CHAPTER XXXII

Arthur arrived in town in a melancholy condition. His was a temperament peculiarly liable to suffer from attacks of depression, and he had, with some excuse, a sufficiently severe one on him now. Do what he would he could not for a single hour free his mind from the sick longing to see or hear from Angela, that, in addition to the mental distress it occasioned him, amounted almost to a physical pain. After two or three days of lounging about his club--for he was in no mood for going out--he began to feel that this sort of thing was intolerable, and that it was absolutely necessary for him to go somewhere or do something.

It so happened that, just after he had come to this decision, he overheard two men, who were sitting at the next table to him in the club dining-room, talking of the island of Madeira, and speaking of it as a charming place. He accepted this as an omen, and determined that to Madeira he would go. And, indeed, the place would suit him as well as any other to get through a portion of his year of probation in, and, whilst affording a complete change of scene, would not be too far from England.

And so it came to pass that on the morrow Arthur found himself in the office of Messrs. Donald Currie, for the purpose of booking his berth in the vessel that was due to sail on the 14th. There he was informed by the very affable clerk, who assisted him to choose his cabin, that

the vessel was unusually empty, and that, up to the present time, berths had been taken for only five ladies, and two of them Jewesses.

"However," the clerk added, by way of consolation, "this one," pointing to Mrs. Carr's name on the list, "is as good as a cargo," and he whistled expressively.

"What do you mean?" asked Arthur, his curiosity slightly excited.

"I mean--my word, here she comes."

At that moment the swing doors of the office were pushed open, and there came through them one of the sweetest, daintiest little women Arthur had ever seen. She was no longer quite young, she might be eight and twenty or thirty, but, on the other hand, maturity had but added to the charms of youth. She had big, brown eyes that Arthur thought could probably look languishing, if they chose, and that even in repose were full of expression, a face soft and blooming as a peach, and round as a baby's, surmounted by a quantity of nut-brown hair, the very sweetest mouth, the lips rather full, and just showing a line of pearl, and lastly, what looked rather odd on such an infantile countenance, a firm, square, and very determined, if very diminutive chin. For the rest, it was difficult to say which was the most perfect, her figure or her dress.

All of which, of course, had little interest for Arthur, but what did

rather startle him was her voice, when she spoke. From such a woman one would naturally have expected a voice of a corresponding nature, namely, one of the soft and murmuring order. But hers, on the contrary, though sweet, was decided, and clear as a bell, and with a peculiar ring in it that he would have recognized amongst a thousand others.

On her entrance, Arthur stepped on one side.

"I have come to say," she said, with a slight bow of recognition to the clerk; "that I have changed my mind about my berth, instead of the starboard deck cabin, I should like to have the port. I think that it will be cooler at this time of year, and also will you please make arrangements for three horses."

"I am excessively sorry, Mrs. Carr," the clerk answered; "but the port cabin is engaged--in fact, this gentleman has just taken it."

"Oh, in that case"--with a little blush--"there is an end of the question."

"By no means," interrupted Arthur. "It is a matter of perfect indifference to me where I go. I beg that you will take it."

"Oh, thank you. You are very good, but I could not think of robbing you of your cabin."

"I must implore you to do so. Rather than there should be any difficulty, I will go below." And then, addressing the clerk, "Be so kind as to change the cabin."

"I owe you many thanks for your courtesy," said Mrs. Carr, with a little curtsey.

Arthur took off his hat.

"Then we will consider that settled. Good morning, or perhaps I should say _au revoir_;" and, bowing again, he left the office.

"What is that gentleman's name?" Mrs. Carr asked, when he was gone.

"Here it is, madam, on the list. 'Arthur Preston Heigham, passenger to Madeira.'"

"Arthur Preston Heigham!" Mrs. Carr said to herself, as she made her way down to her carriage in Fenchurch Street. "Arthur is pretty, and Preston is pretty, but I don't much like Heigham. At any rate, there is no doubt about his being a gentleman. I wonder what he is going to Madeira for? He has an interesting face. I think I am glad we are going to be fellow-passengers."

The two days that remained to him in town, Arthur spent in making his

preparations for departure; getting money, buying, after the manner of young Englishmen starting on a voyage to foreign parts, a large and fearfully sharp hunting-knife, as though Madeira were the home of wild beasts, and laying in a stock of various other articles of a useless description, such as impenetrable sun-helmets and leather coats.

The boat was to sail at noon on Friday, and on the Thursday evening he left Paddington by the mail that reaches Dartmouth about midnight. On the pier, he and one or two other fellow-passengers found a boat waiting to take them to the great vessel, that, painted a dull grey, lay still and solemn in the harbour as they were rowed up to her, very different from the active, living thing that she was destined to become within the next twenty-four hours. The tide ebbing past her iron sides, the fresh, strong smell of the sea, the tall masts pointing skywards like gigantic fingers, the chime of the bell upon the bridge, the sleepy steward, and the stuffy cabin, were all a pleasant variation from the every-day monotony of existence, and contributed towards the conclusion that life was still partially worth living, even when it could not be lived with Angela. Indeed, so much are we the creatures of circumstance, and so liable to be influenced by surroundings, that Arthur, who, a few hours before, had been plunged into the depths of depression, turned into his narrow berth, after a tremendous struggle with the sheets--which stewards arrange on a principle incomprehensible to landlubbers, and probably only partially understood by themselves--with considerable satisfaction and a pleasurable sense of excitement.

The next morning, or rather the earlier part of it, he devoted, when he was not thinking about Angela, to arranging his goods and chattels in his small domain, to examining the lovely scenery of Dartmouth harbour--the sight of which is enough to make any outward-bound individual bitterly regret his determination to quit his native land--and to inspecting the outward man of his fellow-passengers with that icy stolidity which characterizes the true-born Briton. But the great event of the morning was the arrival of the mail-train, bringing the bags destined for various African ports, loose letters for the passengers, and a motley contingent of the passengers themselves. Amongst these latter, he had no difficulty in recognizing the two Jewesses, of whom the clerk in the office had spoken, who were accompanied by individuals, presumably their husbands, and very remarkable for the splendour of their diamond studs and the dirtiness of their nails. The only other specimen of saloon-passenger womankind that he could see was a pretty, black-eyed girl of about eighteen, who was, as he afterwards discovered, going out under the captain's care to be a governess at the Cape, and who, to judge from the intense melancholy of her countenance, did not particularly enjoy the prospect. But, with the exception of some heavy baggage that was being worked up from a cargo-boat by the donkey-engine, and a luxurious cane-chair on the deck that bore her name, no signs were there of Mrs. Carr.

Presently the purser sent round the head-steward, a gentleman whom

Arthur mistook for the first mate, so smart was his uniform, to collect the letters, and it wrung him not a little to think that he alone could send none. The bell sounded to warn all not sailing to hurry to their boats, but still there was nothing to be seen of his acquaintance of the office; and, to speak the truth, he was just a little disappointed, for what he had seen of her had piqued his curiosity, and made him anxious to see more.

"I can't wait any longer," he heard the captain say; "she must come on by the _Kinfauns_."

It was full twelve o'clock, and the last rope was being loosed from the moorings. "Ting-ting," went the engine-room bell. "Thud-thud," started the great screw that would not stop again for so many restless hours. The huge vessel shuddered throughout her frame like an awakening sleeper, and growing quick with life, forged an inch or two a-head. Next, a quartermaster, came with two men to hoist up the gangway, when suddenly a boat shot alongside and hooked on, amongst the occupants of which Arthur had no difficulty in recognizing Mrs. Carr, who sat laughing, like Pleasure, at the helm. The other occupants of the boat, who were not laughing, he guessed to be her servants and the lady who figured on the passenger-list as Miss Terry, a stout, solemn-looking person in spectacles.

"Now, then, Agatha," called out Mrs. Carr from the stern-sheets, "be quick and jump up."

"My dear Mildred, I can't go up there; I can't, indeed. Why, the thing's moving."

"But you must go up, or else be pulled up with a rope. Here, I will show the way," and, moving down the boat, she sprang boldly, as it rose with the swell, into the stalwart arms of the sailor who was waiting on the gangway landing-stage, and thence ran up the steps to the deck.

"Very well, I am going to Madeira. I don't know what you are going to do; but you must make up your mind quick."

"Can't hold on much longer, mum," said the boatman, "she's getting way on now."

"Come on, mum; I won't let you in," said the man of the ladder, seductively.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, what shall I do?" groaned Miss Terry, wringing the hand that was not employed in holding on.

"John," called Mrs. Carr to a servant who was behind Miss Terry, and looking considerably alarmed, "don't stand there like a fool; put Miss Terry on to that ladder."

Mrs. Carr was evidently accustomed to be obeyed, for, thus admonished, John seized the struggling and shrieking Miss Terry, and bore her to the edge of the boat, where she was caught by two sailors, and, amidst the cheers of excited passengers, fairly dragged on to the deck.

"Oh! Mrs. Carr," said the chief officer, reproachfully, when Miss Terry had been satisfactorily deposited on a bench, "you are late again; you were late last voyage."

"Not at all, Mr. Thompson. I hate spending longer than is necessary aboard ship, so, when the train got in, I took a boat and went for a row in the harbour. I knew that you would not go without me."

"Oh, yes, we should have, Mrs. Carr; the skipper heard about it because he waited for you before."

"Well, here I am, and I promise that I won't do it again."

Mr. Thompson laughed, and passed on. At this moment Mrs. Carr perceived Arthur, and, bowing to him, they fell into conversation about the scenery through which the boat was passing on her way to the open sea. Before very long, indeed, as soon as the vessel began to rise and fall upon the swell, this talk was interrupted by a voice from the seat where Miss Terry had been placed.

"Mildred," it said, "I do wish you would not come to sea; I am

beginning to feel ill."

"And no wonder, if you will insist upon coming up ladders head downwards. Where's John? He will help you to your cabin; the deck one, next to mine."

But John had vanished with a parcel.

"Mildred, send some one quick, I beg of you," remarked Miss Terry, in the solemn tones of one who feels that a crisis is approaching.

"I can't see anybody except a very dirty sailor."

"Permit me," said Arthur, stepping to the rescue.

"You are very kind; but she can't walk. I know her ways; she has got to the stage when she must be carried. Can you manage her?"

"I think so," replied Arthur, "if you don't mind holding her legs, and provided that the vessel does not roll," and, with an effort, he hoisted Miss Terry baby-fashion into his arms, and staggered off with her towards the indicated cabin, Mrs. Carr, as suggested, holding the lower limbs of the prostrate lady. Presently she began to laugh.

"If you only knew how absurd we look," she said.

"Don't make me laugh," answered Arthur, puffing; for Miss Terry was by no means light, "or I shall drop her."

"If you do, young man," ejaculated his apparently unconscious burden with wonderful energy, "I will never forgive you."

A remark, the suddenness of which so startled him, that he very nearly did.

"Thank you. Now lay her quite flat, please. She won't get up again till we drop anchor at Madeira."

"If I live so long," murmured the invalid.

Arthur now made his bow and departed, wondering how two women so dissimilar as Mrs. Carr and Miss Terry came to be living together. As it is a piece of curiosity that the reader may share, perhaps it had better be explained.

Miss Terry was a middle-aged relative of Mrs. Carr's late husband, who had by a series of misfortunes been left quite destitute. Her distress having come to the knowledge of Mildred Carr, she, with the kind-hearted promptitude that distinguished her, at once came to her aid, paid her debts, and brought her to her own house to stay, where she had remained ever since under the title of companion. These two women, living thus together, had nothing whatsoever in common, save that Miss

Terry took some reflected interest in beetles. As for travelling, having been brought up and lived in the same house of the same county town until she reached the age of forty-five, it was, as may be imagined, altogether obnoxious to her. Indeed, it is more than doubtful if she retained any clear impression whatsoever of the places she visited. "A set of foreign holes!" as she would call them, contemptuously. Miss Terry was, in short, neither clever nor strong minded, but so long as she could be in the company of her beloved Mildred, whom she regarded with mingled reverence and affection, she was perfectly happy. Oddly enough, this affection was reciprocated, and there probably was nobody in the world for whom Mrs. Carr cared so much as her cousin by marriage, Agatha Terry. And yet it would be impossible to imagine two women more dissimilar.

Not long after they had left Dartmouth, the afternoon set in dull, and towards evening the sea freshened sufficiently to send most of the passengers below, leaving those who remained to be finally dispersed by the penetrating drizzle that is generally to be met with off the English coast. Arthur, left alone on the heaving deck, surveyed the scene, and thought it very desolate. Around was a grey waste of tossing waters, illumined here and there by the setting rays of an angry sun, above, a wild and windy sky, with not even a sea-gull in all its space, and in the far distance a white and fading line, which was the shore of England.

Faint it grew, and fainter yet, and, as it disappeared, he thought of

Angela, and a yearning sorrow fell upon him. When, he wondered sadly, should he again look into her eyes, and hold that proud beauty in his arms; what fate awaited them in the future that stretched before them, dim as the darkening ocean, and more uncertain. Alas! he could not tell, he only felt that it was very bitter to be parted thus from her to whom had been given his whole heart's love, to know that every fleeting moment widened a breach already far too wide, and not to know if it would again be narrowed, or if this farewell would be the last. Then he thought, if it should be the last, if she should die or desert him, what would his life be worth to him? A consciousness within him answered, "nothing." And, in a degree, his conclusion was right; for, although it is, fortunately, not often in the power of any single passion to render life altogether worthless; it is certain that, when it strikes in youth, there is no sickness so sore as that of the heart; no sorrow more keen, and no evil more lasting than those connected with its disappointments and its griefs. For other sorrows, life has salves and consolations, but a noble and enduring passion is not all of this world, and to cure its sting we must look to something beyond this world's quackeries. Other griefs can find sympathy and expression, and become absorbed little by little in the variety of love's issues. But love, as it is, and should be understood--not the faint ghost that arrays itself in stolen robes, and says, "I am love," but love the strong and the immortal, the passkey to the happy skies, the angel cipher we read, but cannot understand--such love as this, and there is none other true, can find no full solace here, not even in its earthly satisfaction.

For still it beats against its mortal bars and rends the heart that holds it; still strives like a meteor flaming to its central star, or a new loosed spirit seeking the presence of its God, to pass hence with that kindred soul to the inner heaven whence it came, there to be wholly mingled with its other life and clothed with a divine identity: --there to satisfy the aspirations that now vaguely throb within their fleshly walls, with the splendour and the peace and the full measure of the eternal joys it knows await its coming.

And is it not a first-fruit of this knowledge, that the thoughts of those who are plunged into the fires of a pure devotion fly upwards as surely as the sparks? Nothing but the dross, the grosser earthly part is purged away by their ever-chastening sorrow, which is, in truth, a discipline for finer souls. For did there ever yet live the man or woman who, loving truly, has suffered, and the fires burnt out, has not risen Phoenix-like from their ashes, purer and better, and holding in the heart a bright, undying hope? Never; for these have walked bare-footed upon the holy ground, it is the flames from the Altar that have purged them and left their own light within! And surely this holds also good of those who have loved and lost, of those who have been scorned or betrayed; of the suffering army that cry aloud of the empty bitterness of life and dare not hope beyond. They do not understand that having once loved truly it is not possible that they should altogether lose: that there is to their pain and the dry-rot of their hopes, as to everything else in Nature, an end object. Shall the

soul be immortal, and its best essence but a thing of air? Shall the one thought by day and the one dream by night, the ethereal star which guides us across life's mirage, and which will still shine serene at the moment of our fall from the precipice of Time: shall this alone, amidst all that makes us what we are, be chosen out to see corruption, to be cast off and forgotten in the grave? Never! There, by the workings of a Providence we cannot understand, that mighty germ awaits fruition. There, too, shall we know the wherefore of our sorrow at which, sad-eyed, we now so often wonder: there shall we kiss the rod that smote us, and learn the glorious uses and pluck the glowing fruits of an affliction, that on earth filled us with such sick longing, and such an aching pain.

Let the long-suffering reader forgive these pages of speculative writing, for the subject is a tempting one, and full of interest for us mortals. Indeed, it may chance that, if he or she is more than five-and-twenty, these lines may even have been read without impatience, for there are many who have the memory of a lost Angela hidden away somewhere in the records of their past, and who are fain, in the breathing spaces of their lives, to dream that they will find her wandering in that wide Eternity where "all human barriers fall, all human relations end, and love ceases to be a crime."