

## CHAPTER LV

Outside the door of the registry-office, Angela and her father had to make their way through a crowd of small boys, who had by some means or other found out that a wedding was going on inside, and stood waiting there, animated by the intention of cheering the bride and the certain hope of sixpences. But when they saw Angela, her stately form robed in black, and her sweet face betraying the anguish of her mind, the sight shocked their sense of the fitness of things, and they slipped off without a word. Indeed, a butcher's boy, with a turn for expressive language, remarked in indignation to another of his craft so soon as they had recovered their spirits.

"Call that a weddin', Bill; why, it's more like a--funeral with the plumes off; and as for the gal, though she's a 'clipper,' her face was as pale as a 'long 'un's.'"

Angela never quite knew how she got back to the Abbey House. She only remembered that she was by herself in the fly, her father preferring to travel on the box alone with the coachman. Nor could she ever quite remember how she got through the remainder of that day. She was quite mazed. But at length it passed, and the night came, and she was thankful for the night.

About nine o'clock she went up to her bedroom at the top of the house. It had served as a nursery for many generations of Caresfoots; indeed,

during the last three centuries, hundreds of little feet had pattered over the old worm-eaten boards. But the little feet had long since gone to dust, and the only signs of children's play and merriment left about the place were the numberless scratches, nicks, and letters cut in the old panelling, and even on the beams which supported the low ceiling.

It was a lonesome room for a young girl, or, indeed, for anybody whose nerves were not of the strongest. Nobody slept upon that floor or in the rooms beneath it, Philip occupying a little closet which joined his study on the ground floor. All the other rooms were closed, and tenanted only by rats that made unearthly noises in their emptiness. As for Jakes and his wife, the only servants on the place, they occupied a room over the washhouse, which was separate from the main building. Angela was therefore practically alone in a great house, and might have been murdered a dozen times over without the fact being discovered for hours. This did not, however, trouble her much, simply because she paid no heed to the noises in the house, and was singularly free from fear of any kind.

On reaching her room, she sat down and began to think of Arthur, and, as she thought, her mind grew clearer and more at peace. Indeed, it seemed to her that her dead lover was near, and as though she could distinguish pulsations of thought which came from him, impinging on her system, and bringing his presence with them. It is a common sensation, and occurs to many people of sensitive organization when

asleep or thinking on some one with whom they are in a high state of sympathy, and doubtless indicates some occult communication. But, as it chanced, it had never before visited Angela in this form, and she abandoned herself to its influence with delight. It thrilled her through and through.

How long she sat thus she could not tell, but presently the communication, whatever it was, stopped as suddenly as though the connecting link had been severed. The currents directed by her will would no longer do her bidding; they could not find their object, or, frightened by some adverse influence, recoiled in confusion on her brain. Several times she tried to renew this subtle intercourse that was so palpable and real, and yet so different from anything else in the world, but failed. Then she rose, feeling very tired, for those who thus draw upon the vital energies must pay the penalty of exhaustion. She took her Bible and read her nightly chapter, and then undressed and said her prayers, praying with unusual earnestness that it might please the Almighty in His wisdom to take her to where her lover was. Her prayers done, she rose, put on a white dressing wrapper, and, seating herself before the glass, unloosed her hair. Then she began to brush it, pausing presently to think how Arthur had admired its colour and the ripples on it. She had been much more careful of her hair since then, and smiled sadly to herself at her folly for being so.

Thinking thus, she fell into a reverie, and sat so still that a great

grey rat came noiselessly out of his hole in a corner of the room, and, advancing into the circle of light round the dressing-table, sat up on his hind legs to see if he was alone. Suddenly he turned and scuttled back to his hole in evident alarm, and at the same second Angela thought that she heard a sound of a different character from those she was accustomed to in the old house--a sound like the creaking of a boot. It passed, however, but left an indefinable dread creeping over her, and chilling the blood in her veins. She began to expect something, she knew not what, and was fascinated by the expectation. She would have risen to lock the door, but all strength seemed to have left her; she was paralysed by the near sense of evil. Then came a silence as intense as it was lonely.

It was a ghastly moment.

Her back was towards the doorway, for her dressing-table was immediately opposite the door, which was raised some four feet above the level of the landing, and approached by as many steps.

Gradually her eyes became riveted on the glass before her, for in it she thought that she saw the door move. Next second, she was sure that it was moving, very slowly; the hinges took an age to turn. What could be behind it? At last it was open, and in the glass Angela saw framed in darkness the head and shoulders of George Caresfoot. At first she believed that her mind deceived her, that it was an apparition. No, there was no mistake. But the respirator, the hollow

cough and decrepitude of the morning--where were they?

With horror in her heart, she turned and faced him. Seeing that he was observed, he staggered into the room with a step which was half drunken and half jaunty, but which belied the conflict of passions written on his brow. He spoke--his voice sounded hoarse and hollow, and was ill-tuned to his words.

"You did not expect me perhaps--wonder how I got here! Jakes let me in; he has got a proper respect for marital rights, has Jakes. You looked so pretty, I could not make up my mind to disturb you. Quite a romantic meeting, is it not?"

"You are a dying man. How did you come here?"

"Dying! my dear wife; not a bit of it. I am no more dying than you are. I have been ill, it is true, but that is only because you have fretted me so. The dying was only a little ruse to get your consent. All is fair in love and war, you know; and of course you never really believed in that precious agreement. That was nothing but a bit of maidenly shyness, eh?"

Angela stood still as a stone, a look of horror on her face.

"Then you don't know what you have cost me. Your father's price was a hundred and fifty thousand, at least that is what it came to, the old

shark! It isn't every man who would come down like for a girl, now is it? It shows a generous mind, doesn't it?"

Still she uttered not a syllable.

"Angela," he said, changing his tone to one of hoarse earnestness, "don't look at me like that, because, even if you are a bit put out at the trick I have played you, just think it was because I loved you so much, Angela. I couldn't help it, I couldn't really. It is not every man who would go through all that I have gone through for you; it is no joke to sham consumption for three months, I can tell you; but we will have many a laugh over that. Why don't you answer me, instead of standing there just like the Andromeda in my study?"

The simile was an apt one, the statue of the girl awaiting her awful fate wore the same hopeless, helpless look of vacant terror which was upon Angela's face now. But its mention recalled Lady Bellamy and the ominous incident in which that statue had figured, and he hastened to drown recollection in action.

"Come," he said, "you will forgive me, won't you? It was all done for love of you." And he moved towards her.

As he came she seemed to collect her energies; the fear left her face, and in its stead there shone a great and awful blaze of indignation.

Her brush was still in her hand, and as he drew near she dashed it full into his face. It was but a light thing, and only staggered him, but it gave her time to pass him, and reach the still open door. Bare-footed, she fled like the wind down the passages, and down the stairs. Uttering an oath, he followed her. But, as she went, she remembered that she could not run upon the gravel with her naked feet, and, with this in her mind, she turned to bay by a large window that gave light to the first-floor landing, immediately opposite which was the portrait of "Devil" Caresfoot. It was unbolted, and with a single movement of the hand she flung it open, and stood panting by it in the full light of the moon. In another moment he was upon her, furious at the blow, and his face contorted with passion.

"Stop," she cried, "and listen to me. Before I will allow you to touch me with a single finger, I will spring from here. I would rather thrust myself into the hands of Providence than into yours, monster and perjured liar that you are!"

He stopped as she bade him, and commenced to pace round and round her in a semicircle, glaring at her with wild eyes.

"If you jump from there," he said, "you will only break your limbs; it is not high enough to kill you. You are my wife, don't you understand? You are my legal wife, the law is on my side. No one can help you, no one; you are mine in the sight of the whole world."

"But not yours in the sight of God. It is to Him that I now appeal.  
Get back!"

She stretched out her arm, and with her golden hair glimmering in the moonlight, her white robes, and the anger on her face, looked like some avenging angel driving a fiend to hell. He shrank away from her, and there came a pause, and, save for their heavy breathing, stillness again fell upon the house, whilst the picture that hung above them seemed, in the half light, to follow them with its fierce eyes, as though it were a living thing.

The landing where they stood looked upon the hall below, at the end of which was Philip's study. Suddenly its door burst open, and Philip himself passed through it, grasping a candlestick in one hand and some parchments in the other. His features were dreadful to see, resembling those of a dumb thing in torture; his eyes protruded, his livid lips moved, but no sound came from them. He staggered across the hall with terror staring from his face.

"Father, father," called Angela; but he took no notice--he did not even seem to hear.

Presently they heard the candlestick thrown with a clash upon the hall pavement, then the front door slammed, and he was gone, and at that moment a great ruddy glow shot up the western sky, then a tongue of flame, then another and another.



"See," said Angela, with a solemn laugh, "I did not appeal for help in vain."

Isleworth Hall was in flames.