

CHAPTER LX

That same afternoon, Lady Bellamy ordered out the victoria with the fast trotting horse, and drove to the Abbey House. She found Philip pacing up and down the gravel in front of the grey old place, which had that morning added one more to the long list of human tragedies its walls had witnessed. His face was pale, and contorted by mental suffering, and, as soon as he recognized Lady Bellamy, he made an effort to escape. She stopped him.

"I suppose it is here, Mr. Caresfoot?"

"It! What?"

"The body."

"Yes."

"I wish to see it."

Philip hesitated a minute, and then led the way to his study. The corpse had been laid upon the table just as it had been taken from the water; indeed, the wet still fell in heavy drops from the clothes on to the ground. It was to be removed to Roxham that evening, to await the inquest on the morrow. The shutters of the room had been closed, lest the light should strike too fiercely on the ghastly sight; but

even in the twilight Lady Bellamy could discern every detail of its outline clearly marked by the wet patches on the sheet which was thrown loosely over it. On a chair, by the side of the table, above the level of which its head rose, giving it the appearance of being in the act of climbing on to it, lay the carcass of the dog, its teeth still firmly set in the dead man's arm. They had been unable to unlock the savage grip without hacking its jaws asunder, and this it was not thought advisable to do till after the inquest.

At the door Philip paused, as though he did not mean to enter.

"Come in," said Lady Bellamy; "surely you are not afraid of a dead man."

"I fear the dead a great deal more than I do the living," he muttered, but came in and shut the door.

As soon as her eyes had grown accustomed to the light, Lady Bellamy went up to the body, and, drawing off the sheet, gazed long and steadily at the mutilated face, on the lips of which the bloody froth still stood.

"I told him last night," she said presently to Philip, "that we should never meet again alive, but I did not think to see him so soon like this. Do you know that I once loved that thing, that shattered brain directed the only will to which I ever bowed? But the love went out

for ever last night, the chain snapped, and now I can look upon this sight without a single sigh or a regret, with nothing but loathing and disgust. There lies the man who ruined me--did you know it? I do not care who knows it now--ruined me with his eyes open, not caring anything about me; there lies the hard task-master whom I served through so many years, the villain who drove me against my will into this last crime which has thus brought its reward. The dog gave him his just due; look, its teeth still hold him, as fast, perhaps, as the memories of his crimes will hold him where he has gone. Regret him! sorrow for him! no, oh no! I can curse him as he lies, villain, monster, devil that he was!"

She paused, and even in the dim light Philip could see her bosom heave and her great eyes flash with the fierceness of her excitement.

"You should not talk so of the dead," he said.

"You are right," she answered; "he has gone beyond the reach of my words, but the thought of all the misery I have suffered at his hands made me for a moment mad. Cover it up again, the vile frame which held a viler soul; to the earth with the one, to undreamed of sorrow with the other, each to its appointed place. How does it run?--'The wages of sin is death.' Yes, that is right. He is dead; the blow fell first on him, that was right, and I am about to die; and you--what will happen to you, the Judas of the plot, eh? You do not think that you will enjoy your blood-money in peace, do you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Philip, nervously; her wild way frightened him.

"Mean! why, that you are the sorriest knave of all. This man was at least led on to crime by passion; Bellamy entered into it to work out a secret revenge, poor fool; I acted because I couldn't help myself at first, and then for the sake of the game itself, for when I take a thing in my hand, I will succeed. But you, Philip Caresfoot, you sold your own flesh and blood for money or money's worth, and you are the worst of all--worse than George, for even a brutal love is a nobler thing than avarice like yours. Well, as the sin is, so will the punishment be."

"It is a lie! I thought that he was dead."

"You thought that Arthur Heigham was dead!--then I read your thoughts very wrongly when we met upon the road on Christmas Day. You wished to think that he was dead, but you did not think it. Even now your conscience is making a coward of you, and, as you said just now, for you the silence of the dead is more terrible than the accusations of the living. I know a little about you, Philip. Do you not see shadows on your walls, and do not departed voices come to haunt you in your sleep? I know you do, and I will tell you this--the Things which you have suffered from at times shall henceforth be your continual companions. If you can pray, pray with all your strength that your

daughter may not die; for, if she does, her shadow will always be there to haunt you with the rest. Why do you tremble so at the mere mention of a spirit? Stand still, and I will show you one. I can if I like."

Philip could stand it no longer. With a curse he burst out of the room. Presently she followed him, and found him standing in front of the house, wiping the cold perspiration from his forehead.

"You accursed woman," he said, "go, and never come near this house again!"

"I never shall come to this house again," she answered. "Ah, here is my carriage. Good-bye, Philip Caresfoot. You are a very wealthy man now--worth I do not know how many thousands a year. You have been singularly fortunate--you have accomplished your ends. Few people can do that. May the accomplishment bring happiness with it! If you wish it to do so, stifle your conscience, and do not let your superstitions affect you. But, by the way, you know French, do you not? Then here is a maxim that, in parting, I recommend to your attention--it has some truth in it: *Il y a une page effrayante dans le livre des destinees humaines: on y lit en tete ces mots 'les desirs accomplis.'*" And she was gone.

"I owed him a debt for tempting George on in that business," thought Lady Bellamy to herself, as she rolled swiftly down the avenue of

giant walnuts; "but I think that I have repaid it. The thorn I have planted will fester in his flesh till he dies of the sore.

Superstition run wild in his weak mind will make the world a hell for him, and that is what I wish."

Presently she stopped the carriage, and walked to the top of a little knoll commanding what had been Isleworth Hill, but was now a black smoking blot on the landscape. The white front of the house was still standing, though riven from top to bottom, and through its empty window-places the westering sun poured great streams of fire which looked like flame shining through the eye-sockets of a gigantic skull.

"I did that well," she said; "and yet how blind I was! I should have known that he spoke the truth when he said the letters were not there. My skill failed me--it always does fail at need. I thought the fire would reach them somehow."

When she arrived at Rewtham House, she found that Sir John had left, taking luggage with him, and stating that he was going to put up at an inn at Roxham. On the hall-table, too, lay a summons to attend the inquest on the body of George Caresfoot, which was to take place on the morrow. She tore it across. Then she went up and dressed herself for dinner with such splendour that her maid thought it necessary to remind her that there was no company coming.

"No," she said, with a strange smile; "but I am going out to-night.

Give me my sapphire necklace."

She sat through dinner, and afterwards went into the drawing-room, and opening a despatch-box, read and burnt a great number of papers.

"There go the keys to my knowledge," she said aloud, as they flickered and fell into ashes. "No one shall reap the fruits of my labours; and yet it is a pity--I was on the right track, and, though I could never have succeeded, another might. I had the key, though I could not find the lock. I must go through with it now. I cannot live deprived both of success and of my secret power, and I could never begin and climb that stair again."

Then, from a secret drawer in the despatch-box, she extracted a little phial, tightly stoppered and sealing-waxed. She examined it closely, and looked at the liquid in it against the light.

"My medicine has taken no harm during this twenty years," she thought. "It still looks what it is--strong enough to kill a giant, and subtle enough to leave little trace upon a child." Then she shut up the despatch-box and put it away, and, going to the open window, looked up at the stars, and then down at the shadows flung by the clouds as they swept across the moon.

"Shadows," she mused, "below, and gleams of light between the shadows --that is like our life. Light above--pure, clear, eternal--that is

like the wider life. And between the two--the night, and above them both--the stars.

"In the immensity, where shall I find my place? Oh, that I might sleep eternally! Yes, that would be best of all--to sink into sleep never ending, unbroken, and unbreakable, to be absorbed into the cool vastness of the night, and lie in her great arms for ever. Oh, Night! whom I have ever loved, you bring your sleep to wearied millions--bring me sleep eternal. But no, the stars are above the night, and above the stars is--what? Yes; the hour I dread like every other mortal with my body, and yet dare to long for with my spirit, has come. I am about to cast off Time, and pass into Eternity, to spring from the giddy heights of Space into the uncertain arms of the Infinite. Yet a few minutes, and my essence, my vital part, will start upon its endless course, and passing far above those stars, will find the fount of that knowledge of which it has already sipped, and drink and drink till it grows like a God, and can look upon the truth and not be blinded. Such are my high hopes. And yet--if there be a hell! My life has been evil, my sins many. What if there be an avenging Power waiting, as some think, to grind me into powder, and then endow each crushed particle with individual sense of endless misery? What if there be a hell! In a few minutes, or what will seem but a few minutes --for surely, to the disembodied spirit, time cannot exist; though it sleep a billion years, it will be as a breath--I shall have solved the problem. I shall know what all the panic-stricken millions madly ask, and ask in vain! Yes, I shall know if there is a hell! Well, if

there be, then I shall rule there, for power is native to my soul. Let me hesitate no longer, but go and solve the problem before I grow afraid. Afraid--I am not afraid. 'I have immortal longings in me.' Who was it said that? Oh, Cleopatra! Was Cleopatra more beautiful than I am, I wonder? I am sure that she was not so great; for, had I been her, Antony should have driven Caesar out of Egypt. Oh! if I could have loved with a pure and perfect love as other women may, and intertwined my destiny with that of some _great_ man--some being of a nature kindred to my own--I should have been good and happy, and he should have ruled this country. But Fate and Fortune, grown afraid of what I should do, linked my life to a soulless brute! and, alas! like him I have fallen--fallen irretrievably!"

She closed the window, and, coming into the room, rang the bell.

"Bring me some wine," she said to the servant. "I do not feel well."

"What wine, my lady?"

"Champagne."

The wine was brought, and stood, uncorked, upon the table.

"That will do," she said. "Tell my maid not to sit up for me: it will be late before I go to bed to-night."

The man bowed and went, and she poured out some of the sparkling wine, and then, taking the little phial, opened it with difficulty, and emptied its contents into the glass. The wine boiled up furiously, turned milk-white, and then cleared again; but the poison had destroyed its sparkle--it was dead as ditch-water.

"That is strange," she said, "I never saw that effect before." Next she took the phial and powdered it into a pinch of tiny dust with a whale's tooth that lay upon the table. The dust she took to the window and threw out, a little at a time. Lady Bellamy wished to die as she had lived, a mystery. Then she came and stood over the deadly draught she had compounded, and thought sometimes aloud and sometimes to herself.

"I have heard it said that suicides are cowards; let those who say it, stand as I stand to-night, with death lying in the little circle of a glass before them, and they will know whether they are cowards, or if they are spirits of a braver sort than those who can bear to drudge to the bitter end of life. It is not yet too late. I can throw that stuff away. I can leave this place and begin life anew in some other country, my jewels will give me the means, and, for the matter of that, I can always win as much money as I want. But, no; then I must begin again, and for that I have not the patience or the time. Besides, I long to know, to solve the mystery. Come, let me make an end, I will chance it. Spirits like my own wear their life only while it does not gall them; if it begins to fret, they cast it from them

like a half-worn dress, scorning to wrap it round them till it drops away in rags."

She raised the glass.

"How lonely this place is, and how still, and yet it may well be that there are millions round me watching what I do. Why does he come into my mind now, that good man, and the child I bore him? Shall I see them presently? Will they crush me with their reproaches? And--have my nerves broken down?--Is it fancy, or does that girl's pale face, with warning in her eyes, float between me and the wall? Well, I will drink to her, for her mind could even overtop my own. She was, at least, my equal, and I have driven her mad! Let me taste this stuff."

Lifting the glass to her lips, she drank a little, and set it down.

The effect was almost magical. Her eyes blazed, a new beauty bloomed upon her cheek, her whole grand presence seemed to gain in majesty. The quick drug for a moment burnt away the curtain between the seen and the unseen, and yet left her living.

"Ah," she cried, in the silence of the room, "how it runs along my veins; I hear the rushing of the stars, I see strange worlds, my soul leaps through infinite spaces, the white light of immortality strikes upon my eyes and blinds me. Come, life unending, I have conquered death."

Seizing the poison, she swallowed what remained of it, and dashed the glass down beside her. Then she fell heavily on her face, once she struggled to her knees, then fell again, and lay still.