

## CHAPTER LXIX

And so on the following day Angela and Pigott returned to the Abbey House, but they both felt that it was a sad home-coming. Indeed, if there had been no other cause for melancholy, the sight of Philip's face was enough to excite it in the most happy-minded person. Not that Angela saw much of him, however, for they still kept to their old habit of not living together. All day her father was shut up in his room transacting business that had reference to the accession of his property and the settlement of George's affairs; for his cousin had died intestate, so he took his personalty and wound up the estate as heir-at-law. At night, however, he would go out and walk for miles, and in all weathers--he seemed to dread spending the dark hours at home.

When Angela had been back about a month in the old place, she accidentally got a curious insight into her father's mental sufferings.

It so happened that one night, finding it impossible to sleep, and being much oppressed by sorrowful thoughts, she thought that she would read the hours away. But the particular book she wanted to find was downstairs, and it was two o'clock in the morning, and chilly in the passages. However, anything is better than sleeplessness, and the tyranny of sad thoughts and empty longings; so, throwing on her dressing-gown, she took a candle, and set off, thinking as she went

how she had in the same guise fled before her husband.

She got her book, and was returning, when she saw that there was still a light in her father's study, and that the door was ajar. At that moment it so happened that an unusually sharp draught coming down one of the passages of the rambling old house, caught her candle and extinguished it. Making her way to the study-door, she pushed it open to see if anybody was there previous to asking for a light. At first she could see nobody. On the table, which was covered with papers, there stood two candles, a brandy-bottle, and a glass. She was just moving to the candle to get a light, when her eye fell on what she at first believed to be a heap of clothes huddled together on the floor in the corner of the room. Further examination showed that it was a man--she could distinctly see the backs of his hands. Her first idea was that she had surprised a thief, and she stopped, feeling frightened and not knowing what to do. Just then the bundle straightened itself a little and dropped its hands, revealing to her wondering gaze her own father's face, which wore the same awful look of abject fear which she had seen upon it when he passed through the hall beneath her just before Isleworth broke into flame on the night of her marriage. The eyes appeared to be starting from the sockets in an effort to clearly realize an undefinable horror, the hair, now daily growing greyer, was partially erect, and the pallid lips, half-opened, as though to speak words that would not come. He saw her too, but did not seem surprised at her presence. Covering up his eyes again with one hand, he shrank further back into his corner, and with the

other pointed to a large leather arm-chair in which Pigott had told her her grandfather had died.

"Look there," he whispered, hoarsely.

"Where, father? I see nothing."

"There, girl, in the chair--look how it glares at me!"

Angela stood aghast. She was alarmed, in defiance of her own reason, and began to catch the contagion of superstition.

"This is dreadful," she said; "for heaven's sake tell me what is the matter."

Philip's ghastly gaze again fixed itself on the chair, and his teeth began to chatter.

"\_Great God,\_" he said, "\_it is coming.\_"

And, uttering a smothered cry, he fell on his face in a half faint. The necessity for action brought Angela to herself. Seizing the water-bottle, she splashed some water into her father's face. He came to himself almost instantly.

"Where am I?" he said. "Ah! I remember; I have not been quite well.

You must not think anything of that. What are you doing down here at this time of night? Pass me that bottle," and he took nearly half a tumbler of raw brandy. "There, I am quite right again now; I had a bad attack of indigestion, that is all. Good night."

Angela went without a word. She understood now what her father had meant when he said that he was "accursed;" but she could not help wondering whether the brandy had anything to do with his "indigestion."

On the following day the doctor came to see her. It struck Angela that he came oftener than was necessary, the fact being that he would gladly have attended her gratis all year round. A doctor does not often get the chance of visiting such a patient.

"You do not look quite so well to-day," he said.

"No," she answered, with a little smile; "I had bad dreams last night."

"Ah! I thought so. You should try to avoid that sort of thing; you are far too imaginative already."

"One cannot run away from one's dreams. Murder will out in sleep."

"Well, I have a message for you."

"Who from?"

"Lady Bellamy. You know that she is paralysed?"

"Yes."

"Well, she wants you to go and see her. Shall you go?"

Angela thought a little, and answered,

"Yes, I think so."

"You must be prepared for some bitter language if she speaks at all. Very likely she will beg you to get her some poison to kill herself with. I have been obliged to take the greatest precautions to prevent her from obtaining any. I am not very sensitive, but once or twice she has positively made me shiver with the things she says."

"She can never say anything more dreadful to me than she has said already, Dr. Williamson."

"Perhaps not. Go if you like. If you were revengeful--which I am sure you are not--you would have good reason to be satisfied at what you will see. Medically speaking, it is a sad case."

Accordingly, that every afternoon, Angela, accompanied by Pigott, started off for Rewtham House, where Lady Bellamy still lived, or rather existed. It was her first outing since the inquest on George Caresfoot had caused her and her history to become publicly notorious, and, as she walked along, she was surprised to find that she was the object of popular sympathy. Every man she met touched or took off his hat, according to his degree, and, as soon as she had passed, turned round and stared at her. Some fine folks whom she did not know--indeed, she knew no one, though it had been the fashion to send and "inquire" during her illness--drove past in an open carriage and pair, and she saw a gentleman on the front seat whisper something to the ladies, bringing round their heads towards her as simultaneously as though they both worked on a single wire. Even the children coming out of the village school set up a cheer as she passed.

"Good gracious, Pigott, what is it all about?" she asked, at last.

"Well, you see, miss, they talk of you in the papers as the 'Abbey House heroine'--and heroines is rare in these parts."

Overwhelmed with so much attention, Angela was thankful when at last they reached Rewtham House.

Pigott went into the housekeeper's room, and Angela was at once shown up into the drawing-room. The servant announced her name to a black-robed figure lying on a sofa, and closed the door.

"Come here, Angela Caresfoot," said a well-known voice, "and see how Fate has repaid the woman who tried to ruin you."

She advanced and looked at the deathly face, still as darkly beautiful as ever, on which was fixed that strange look of wild expectancy that it had worn when its owner took the poison.

"Yes, look at me; think what I was, and then what I am, and learn how the Spirit of evil pays those who serve him. I thought to kill myself, but death was denied me, and now I live as you see me. I am an outcast from the society of my kind--not that I ever cared for that, except to rule it. I cannot stir hand or foot, I cannot write, I can scarcely read, I cannot even die. My only resource is the bitter sea of thought that seethes eternally in this stricken frame like fire pent in the womb of a volcano. Yes, Angela Caresfoot, and like the fire, too, sometimes it overflows, and then I can blaspheme and rave aloud till my voice fails. That is the only power which is left to me."

Angela uttered an exclamation of pity.

"Pity--do not pity me; I will not be pitied by you. Mock me if you will; it is your turn now. You prophesied that it would come; now it is here."

"At any rate, you are still comfortable in your own house," said

Angela, nervously, anxious to change the subject, and not knowing what to say.

"Oh! yes, I have money enough, if that is what you mean. My husband threatened to leave me destitute, but fear of public opinion--and I hear that he has run away, and is not well thought of now--or perhaps of myself, cripple as I am, caused him to change his mind. But do not let us talk of that poor creature. I sent for you here for a purpose. Where is your lover?"

Angela turned pale and trembled.

"What, do you not know, or are you tired of him?"

"Tired of him! I shall never be tired of him; but he has gone."

"Shall I tell you where to find him?"

"You would not if you could; you would deceive me again."

"No, oddly enough, I shall not. I have no longer any object in doing so. When I was bent upon marrying you to George Caresfoot, I lashed myself into hating you; now I hate you no longer, I respect you--indeed, I have done so all along."

"Then, why did you work me such a bitter wrong?"



"Because I was forced to. Believe me or not as you will, I am not going to tell you the story--at any rate, not now. I can only repeat that I was forced to."

"Where is Arthur?"

"In Madeira. Do you remember once telling me that you had only to lift your hand--so--ah! I forgot, I cannot lift mine--to draw him back to you, that no other woman in the world could keep him from you if you chose to bid him come?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Then, if you wish to get him back, you had better exercise your power, for he has gone to another woman."

"Who is she? What is she like?"

"She is a young widow--a Mrs. Carr. She is desperately in love with him--very beautiful and very rich."

"Beautiful! How do you mean? Tell me exactly what she is like."

"She has brown eyes, brown hair, a lovely complexion, and a perfect figure."

Angela glanced rapidly at her own reflection in the glass and sighed.

"Then I fear that I shall have no chance against her--none!"

"You are a fool! if you were alone in the same room with her, nobody would see her for looking at you."

Angela sighed again, this time from relief.

"But there is worse than that; very possibly he has married her."

"Ah! then it is all over!"

"Why? If he loves you as much as you think, you can bring him back to you, married or unmarried."

"Perhaps. Yes, I think I could; but I would not."

"Why? If he loves you and you love him, you have a right to him. Among all the shams and fictions that we call laws, there is only one true--the law of Nature, by virtue of which you belong to each other."

"No, there is a higher law--the law of duty, by means of which we try to curb the impulses of Nature. The woman who has won him has a right to consideration."

"Then, to gratify a foolish prejudice, you are prepared to lose him forever?"

"No, Lady Bellamy; if I thought that I was to lose him for ever, I might be tempted to do what is wrong in order to be with him for a time; but I do not think that. I only lose him for a time that I may gain him for ever. In this world he is separated from me, in the worlds to come my rights will assert themselves, and we shall be together, and never part any more."

Lady Bellamy looked at her wonderingly, for her eyes could still express her emotions.

"You are a fine creature," she said, "and, if you believe that, perhaps it will be true for you, since Faith must be the measure of realization. But, after all, he may not have married her. That will be for you to find out."

"How can I find out?"

"By writing to him, of course--to the care of Mrs. Carr, Madeira. That is sure to find him."

"Thank you. How can I thank you enough?"

"It seems to me that you owe me few thanks. You are always foolish about what tends to secure your own happiness, or you would have thought of this before."

There was a pause, and then Angela rose to go.

"Are you going. Yes, go. I am not fit company for such as you. Perhaps we shall not meet again; but, in thinking of all the injuries that I have done you, remember that my punishment is proportionate to my sin. They tell me that I may live for years."

Angela gazed at the splendid wreck beneath her, and an infinite pity swelled in her gentle heart. Stooping, she kissed her on the forehead. A wild astonishment filled Lady Bellamy's great, dark eyes.

"Child, child, what are you doing? you do not know what I am, or you would not kiss me!"

"Yes, Lady Bellamy," she said, quietly, "I do, that is, I know what you have been; but I want to forget that. Perhaps you will one day be able to forget it too. I do not wish to preach, but perhaps, after all, this terrible misfortune may lead you to something better. Thank God, there is forgiveness for us all."

Her words touched some forgotten chord in the stricken woman's heart, and two big tears rolled down the frozen cheeks. They were the first

Anne Bellamy had wept for many a day.

"Your voice," she said, "has a music that awakes the echoes from a time when I was good and pure like you, but that time has gone for ever."

"Surely, Lady Bellamy, the heart that can remember it can also strive to reach another like it. If you have descended the cliff whence those echoes spring, into a valley however deep, there is still another cliff before you that you may climb."

"It is easy to descend, but we need wings to climb. Look at me, Angela; my body is not more crippled and shorn of power than my dark spirit is of wings. How can I climb?"

Angela bent low beside her and whispered a few words in her ear, then rose with a shy blush upon her face. Lady Bellamy shut her eyes. Presently she opened them again.

"Do not speak any more of this to me now," she said. "I must have time. The instinct of years cannot be brushed away in a day. If you knew all the sins I have committed, perhaps you would think too that for such as I am there is no forgiveness and no hope."

"Whilst there is life there is hope, and, as I once heard Mr. Fraser say, the real key to forgiveness is the desire to be forgiven."

Again Lady Bellamy shut her eyes and thought, and, when she drew up their heavy lids, Angela saw that there was something of a peaceful look about them.

"Stand so," she said to Angela, "there where the light falls upon your face. That will do; now shall I tell you what I read there? On your forehead sit resolute power to grasp, and almost measureless capacity to imagine; in your eyes there is a sympathy not to be guessed by beings of a coarser fibre; those eyes could look at Heaven and not be dazzled. Your whole face speaks of a purity and single-mindedness which I can read but cannot understand. Your mind rejects the glittering bubbles that men follow, and seeks the solid truth. Your spirit is in tune with things of light and air; it can float to the extremest heights of our mental atmosphere, and thence can almost gaze into the infinite beyond. Pure, but not cold, thirsting for a wider knowledge, and at times breathing the air of a higher world; resolute, but patient; proud, and yet humble to learn; holy, but aspiring; conscious of gifts you do not know how to use, girl, you rise as near to what is divine as a mortal may. I have always thought so, now I am sure of it."

"Lady Bellamy!"

"Hush! I have a reason for what I say. I do not ask you to waste time by listening to senseless panegyrics. Listen: I will tell you what I

have never told to a living soul before. For years I have been a student of a lore almost forgotten in this country--a lore which once fully acquired will put the powers that lie hid in Nature at the command of its possessor, that will even enable him to look beyond Nature, and perhaps, so far as the duration of existence is concerned, for awhile to triumph over it. That lore you can learn, though it baffled me. My intellect and determination enabled me to find the cues to it, and to stumble on some of its secrets, but I could not follow them; too late I learnt that only the good and pure can do that. Much of the result of years of toil I destroyed the other night, but I still know enough to empower you to reconstruct what I annihilated; you can learn more in one year than I learnt in ten. I am grateful to you, and, if you wish it, I will show you the way."

Angela listened, open-eyed. Lady Bellamy was right, she was greedy of knowledge and the power that springs from knowledge.

"But would it not be wrong?" she said.

"There can be nothing wrong in what the ruling Wisdom allows us to acquire without the help of what is evil. But do not be deceived, such knowledge and power as this is not a thing to be trifled with. To obtain a mastery over it, you must devote your life to it; you must give it

"Allegiance whole, not strained to suit desire,'

"No earthly passion must come to trouble the fixed serenity of your aspirations; that was one, but only one, of the reasons of my failure. You must leave your Arthur to Mrs. Carr, and henceforward put him as much out of your mind as possible; and this, that you may be able to separate yourself from earthly bonds and hopes and fears. Troubled waters reflect a broken image."

"I must, then, choose between this knowledge and my love?"

"Yes; and you will do well if you choose the knowledge; for, before you die--if, indeed, you do not in the end, for a certain period, overcome even death--you will be more of an angel than a woman. On the one hand, then, this proud and dizzy destiny awaits you; on the other, every-day joys and sorrows shared by all the world, and an ordinary attachment to a man against whom I have, indeed, nothing to say, but who is not your equal, and who is, at the best, full of weaknesses that you should despise."

"But, Lady Bellamy, his weaknesses are a part of himself, and I love him all, just as he is; weakness needs love more than what is strong."

"Perhaps; but, in return for your love, I offer you no empty cup. I do not ask you to follow fantastic theories--of that I will soon convince you. Shall I show you the semblance of your Arthur and Mrs. Carr as they are at this moment?"



"No, Lady Bellamy, no, I have chosen. You offer, after years of devotion, to make me \_almost like an angel\_. The temptation is very great, and it fascinates me. But I hope, if I can succeed in living a good life, to become altogether an angel when I die. Why, then, should I attempt to filch fragments of a knowledge that will one day be all my own?--if, indeed, it is right to do so. Whilst I am here, Arthur's love is more to me than such knowledge can ever be. If he is married, I may learn to think differently, and try to soothe my mind by forcing it to run in these hidden grooves. Till then, I choose Arthur and my petty hopes and fears; for, after all, they are the natural heritage of my humanity."

Lady Bellamy thought for awhile, and answered,

"I begin to think that the Great Power who made us has mixed even His most perfect works with an element of weakness, lest they should soar too high, and see too far. The prick of a pin will bring a balloon to earth, and an earthly passion, Angela, will prevent you from soaring to the clouds. So be it. You have had your chance. It is only one more disappointment."