CHAPTER XXXI

When Angela was still quite a child, the permanent inhabitants of Sherborne Lane, King William Street, in the city of London, used to note a very pretty girl, of small statue and modest ways, passing out --every evening after the city gentlemen had locked up their offices and gone home--from the quiet of the lane into the roar and rush of the city. This young girl was Mildred James, the only daughter of a struggling, a very struggling, city doctor, and her daily mission was to go to the cheap markets, and buy the provisions that were to last the Sherborne Lane household (for her father lived in the same rooms that he practised in) for the ensuing twenty-four hours. The world was a hard place for poor Mildred in those days of provision hunting, when so little money had to pay for so many necessaries, and to provide also for the luxuries that were necessaries to her invalid mother. Some years later, when she was a sweet maiden of eighteen, her mother died, but medical competition was keen in Sherborne Lane, and her removal did not greatly alleviate the pressure of poverty. At last, one evening, when she was about twenty years of age, a certain Mr. Carr, an old gentleman with whom her father had some acquaintance, sent up a card with a pencilled message on it to the effect that he would be glad to see Dr. James.

"Run, Mildred," said her father, "and tell Mr. Carr that I will be with him in a minute. It will never do to see a new patient in this coat."

Mildred departed, and, gliding into the gloomy consulting-room like a sunbeam, delivered her message to the old gentleman, who appeared to be in some pain, and prepared to return.

"Don't go away," almost shouted the aged patient; "I have crushed my finger in a door, and it hurts most confoundedly. You are something to look at in this hole, and distract my attention."

Mildred thought to herself that this was an odd way of paying a compliment, if it was meant for one; but then, old gentlemen with crushed fingers are not given to weighing their words.

"Are you Dr. James' daughter?" he asked, presently.

"Yes, sir."

"Ugh, I have lived most of my life in Sherborne Lane, and never saw anything half so pretty in it before. Confound this finger!"

At this moment the doctor himself arrived, and wanted to dismiss Mildred, but Mr. Carr, who was a headstrong old gentleman, vowed that no one else should hold his injured hand whilst it was dressed, and so she stayed just long enough for him to fall as completely in love with her shell-like face was though he had been twenty instead of nearly seventy.

Now, Mr. Carr was not remarkable for good looks, and in addition to having seen out so many summers, had also buried two wives. It will, therefore, be clear that he was scarcely the suitor that a lovely girl, conscious of capacities for deep affection, would have selected of her own free will; but, on the other hand, he was honest and kind-hearted, and, what was more to the point, perhaps the wealthiest wine-merchant in the city. Mildred resisted as long as she could, but want is a hard master, and a father's arguments are difficult to answer, and in the end she married him, and, what is more, made him a good and faithful wife.

She never had any cause to regret it, for he was kindness itself towards her, and when he died, some five years afterwards, having no children of his own, he left her sole legatee of all his enormous fortune, bound up by no restrictions as to re-marriage. About this time also her father died, and she was left as much alone in the world as it is possible for a young and pretty woman, possessing in her own right between twenty and thirty thousand a year, to be.

Needless to say, Mrs. Carr was thenceforth one of the catches of her generation; but nobody could catch her, though she alone knew how many had tried. Once she made a list of all the people who had proposed to her; it included amongst others a bishop, two peers, three members of parliament, no less than five army officers, an American, and a dissenting clergyman.

"It is perfectly marvellous, my dear," she said to her companion, Agatha Terry, "how fond people are of twenty thousand a year, and yet they all said that they loved me for myself, that is, all except the dissenter, who wanted me to help to 'feed his flock,' and I liked him the best of the lot, because he was the honestest."

Mrs. Carr had a beautiful house in Grosvenor Square, a place in Leicestershire, where she hunted a little, a place in the Isle of Wight that she rarely visited, and, lastly, a place at Madeira where she lived for nearly half the year. There never had been a breath of scandal against her name, nor had she given cause for any. "As for loving," she would say, "the only things she loved were beetles and mummies," for she was a clever naturalist, and a faithful student of the lore of the ancient Egyptians. The beetles, she would explain, had been the connecting link between the two sciences, since beetles had led her to scarabaei, and scarabaei to the human husks with which they are to be found; but this statement, though amusing, was not strictly accurate, as she had in reality contracted the taste from her late husband, who had left her a large collection of Egyptian antiquities.

"I do adore a mummy," she would say, "I am small enough in mind and body already, but it makes me feel inches smaller, and I like to measure my own diminutiveness."

She was not much of a reader; life was, she declared, too short to

waste in study; but, when she did take up a book, it was generally of a nature that most women of her class would have called stiff, and then she could read it without going to sleep.

In addition to these occupations, Mrs. Carr had had various crazes at different stages of her widowhood, which had now endured for some five years. She had travelled, she had "gone-in for art;" once she had speculated a little, but finding that, for a woman, it was a losing game, she was too shrewd to continue this last pastime. But she always came back to her beetles and her mummies.

Still, with all her money, her places, her offers of marriage, and her self-made occupations, Mildred Carr was essentially "a weary woman, sunk deep in ease, and sated with her life." Within that little frame of hers, there beat a great active heart, ever urging her onwards towards an unknown end. She would describe herself as an "ill-regulated woman," and the description was not without justice, for she did not possess that placid, even mind which is so necessary to the comfort of English ladies, and which enables many of them to bury a husband or a lover as composedly as they take him. She would have given worlds to be able to fall in love with some one, to fill up the daily emptiness of her existence with another's joys and griefs, but she _could_ not. Men passed before her in endless procession, all sorts and conditions of them, and for the most part were anxious to marry her, but they might as well have been a string of wax dolls for aught she could care about them. To her eyes, they were nothing more

than a succession of frock-coats and tall hats, full of shine and emptiness, signifying nothing. For their opinion, too, and that of the society which they helped to form, she had a most complete and wrong-headed contempt. She cared nothing for the ordinary laws of social life, and was prepared to break through them on emergency, as a wasp breaks through a spider's web. Perhaps she guessed that a good deal of breaking would be forgiven to the owner of such a lovely face, and more than twenty thousand a year. With all this, she was extremely observant, and possessed, unknown to herself, great powers of mind, and great, though dormant, capacities for passion. In short, this little woman, with the baby face, smiling and serene as the blue sky that hides the gathering hurricane, was rather odder than the majority of her sex, which is perhaps saying a great deal.

One day, about a week before Arthur departed from the Abbey House, Agatha Terry was sitting in the blue drawing-room in the house in Grosvenor Square, when Mrs. Carr came in, almost at a run, slammed the door behind her, and plumped herself down in a chair with a sigh of relief.

"Agatha, give orders to pack up. We will go to Madeira by the next boat."

"Goodness gracious, Mildred! across that dreadful bay again; and just think how hot it will be, and the beginning of the season too."

"Now, Agatha, I'm going, and there's an end of it, so it is no use arguing. You can stay here, and give a series of balls and dinners, if you like."

"Nonsense, dear; me give parties indeed, and you at Madeira! Why, it's just as though you asked Ruth to entertain the reapers without Naomi. I'll go and give the orders; but I do hope that it will be calm. Why do you want to go now?"

"I'll tell you. Lord Minster has been proposing to me again, and announces his intention of going on doing so till I accept him. You know, he has just got into the Cabinet, so he has celebrated the event by asking me to marry him, for the third time."

"Poor fellow! Perhaps he is very fond of you."

"Not a bit of it. He is fond of my good looks and my money. I will tell you the substance of his speech this morning. He stood like this, with his hands in his pockets, and said, 'I am now a cabinet minister. It is a good thing that a cabinet minister should have somebody presentable to sit at the head of his table. You are presentable. I appreciate beauty, when I have time to think about it. I observe that you are beautiful. I am not very well-off for my position. You, on the other hand, are immensely rich. With your money, I can, in time, become Prime Minister. It is, consequently, evidently to my advantage that you should marry me, and I have sacrificed a very important

appointment in order to come and settle it.'"

Agatha laughed.

"And how did you answer him?"

"In his own style. 'Lord Minster,' I said, 'I am, for the third time, honoured by your flattering proposal, but I have no wish to ornament your table, no desire to expose my beauty to your perpetual admiration, and no ambition to advance your political career. I do not love you, and I had rather become the wife of a crossing-sweeper that I loved, than that of a member of the government for whom I have _every_ respect, but no affection.'

"'As the wife of a crossing-sweeper, it is probable,' he answered, 'that you would be miserable. As my wife, you would certainly be admired and powerful, and consequently happy.'

"'Lord Minster,' I said, 'you have studied human nature but very superficially, if you have not learnt that it is better for a woman to be miserable with the man she loves, than "admired, powerful, and consequently happy," with one who has no attraction for her.'

"'Your remark is interesting,' he replied; 'but I think that there is something paradoxical about it. I must be going now, as I have only five minutes to get to Westminster; but I will think it over, and

answer it when we renew our conversation, which I propose to do very shortly,' and he was gone before I could get in another word."

"But why should that make you go to Madeira?"

"Because, my dear, if I don't, so sure as I am a living woman, that man will tire me out and marry me, and I dislike him, and don't want to marry him. I have a strong will, but his is of iron."

And so it came to pass that the names of Mrs. Carr, Miss Terry, and three servants, appeared upon the passenger list of Messrs. Donald Currie & Co.'s royal mail steamship _Warwick Castle_, due to sail for Madeira and the Cape ports on the 14th of June.