she said, "I have done with it."

"A married woman must wear a ring, Mrs. Caresfoot."

She hurled it upon the floor.

Just then George and Philip returned from a little back-room where they had been with the registrar, who still remained behind, to sign the certificate. George advanced upon his wife with a dreadful smile on his features, removing the respirator as he came. His object was to kiss her, but she divined it and caught her father by the arm.

"Father," she said, "protect me from this man."

"Protect you, Angela; why, he is your husband!"

"My husband! Have you all agreed to drive me mad?"

Lady Bellamy saw that if something were not done quickly, there would be a shocking scene, which was the last thing she wanted, so she seized George and whispered in his ear, after which he followed her sulkily, turning round from time to time to look at Angela.

On her way from Roxham, Lady Bellamy stopped her carriage at the telegraph office and went in and wrote a telegram.

"I respect that woman, and she shall have her chance," she said, as she re-read it previous to handing it to the clerk.

Three hours later Mildred Carr received the following message at Madeira:

"From A. B. to Mrs. Carr, Quinta Carr, Madeira:

"Angela C. married her cousin G. C. this morning."

That night Lady Bellamy dined at Isleworth with George Caresfoot. The dinner passed over in almost complete silence; George was evidently plunged in thought, and could not eat, though he drank a good deal. Lady Bellamy ate and thought too. After the servants had gone, she began to speak.

"I want my price, George," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. You are now Angela Caresfoot's husband; give me back those letters as you promised, I am impatient to break my chains." He hesitated. "George," she said, in a warning voice, "do not dare to play with me; I warn you that your power over me is not what it used to be. Give me back those letters. I have done your wicked work for you and will have my pay."

"All right, Anne, and so you shall; when will you have them?"

"Now, this instant."

"But I have not got my keys."

"You forget your keys are on your watch-chain."

"Ah, to be sure, so they are. You won't turn round on me when you get them, will you, Anne?"

"Why should I turn on you? I wish to get the letters, and, if I can, to have done with you."

He went with a somewhat hesitating step to the iron safe in the corner of the room and opened it. The he opened the subdivision and rummaged about there for a while. At last he looked up.

"It is very curious, Anne," he said, in a half-frightened voice, "but I can't find them."

"George, give me those letters."

"I can't find them, Anne, I can't find them. If you don't believe me, come and look for yourself. Somebody must have taken them."

She advanced and did as he said. It was evident that the letters were not there.

"Once before when you were ill you hid them. Where have you hidden them now?"

"I haven't hidden them, Anne; I haven't, indeed."

She turned slowly and looked him full in the eyes. Her own face was ashy pale with fury, but she said never a word. Her silence was more terrible than words. Then she raised her hands and covered her eyes for a while. Presently she dropped them, and said, in a singularly soft voice,

"It is over now."

"What do you mean?" he asked, fearfully, for she terrified him.

"I mean a great deal, George Caresfoot. I mean that something has snapped the bond which bound me to you. I mean that I no longer fear you, that I have done with you. Use your letters, if you will, you can harm me no more; I have passed out of the region of your influence, out of the reach of your revenge. I look on you now and wonder what the link was between us, for there was a mysterious link. That I cannot tell. But this I can tell you. I have let go your hand, and you

are going to fall down a great precipice, George, a precipice of which I cannot see the foot. Yes, it is right that you should cower before me now; I have cowered before you for more than twenty years. You made me what I am. I am going into the next room now till my carriage comes, I did not order it till half-past ten. Do not follow me. But before I go I will tell you something, and you know I do not make mistakes. You will never sleep under this roof again, George Caresfoot, and we shall not meet again alive. You have had a long day, but your hour has struck."

"Who told you that, woman?" he asked, furiously.

"Last night I read it in the stars, to-night I read it in your face."

And again she looked at him, long and steadily, as he crouched in the chair before her, and then slowly left the room.

After awhile he roused himself, and began to drink wine furiously.

"Curse her," he said, as the fumes mounted into his brain, "curse her, she is trying to frighten me with her infernal magic, but she sha'n't. I know what she is at; but I will be beforehand with her." And, staggering under the mingled influence of drink and excitement, he rose and left the house.

Lady Bellamy sat in the drawing-room, and waited for her carriage; at

last she heard the wheels upon the gravel. Then she rose, and rapidly did something to the great lamp upon the paper-strewn table. As she shut the door she turned.

"That will do," she said.

In the hall she met the servant coming to announce the carriage.

"Is your master still in the dining-room?" she asked.

"No, my lady."

She laughed a little, and civilly bade the man good-night.