

## CHAPTER LXVIII

A fortnight or so afterwards, when the public excitement occasioned by the Caresfoot tragedy had been partially eclipsed by a particularly thrilling child-murder and suicide, a change for the better took place in Angela's condition. One night, after an unusually violent fit of raving, she suddenly went to sleep about twelve o'clock, and slept all that night and all the next day. About half-past nine on the following evening, the watchers in her room--namely, Pigott, Mr. Fraser, and Dr. Williamson, who was trying to make out what this deep sleep meant--were suddenly astonished at seeing her sit up in her bed in a listening attitude, as though she could hear something that interested her intensely, for the webbing that tied her down had been temporarily removed, and then cry, in a tone of the most living anguish, and yet with a world of passionate remonstrance in her voice,

"\_Arthur, Arthur!\_"

Then she sank down again for a few minutes. It was the same night that Mildred and Arthur sat together on the deck of the Evening Star. Presently she opened her eyes, and the doctor saw that there was no longer any madness in them, only great trouble. Her glance first fell upon Pigott.

"Run," she said, "run and stop him; he cannot have gone far. Bring him back to me; quick, or he will be gone."

"Who do you mean, dear?"

"Arthur, of course--Arthur."

"Hush, Angela!" said Mr. Fraser, "he has been gone a long time; you have been very ill."

She did not say anything, but turned her face to the pillow and wept, apparently as much from exhaustion as from any other cause, and then dropped off to sleep again.

"Her reason is saved," said Dr. Williamson, as soon as they were outside the door.

"Thanks be to Providence and you, doctor."

"Thanks to Providence alone. It is a case in which I could do little or nothing. It is a most merciful deliverance. All that you have to do now is to keep her perfectly quiet, and, above all, do not let her father come near her at present. I will call in and tell him. Lady Bellamy? Oh! about the same. She is a strange woman; she never complains, and rarely speaks--though twice I have heard her break out shockingly. There will never be any alternation in her case till the last alteration. Good-bye; I will look round to-morrow."

After this, Angela's recovery was, comparatively speaking, rapid, though of course the effects of so severe a shock to the nervous system could not be shaken off in a day. Though she was no longer mad, she was still in a disturbed state of mind, and subject to strange dreams or visions. One in particular that visited her several nights in a succession, made a great impression upon her.

First, it would seem to her that she was wide awake in the middle of the night, and there would creep over her a sense of unmeasured space, infinite silence, and intense solitude. She would think that she was standing on a dais at the end of a vast hall, down which ran endless rows of pillars supporting an inky sky which was the roof. There was no light in the hall, yet she could clearly see; there was no sound, but she could hear the silence. Only a soft radiance shone from her eyes and brow. She was not afraid, though lonely, but she felt that something would presently come to make an end of solitude. And so she stood for many years or ages--she could not tell which--trying to fathom the mystery of that great place, and watching the light that streamed from her forehead strike upon the marble floor and pillars, or thread the darkness like a shooting star, only to reveal new depths of blackness beyond those it pierced. At length there came, softly falling from the sky-roof which never stirred to any passing breeze, a flake of snow larger than a dove's wing; but it was blood-red, and in its centre shone a wonderful light that made its passage through the darkness a track of glory. As it passed gently downwards without sound, she thought that it threw the shadow of a human face. It lit

upon the marble floor, and the red snow melted there and turned to blood, but the light that had been its heart shone on pure and steady.

Looking up again, she saw that the vault above her was thick with thousands upon thousands of these flakes, each glowing like a crimson lamp, and each throwing its own shadow. One of the shadows was like George, and she shuddered as it passed. And ever as they touched the marble pavement, the flakes melted and became blood, and some of the lights went out, but the most part burnt on, till at length there was no longer any floor, but a dead-sea of blood on which floated a myriad points of fire.

And then it all grew clear to her, for a voice in her mind spoke and said that this was one of God's storehouses for human souls; that the light was the soul, and the red in the snow which turned to blood was the sin which had, during its earthly passage, stained its first purity. The sea of blood before her was the sum of the scarlet wickedness of her age; from every soul there came some to swell its awful waters.

At length the red snow ceased to fall, and a sound that was not a voice, but yet spoke, pealed through the silence, asking if all were ready. The voice that had spoken in her mind answered, "No, he has not come who is to see." Then, looking upwards, she saw, miles on miles away, a bright being with half-shut wings flashing fast towards her, and she knew that it was Arthur, and the loneliness left her. He lit a

breathing radiance by her side, and again the great sound pealed, "Let in the living waters, and cleanse away the sins of this generation."

It echoed and died away, and there followed a tumult like the flow of an angry sea. A mighty wind swept past her, and after it an ocean of molten crystal came rushing through the illimitable hall. The sea and the wind purged away the blood and put out the lamps, leaving behind them a glow of light like that upon her brow, and where the lamps had been stood myriads of seraphic beings, whilst from ten thousand tongues ran forth a paean of celestial song.

Then everything vanished, and deep gloom, that was not, however, dark to her, settled round them. Taking Arthur by the hand, she spread her white wings and circled upwards. Far, far they sailed, till they reached a giant peak that split space in twain. Here they alighted, and watched the masses of cloud tearing through the gulfs on either side of them, and, looking beyond and below, gazed upon the shining worlds that peopled space beneath them.

From the cloud-drifts to the right and left came a noise as of the soughings of many wings; but they did not know what caused it, till presently the vapours lifted, and they saw that alongside of and beneath them two separate streams of souls were passing on outstretched pinions: one stream, that to their left, proceeding to

their earthly homes, and one, that to the right, returning from them. Those who went wore grief upon their shadowy faces, and had sad-coloured wings; but those who returned seemed for the most part happy, and their wings were tipped with splendour.

The never-ending stream that came flowed from a far-off glory, and that which returned, having passed the dividing cliff on which they stood, was changed into a multitude of the red snow-flakes with the glowing hearts, and dropped gently downwards.

So they stood, in happy peace, never tiring, from millennium to millennium. They watched new worlds collecting out of chaos, they saw them speed upon their high aerial course till, grown hoary, their foundation-rocks crumbling with age, they wasted away into the vastness whence they had gathered, to be replaced by fresh creations that in their turn took form, teemed with life, waxed, waned, and vanished.

At length there came an end, and the sougning of wings was silent for ever; no more souls went downwards, and none came up from the earths. Then the distant glory from which the souls had come moved towards them with awful mutterings and robed in lightning, and space was filled with spirits, one of whom, sweeping past them, cried with a loud voice, "Children, Time is dead; now is the beginning of knowledge." And she turned to Arthur, who had grown more radiant than the star which gleamed upon his forehead, and kissed him.

Then she would wake.

Time passed on, and gradually health and strength came back to Angela, till at last she was as powerful in mind, and--if that were possible--except that she was shorn of her lovely hair, more beautiful in body than she had been before her troubles overwhelmed her. Of Arthur she thought a great deal--indeed, she thought of little else; but it was with a sort of hopelessness that precluded action. Nobody had mentioned his name to her, as it was thought wiser not to do so, though Pigott and Mr. Fraser had, in as gentle terms as they could command, told her of the details of the plot against her, and of the consequences to the principal actors in it. Nor had she spoken of him. It seemed to her that she had lost him for good, that he could never come back to her after she had passed, that he must hate her too much. She supposed that, in acting as he did, he was aware of all the circumstances of her marriage, and could find no excuses for her. She did not even know where he was, and, in her ignorance of the uses of private detectives and advertisements, had no idea how to find out. And so she suffered in silence, and only saw him in her dreams.

She still stopped at the vicarage with Pigott; nor had there as yet been any talk of her returning to the Abbey House. Indeed, she had not seen her father since the day of her marriage. But, now that she had

recovered, she felt that something must be done about it. Wondering what it should be, she one afternoon walked to the churchyard, where she had not been since her illness, and, once there, made her way naturally to her mother's grave. She was moving very quietly, and had almost reached the tree under which Hilda Caresfoot lay, when she became aware that there was already somebody kneeling by the grave, with his head rested against the marble cross.

It was her father. Her shadow falling upon him, he turned and saw her, and they stood looking at each other. She was shocked at the dreadful alteration in his face. It was now that of an old man, nearly worn out with suffering. He put his hand before his eyes, and said,

"Angela, how can I face you, least of all here?"

For a moment the memory of her bitter wrongs swelled in her heart, for she now to a great extent understood what her father's part in the plot had been, and she regarded him in silence.

"Father," she said, presently, "I have been in the hands of God, and not in yours, and though you have helped to ruin my life, and have very nearly driven me into a madhouse, I can still say, let the past be the past. But why do you look so wretched? You should look happy; you have got the land--my price, you know," and she laughed a little bitterly.



"Why do I look wretched? Because I am given over to a curse that you cannot understand, and I am not alone. Where are those who plotted against you? George dead, Bellamy gone, Lady Bellamy paralysed hand and foot, and myself--although I did not plot, I only let them be--accursed. But, if you can forget the past, why do you not come back to my house? Of course I cannot force you; you are free and rich, and can suit yourself."

"I will come for a time if you wish--if I can bring Pigott with me."

"You may bring twenty Pigotts, for all I care--so long as you will pay for their board," he added, with a touch of his old miserliness. "But what do you mean 'for a time'?"

"I do not think I shall stop here long; I think that I am going into a sisterhood."

"Oh! well, you are your own mistress, and must do as you choose."

"Then I will come to-morrow," and they parted.