

## CHAPTER LVII

That night Arthur dreamed no evil dreams, but he thought he heard a sound outside his door, and some one speak of fire. Hearing nothing more, he turned and went to sleep again. Waking in the early dawn he felt, ere yet his senses fully came, a happy sense of something, he knew not what, a rosy shadow of coming joy, such as will, only with more intensity, fall upon our quickened faculties when, death ended, our souls begin to stir as we awaken to Eternity.

He sprang from his bed, and his eye fell on a morocco case upon the dressing-table. It contained the diamonds which he had had re-set as a wedding present to Angela. They were nothing compared with Mildred Carr's, but still extremely handsome, their beauty being enhanced by the elegance of the setting, which was in the shape of a snake with emerald head and ruby eyes, so constructed as to clasp tightly round Angela's shapely throat.

The sight of the jewellery at once recalled his present circumstances, and he knew that the long hour of trial was passed--he was about to meet Angela. Having dressed himself as quickly as he could, he took up the jewel-case, but, finding it too large to stow away, he opened it, and, taking out the necklace, crammed it into his pocket. Thus armed he slipped down the stairs, past the open common room where the light shone through the cracks in the shutters on a dismal array of sticky beer-mugs and spirit glasses, down the sanded passage into the village

street.

It was full daylight now, and the sun never looked upon a lovelier morning. The air was warm, but there was that sharp freshness in it which is needful to make summer weather perfect, and which we always miss by breakfasting at nine o'clock. The sky was blue, just flecked with little clouds; the dewdrops sparkled upon every leaf and blade of grass; touches of mist clung about the hollows, and the sweet breath of the awakened earth was full of the perfect scent of an English June, which is in its way even more delicious than the spicy odours of the tropics. It was a morning to make sick men well, and men happy, and atheists believers in a creative hand. How much more than did it fire Arthur's pulses, already bounding with youth and health, with an untold joy.

He felt like a child again, so free from care, so happy, except that his heart swelled with a love beyond the knowledge of children. His quick temperament had rebounded from the depths of unequal depression, into which it so often fell, to the heights of a happy assurance. The Tantalus cup was at his lips at last, and he would drink his full, be sure! His eyes flashed and sparkled, his foot fell light and quick as an antelope's, his brown cheek glowed--never had he looked so handsome. Angela would not forget her promise; she would be waiting for him by the lake, he was sure of that, and thither he made his way through the morning sunshine. They were happy moments.

Presently he passed into the parish of Bratham, and his eye fell upon a neat red brick cottage, a garden planted with sunflowers, and a bright gravel path running to the rustic gate. He thought the garden charmingly old-fashioned, and had just entered a mental note to ask Angela who lived there, when the door opened, and figure he knew emerged, bearing a mat in one hand and a mopstick in the other. He was some way off, and at first could not quite distinguish who it was; but before she had come to the gate he recognized Pigott. By this time she had stepped into the road, and was making elaborate preparations to dust her mat so that she did not see him, till he spoke to her.

"How are you, Pigott? What may you be doing down here? Why are you not up at the Abbey?"

She gave a cry, and the mat and mopstick fell from her hands.

"Mr. Heigham!" she said, in an awed voice that chilled his blood, "what has brought you back, and why do you come to me? I never wronged you."

"What are you talking about? I have come to marry Angela, of course. We are going to be married to-morrow."

"Oh, then it's really you, sir! And she married yesterday--oh, good God!"

"Don't laugh at me, nurse--please don't laugh. It--it upsets me. Why do you shake so? What do you mean?"

"Mean!--I mean that my Angela \_married her cousin, George Caresfoot, at Roxham, yesterday.\_ Heaven forgive me for having to tell it you!"

Reader, have you ever mortally wounded a head of large game? You hear your bullet thud upon the living flesh, and see the creature throw up its head and stagger for a moment, and then plunge forward with desperate speed, crashing through bush and reeds as though they were meadow-grass. Follow him awhile, and you will find him standing quite still, breathing in great sighs, his back humped and his eye dim, the gore trickling from his nostrils. He is dying--but be careful, he means mischief before he dies.

Any great shock, mental or physical, is apt to reduce man to the level of his brother beasts. Arthur, for instance, behaved very much like a wounded buffalo as soon as the stun of the blow passed away, and the rending pain began to make itself felt. For a few seconds he gazed before him stupid and helpless, then his face turned quite grey, the eyes and nostrils gaped wide, and a curious rigidity took possession of his muscles.

The road he was following led to a branching lane, the same that Angela was turning up that misty Christmas Eve when she saw Lady Bellamy glide past in her carriage. This lane had in former ages, no

doubt, to judge from its numerous curves, been an ancient forest-path, and it ran to the little bridge over the stream that fed the lake--a point that, by travelling as the crow flies from Pigott's cottage, might be reached in half the time. This fact Arthur seemed at that dreadful moment to suddenly realize, more probably from natural instinct than from any particular knowledge of the lay of the land. He did not speak again to Pigott, and she was too frightened at his face to speak to him. He only looked at her, but she never forgot that look so long as she lived. Then he turned like a mad thing, and went \_crash\_ through the thick fence that hedged the road, and ran at full speed towards the lake, diverging neither to the right nor to the left, but breaking his way without the slightest apparent difficulty through everything that opposed him.

Very soon he came to the little bridge, and here, struck by some new instinct, he halted. He did not appear to be out of breath, but he leaned on the rail of the bridge and groaned like a dying man. His ghastly face made a blot in the mimic scenery of the place, which was really very pretty. The bridge commanded no view, for the little creek it spanned, and into which the stream ran, gave a turn before it grew into the neck of the lake; but it was hedged in by greenery, and the still pool beneath it was starred with water-lilies, turning their innocent eyes up to the blue sky, and looking as peaceful as though there were no stormy winds or waters in the world to toss them. Amongst these water-lilies a moorhen had built her nest, and presently she came clucking out right under Arthur's feet, followed by ten or a

dozen little hurrying black balls, each tipped with sealing-wax red. She looked very happy with her brood--as happy as the lilies and the blue sky--and the sight made him savage. He took up a large stone that lay by him and threw it at her. It hit her on the back and killed her, and Arthur laughed loud as he watched her struggle, and then lie still, while the motherless chicks hurried, frightened, away. And yet since he was a boy he had never till now wantonly injured any living creature.

Presently, the dead water-hen floated out of sight, and he roused himself, straightened his clothes, which had been somewhat torn and deranged, and, with a steady step and a fixed smile upon his lips, went forward, no longer at a run, but walking quietly up the path that led to the big oak and shaded glen. In five minutes he was there.

Again he paused and looked. There was something to see. On one of the stone seats, dressed in black, her face deathly pale, her head resting on her hand, and trouble in her eyes, sat Angela. On the other was her constant companion, the dog which he had given her. He remembered how, a little more than a year before, she had surprised him in the same way, and he had looked upon her and loved her. He could even smile at the strange irony of fate that had, under such curiously reversed circumstances, brought him back to surprise her, to look upon her, and hate her.

She moved uneasily, and glanced round, but he was hidden by a bush.

Then she half rose, paused irresolutely, and, as though struggling against something foolish, sat determinedly down again. When Arthur had done smiling, he came forward a few steps into the open, feeling that his face was all drawn and changed, as indeed it was. It was the face of a man of fifty. His eyes were fire, and his heart was ice.

She turned her head, and looked up with a shrinking in her eyes, as though she feared to see something hateful--a shrinking which turned first to wonder, then to dread, then to a lively joy, and then again to awe. She rose mechanically, with a great gasp; her lips parted, as though to speak, but no words came. The dog, too, saw him, and growled, then ran up and sniffed, and leaped upon him with a yelp of joy. He waved it down, and there was something in the gesture that frightened the beast. It shrank behind him. Then he spoke in a clear, hard tone--not his own voice, she thought.

"Angela, is this true? Are you \_married?\_"

"Oh, no;" and her voice came stealing to his senses like half-forgotten music; "that is, yes, alas! But is it really you? Oh, Arthur, my darling, have you come back to me?" and she moved towards him with outstretched arms.

Already they were closing round him, and he could feel her breath upon his cheek, when the charm broke, and he wrenched himself free.

"Get back; do not dare to touch me. Do you know what you are? The poor lost girl is not fallen so low as you. She must get her bread; but, at any rate, I could have given you bread. What! fresh from your husband's arms, and ready to throw yourself into mine! Shame upon you! Were you not married yesterday?"

"Oh, Arthur, have pity! You do not understand. Oh, merciful God----"

"Have pity! What need for pity? Were you not married yesterday?" and he laughed bitterly. "I come--I come from far to congratulate the new-made wife. It is a little odd, though, I thought to marry you myself. See, here was my wedding present;" and he tore the diamond necklace from his pocket. "A snake, you see; a good emblem! Away with it, its use is gone!"

The diamonds went flashing through the sunlight, and fell with a little splash into the lake.

"What! are you not sorry to see so much valuable property wasted? You have a keen appreciation of property!"

Angela sank down on her knees before him, like a broken lily. Her looks grew faint and despairing. The stately head bowed itself to his feet, and all the golden weight of hair broke loose. But he did not pause or spare her. He ground his teeth. No one could have recognized in this maddened, passion-inspired man the pleasant, easy-tempered



Arthur of an hour before. His nature was stirred to its depths, and they were deep.

"You miserable woman! do not kneel to me. If it were not unmanly, I could spurn you with my foot. Do you know, girl, you who swore to love me till time had passed--yes, and for all eternity, you who do love me at this moment--and therein lies your shame--that you have killed me? You have murdered my heart. I trusted you, Angela, I trusted you, I gave you all my life, all that was best in me; and now in reward--degraded as you are--I must always love you as much as I despise you. Even now I feel that I cannot hate you and forget you. I must love you, and I must despise you."

She gazed up at him like a dumb beast at its butcher; she could not speak, her voice had gone.

"And yet, when I think of it, I have something to thank you for. You have cleared my mind of illusions. You have taught me what a woman's purity is worth. You did the thing well, too! You did not crush me by inches with platitudes, bidding me forget you and not think of you any more, as though forgetfulness were possible, and thought a tangible thing that one could kill. You struck home in silence, once and for all. Thank you for that, Angela. What, are you crying? Go back to the brute whom you have chosen, the brute whose passion or whose money you could prefer to me, tell him that they are tears of happiness, and let him kiss them quite away."

"Oh, Arthur--cruel--Arthur!" and nature gave way. She fell fainting on the grass.

Then, when he saw that she could not understand or feel any more, his rage died, and he too broke down and sobbed, great, gasping sobs. And the frightened dog crept up and licked first her face and then his hand.

Kneeling down, Arthur raised her in his arms and strained her to his heart, kissing her thrice upon the forehead--the lips he could not touch. Then he placed her on the seat, leaning her weight against the tree, and, motioning back the dog, he went his way.