CHAPTER LXXI

Just as Angela was engaged in finishing her long letter to Arthur--surely one of the strangest ever written by a girl to the man she loved--Mr. Fraser was reading an epistle which had reached him by that afternoon's post. We will look over his shoulder, and see what was in it.

It was a letter dated from the vicarage of one of the poorest parishes in the great Dock district in the east of London. It began--

"Dear Sir,

"I shall be only too thankful to entertain your proposal for an exchange of livings, more especially as, at first sight, it would seem that all the advantage is on my side. The fact is, that the incessant strain of work here has at last broken down my health to such a degree, that the doctors tell me plainly I must choose between the comparative rest of a country parish, or the certainty of passing to a completer quiet before my time. Also, now that my children are growing up, I am very anxious to remove them from the sights and sounds and tainted moral atmosphere of this poverty-stricken and degraded quarter.

"But, however that may be, I should not be doing my duty to you, if

I did not warn you that this is no parish for a man of your age to undertake, unless for strong reasons (for I see by the Clergy List that you are a year or so older than myself). The work is positively ceaseless, and often of a most shocking and thankless character; and there are almost no respectable inhabitants; for nobody lives in the parish, except those who are too poor to live elsewhere. The stipend, too, is, as you are aware, not large. However, if, in face of these disadvantages, you still entertain the idea of an exchange, perhaps we had better meet. . . ."

The letter then entered into details.

"I think that will suit me very well," said Mr. Fraser, aloud to himself, as he put it down. "It will not greatly matter if my health does break down; and I ought to have gone long ago. 'Positively ceaseless,' he says the work is. Well, ceaseless work is the only thing that can stifle thought. And yet it will be hard, coming up by the roots after all these years. Ah me! this is a queer world, and a sad one for some of us! I will write to the bishop at once."

From which it will be gathered that things had not been going well with Mr. Fraser.

Meanwhile, Angela put her statement and the accompanying letter into a large envelope. Then she took the queer emerald ring off her finger,

and, as there was nobody looking, she kissed it, and wrapped it up in a piece of cotton-wool, and stowed it away in the letter, and sealed it up. Next she addressed it, in her clear miniature handwriting, to

"Arthur P. Heigham, Esq.,

"Care of Mrs. Carr,

"Madeira,"

as Lady Bellamy had told her; and, calling to Pigott to come with her, started off to the post-office to register and post her precious packet, for the Madeira mail left Southampton on the morrow.

She had just time to reach the office, affix the three shillings' worth of stamps that the letter took, and register it, when the postman came up, and she saw it stamped and bundled into his bag with the others, just as though it were nothing, instead of her whole life depending on it; and away it went on its journey, as much beyond recall as yesterday's sins.

"And so you have been a-writing to him, Miss?" said Pigott, as soon as they were out of the office.

"Yes, Pigott," and she told her what Lady Bellamy had said. She listened attentively, with a shrewd twinkle in her eyes.

"I'm thinking, dearie, that it's a pity you didn't post yourself, that's the best letter; it can't make no mistakes, nor fall into the hands of them it isn't meant for."

"What can you mean?"

"I'm thinking, miss, that change of air is a wonderful good thing after sickness, especially sea-air," answered Pigott, oracularly.

"I don't in the least understand you. Really, Pigott, you drive me wild with your parables."

"Lord, dear, for all you're so clever you never could see half an inch into a brick wall, and that with my meaning as clear as a haystick in a thunderstorm."

This last definition quite finished Angela. Why, she wondered, should a haystack be clearer in a thunderstorm than at any other time. She looked at her companion helplessly, and was silent.

"Bless me, what I have been telling, as plain as plain can be, is, why don't you go to this Mad--Mad--what's the name?--I never can think of them foreign names. I'm like Jakes and the flowers: he says the smaller and 'footier' they are, the longer the name they sticks on to them, just to puzzle a body who----"

"Madeira," suggested Angela, with the calmness of despair.

"Yes, that's it--Madeiry. Well, why don't you go to Madeiry along with your letter to look after Mr. Arthur? Like enough he is in a bit of a mess there. So far as I know anything about their ways, young men always are, in a general sort of way, for everlasting a-caterwauling after some one or other, for all the world like a tom on the tiles, more especial if they are in love with somebody else. But, dear me, a sensible woman don't bother her head about that. She just goes and hooks them out of it, and then she knows where they are, and keeps them there."

"Oh, Pigott, never mind all these reflections, though I'm sure I don't know how you can think of such things. The idea of comparing poor dear Arthur with a tom-cat! But tell me, how can I go to Madeira? Supposing that he is married?"

"Well, then you would learn all about it for yourself, and no gammoning; and there'd be an end to it, one way or the other."

"But would it be quite modest, to run after him like that?"

"Modest, indeed! And why shouldn't a young lady travel for her health? I have heard say that this Madeiry is a wonderful place for the stomach."

"The lungs, Pigott--the lungs."

"Well, then, the lungs. But it don't matter; they ain't far off each other."

"But, Pigott, who could I go with? I could not go alone."

"Go with? Why, me, of course."

"I can hardly fancy you at sea, Pigott."

"And why not, miss? I dare say I shall do as well as other folks there; and if I do go to the bottom, as seems likely, there's plenty of room for a respectable person there, I should hope. Look here, dear. You'll never be happy unless you marry Mr. Arthur; so don't you go and throw away a chance, just out of foolishness, and for fear of what folks say. That's how dozens of women make a mess of it. Folks say one thing to-day and another to-morrow, but you'll remain you for all that. Maybe he's married; and, if so, it's a bad business, and there's an end of it; but maybe, too, he isn't. As for that letter, as likely as not the other one will put it in the fire. I should, I doubt, if I were in her shoes. So don't you lose any time, for, if he isn't married, it's like enough he soon will be."

Angela felt that there was sense in what her old nurse said, though

the idea was a new one to her, and it made her thoughtful.

"I'll think about it," she said, presently. "I wonder what Mr. Fraser would say about it."

"Perhaps one thing, and perhaps another. He's good and kind, but he hasn't got much head for these sort of things, he's always thinking of something else. Just look what a fool Squire George (may he twist and turn in his grave) made of him. You ask him, if you like; but you be guided by yourself, dearie. Your head is worth six Reverend Fraser's when you bring it to a thing. But I must be off, and count the linen."

That evening, after tea, Angela went down to Mr. Fraser's. He was directing an envelope to the Lord Bishop of his diocese when she entered; but he hurriedly put it away in the blotting-paper.

"Well, Angela, did you get your letter off?"

"Yes, Mr. Fraser, it was just in time to catch the mail to-morrow. But, do you know, that is what I want to speak to you about. Pigott thinks that, under all the circumstances"--here Angela hesitated a little--"she and I had better go to Madeira and find out how things stand, and I almost think that she is right."

"Certainly," answered Mr. Fraser, rising and looking out of the window. "You have a great deal at stake."

"You do not think that it would be immodest?"

"My dear Angela, when in such a case as this a woman goes to seek the man she loves, and whom she believes loves her, I do not myself see where there is room for immodesty."

"No, nor do I, and I do love him so very dearly; he is all my life to me."

Mr. Fraser winced visibly.

"What is the matter? have you got a headache?"

"Nothing, only a twinge here," and he pointed to his heart.

Angela looked alarmed; she took a womanly interest in anybody's ailments.

"I know what it is," she said. "Widow James suffers from it. You must take it in hand at once, or it will become chronic after meals, as hers is."

Mr. Fraser smiled grimly as he answered:

"I am afraid that I have neglected it too long--it has become chronic

already. But about Madeira; have you, then, made up your mind to go?"

"Yes, I think that I shall go. If he--is married, you know--I can always come back again, and perhaps Pigott is right; the letter might miscarry, and there is so much at stake."

"When shall you go, then?"

"By the next steamer, I suppose. They go every week, I think. I will tell my father that I am going to-morrow."

"Ah! you will want money, I suppose."

"No, I believe that I have plenty of money of my own now."

"Oh! yes, under your marriage settlement, no doubt. Well, my dear, I am sure I hope that your journey will not be in vain. Did I tell you I have also written to Mr. Heigham by this mail, and told him all I knew about the matter?"

"That is very kind and thoughtful of you; it is just like you," answered Angela, gently.

"Not at all, not at all; but you have never told me how you got on with Lady Bellamy--that is, except what she told you about Mr. Heigham."

"Oh! it was a strange interview. What do you think she wanted to teach me?"

"I have not the faintest idea."

"Magic."

"Nonsense."

"Yes, she did; she told me that she could read all sorts of things in my face, and offered, if I would give myself up to it, to make me more than human."

"Pshaw! it was a bit of charlatanism; she wanted to frighten you."

"No, I think she believed what she said, and I think that she has some sort of power. She seemed disappointed when I refused, and, do you know it, if it had not been for Arthur, I do not think that I should have refused. I love power, or rather knowledge; but then I love Arthur more."

"And why is he incompatible with knowledge?"

"I do not know; but she said that, to triumph over the mysteries she wished to teach me, I must free myself from earthly love and cares. I

told her that, if Arthur is married, I would think of it."

"Well, Angela, to be frank, I do not believe in Lady Bellamy's magic, and, if its practice brings people to what she is, I think it is best left alone; indeed, I expect that the whole thing is a delusion arising from her condition. But I think she is right when she told you that to become a mistress of her art--or, indeed, of any noble art--you must separate yourself from earthly passions. I owe your Arthur a grudge as well as Lady Bellamy. I hoped, Angela, to see you rise like a star upon this age of insolence and infidelity. I wanted you to be a great woman; but that dream is all over now."

"Why, Mr. Fraser?"

"Because, my dear, both history and observation teach us that great gifts like yours partake of the character of an accident in a woman; they are not natural to her, and she does not wear such jewels easily --they put her outside of her sex. It is something as though a man were born into the world with wings. At first he would be very proud of them, and go sailing about in the sky to the admiration of the crowds beneath him; but by-and-by he would grow tired of flying alone, and after all, it is not necessary to fly to transact the ordinary business of the world. And perhaps at last he would learn to love somebody without wings, somebody who could not fly, and he would always want to be with her down on the homely earth, and not alone up in the heavenly heights. If a woman had all the genius of Plato or all

the learning of Solomon, it would be forgotten at the touch of a baby's fingers.

"Well, well, we cannot fight against human nature, and I daresay that in a few years you will forget that you can read Greek as well as you can English, and were very near finding out a perfect way of squaring the circle. Perhaps it is best so. Lady Bellamy may have read a great many fine things in your face. Shall I tell you what I read there? I read that you will marry your Arthur, and become a happy wife and a happier mother; that your life will be one long story of unassuming kindness, and that, when at last you die, you will become a sacred memory in many hearts. That is what I read. The only magic you will ever wield, Angela, will be the magic of your goodness."

"Who knows? We cannot read the future," she answered.

"And so you are going to Madeira next week. Then, this will be the last time that we shall meet--before you go, I mean--for I am off to London to-morrow, for a while, on some business. When next we meet, if we do meet again, Angela, you will be a married woman. Do not start, dear; there is nothing shocking about that. But, perhaps, we shall not meet any more."

"Oh, Mr. Fraser! why do you say such dreadful things?"

"There is nothing dreadful about it, Angela. I am getting on in life,

and am not so strong as I was; and you are both young and strong, and must in the ordinary course of things outlive me for many years. But, whatever happens, my dear, I know that you always keep a warm corner in your memory for your old master; and, as for me, I can honestly say, that to have known and taught you has been the greatest privilege of a rather lonely life."

Here Angela began to cry.

"Don't cry, my dear. There is, thank God, another meeting-place than this, and, if I reach the shore of that great future before you, I shall--but there, my dear, it is time for you to be going home. You must not stop here to listen to this melancholy talk. Go home, Angela, and think about your lover. I am busy to-night. Give me a kiss, dear, and go."

Presently, she was gone, and he heard the front-door close behind her. He went to the window, and watched the tall form gradually growing fainter in the gloaming, till it vanished altogether.

Then he came back, and, sitting down at his writing-table, rested his grizzled head upon his hand and thought. Presently he raised it, and there was a sad smile flickering round the wrinkles of the nervous mouth.

"And now for 'hard labour at the London docks,'" he said, aloud.