

CHAPTER XXXIV

A minute or two after the boat in which Arthur was being piloted to the shore, under the guidance of the manager of Miles' Hotel, had left the side of the vessel, Mrs. Carr's steam-launch shot up alongside of them, its brass-work gleaming in the sunlight like polished gold. On the deck, near the little wheel, stood Mrs. Carr herself, and by her side, her martial cloak around her, lay Miss Terry, still as any log.

"Mr. Heigham," said Mrs. Carr, in a voice that sounded across the water like a silver bell, "I forgot that you will not be able to find your way to my place by yourself to-morrow, so I will send down a bullock-car to fetch you; you have to travel about with bullocks here, you know. Good-bye," and, before he could answer, the launch's head was round, and she was tearing through the swell at the rate of fourteen knots.

"That's her private launch," said the manager of the hotel to Arthur, "it is the quickest in the island, and she always goes at full steam. She must have come some way round to tell you that, too. There's her place, over there."

"Mrs. Carr comes here every year, does she not?"

"Oh, yes, every year; but she is very early this year; our season does not begin yet, you know. She is a great blessing to the place, she

gives so much away to the poor peasants. At first she used to come with old Mr. Carr, and a wonderful nurse they say she made to the old gentleman till he died."

"Does she entertain much?"

"Not as a rule, but sometimes she gives great balls, splendid affairs, and a series of dinner-parties that are the talk of the island. She hardly ever goes out anywhere, which makes the ladies in the place angry, but, I believe, that they all go to her balls and dinners.

Mostly, she spends her time up in the hills, collecting butterflies and beetles. She has got the most wonderful collection of Egyptian curiosities up at the house there, too, though why she keeps them here instead of in England, I am sure I don't know. Her husband began the collection when he was a young man, and collected all his life, and she has gone on with it since."

"I wonder that she has not married again."

"Well, it can't be for want of asking, if half of what they say is true; for, according to that, every single gentleman under fifty who has been at Madeira during the last five years has had a try at her, but she wouldn't look at one of them. But of course that is gossip--and here we are at the landing-place. Sit steady, sir; those fellows will pull the boat up."

Had it not been for the pre-occupied and uncomfortable state of his mind, that took the flavour out of all that he did, and persistently thrust a skeleton amidst the flowers of every landscape, Arthur should by rights have enjoyed himself very much at Madeira.

To live in one of the lofty rooms of "Miles' Hotel," protected by thick walls and cool, green shutters, to feel that you are enjoying all the advantages of a warm climate without its drawbacks, and that, too, however much people in England may be shivering--which they mostly do all the year round--is in itself a luxury. And so it is, if the day is hot, to dine chiefly off fish and fruit, and such fruit! and then to exchange the dining-room for the cool portico, with the sea-breeze sweeping through it, and, pipe in hand, to sink into a slumber that even the diabolical shrieks of the parrots, tied by the leg in a line below, are powerless to disturb. Or, if you be energetic --I speak of Madeira energy--you may stroll down the little terraced walk, under the shade of your landlord's vines, and contemplate the growing mass of greenery that in this heavenly island makes a garden. You can do more than this even; for, having penetrated through the brilliant flower-beds, and recruited exhausted nature under a fig-tree, you can engage, in true English fashion, in a game of lawn-tennis, which done, you will again seek the shade of the creeping vines or spreading bananas, and in a springy hammock take your well-earned repose.

All these things are the quintessence of luxury, so much so that he

who has once enjoyed them will long to turn lotos-eater, forget the painful and laborious past, and live and die at "Miles' Hotel." Oh, Madeira! gem of the ocean, land of pine-clad mountains that foolish men love to climb, valleys where wise ones much prefer to rest, and of smells that both alike abhor; Madeira of the sunny sky and azure sea, land flowing with milk and honey, and overflowing with population, if only you belonged to the country on which you depend for a livelihood, what a perfect place you would be, and how poetical one could grow about you! a consummation which, fortunately for my readers, the recollection of the open drains, the ill-favoured priests, and Portuguese officials effectually prevents.

On the following morning, at twelve punctually, Arthur was informed that the conveyance had arrived to fetch him. He went down, and was quite appalled at its magnificence. It was sledge-like in form, built to hold four, and mounted on wooden runners that glided over the round pebbles with which the Madeira streets are paved, with scarcely a sound, and as smoothly as though they ran on ice. The chariot, as Arthur always called it afterwards, was built of beautiful woods, and lined and curtained throughout with satin, whilst the motive power was supplied by two splendidly harnessed white oxen. Two native servants, handsome young fellows, dressed in a kind of white uniform, accompanied the sledge, and saluted Arthur on his appearance with much reverence.

It took him, however, some time before he could make up his mind to

embark in a conveyance that reminded him of the description of Cleopatra's galley, and smelt more sweet; but finally he got in, and off he started, feeling that he was the observed of all observers, and followed by at least a score of beggars, each afflicted with some peculiar and dreadful deformity or disease. And thus, in triumphal guise, they slid down the quaint and narrow streets, squeezed in for the sake of shade between a double line of tall, green-shuttered houses; over the bridges that span the vast open drains; past the ochre-coloured cathedral; down the promenade edged with great magnolia-trees, that made the air heavy with their perfume, and where twice a week the band plays, and the Portuguese officials march up and down in all the pomp and panoply of office; onward through the dip, where the town lopes downwards to the sea; then up again through more streets, and past a stretch of dead wall, after which the chariot wheels through some iron gates, and he is in fairyland. One each side of the carriage-way there spreads a garden calculated to make English horticulturists gnash their teeth with envy, through the bowers of which he could catch peeps of green turf and of the blue sea beyond.

Here the cabbage palm shot its smooth and lofty trunk high into the air, there the bamboo waved its leafy ostrich plumes, and all about and around the soil was spread like an Indian shawl, with many a gorgeous flower and many a splendid fruit. Arthur thought of the garden of Eden and the Isles of the Blest, and whilst his eyes, accustomed to nothing better than our poor English roses, were still fixed upon the blazing masses of pomegranate flower, and his senses

were filled with the sweet scent of orange and magnolia blooms, the oxen halted before the portico of a stately building, white-walled and green-shuttered like all Madeira houses.

Then the slaves of the chariot assisted him to descend, whilst other slaves of the door bowed him up the steps, and he stood in a great cool hall, dazzling dark after the brilliancy of the sunlight. And here no slave awaited him, but the princess of this fair domain, none other than Mildred Carr herself, clad all in summer white, and with a smile of welcome in her eyes.

"I am so glad that you have come. How do you like Madeira? Do you find it very hot?"

"I have not seen much of it yet; but this place is lovely, it is like fairyland, and, I believe, that you," he added, with a bow, "are the fairy queen."

"Compliments again, Mr. Heigham. Well, I was the sleeping beauty last time, so one may as well be a queen for a change. I wonder what you will call me next?"

"Let me see: shall we say--an angel?"

"Mr. Heigham, stop talking nonsense, and come into the drawing-room."

He followed her, laughing, into an apartment that, from its noble proportions and beauty, might fairly be called magnificent. Its ceiling was panelled with worked timber, and its floor beautifully inlaid with woods of various hue, whilst the walls were thickly covered with pictures, chiefly sea-pieces, and all by good masters. He had, however, but little time to look about him, for a door opened at the further end of the room, and admitted the portly person of Miss Terry, arrayed in a gigantic sun hat and a pair of green spectacles. She seemed very hot, and held in her hand a piece of brown paper, inside of which something was violently scratching.

"I've caught him at last," she said, "though he did avoid me all last year. I've caught him."

"Good gracious! caught what?" asked Arthur, with great interest.

"What! why him that Mildred wanted," she replied, regardless of grammar in her excitement. "Just look at him, he's beautiful."

Thus admonished, Arthur carefully undid the brown paper, and next moment started back with an exclamation, and began to dance about with an enormous red beetle grinding its jaws into his finger.

"Oh, keep still, do, pray," called Miss Terry, in alarm, "don't shake him off on any account, or we shall lose him for the want of a little patience, as I did when he bit my finger last year. If you'll keep him

quite still, he won't leave go, and I'll ring for John to bring the chloroform bottle."

Arthur, feeling that the interests of science were matters of a higher importance than the well-being of his finger, obeyed her injunction to the letter, hanging his arm (and the beetle) over the back of a chair and looking the picture of silent misery.

"Quite still, if you please, Mr. Heigham, quite still; is not the animal's tenacity interesting?"

"No doubt to you, but I hope your pet beetle is not poisonous, for he is gnashing his pincers together inside my finger."

"Never mind, we will treat you with caustic presently. Mildred, don't laugh so much, but come and look at him; he's lovely. John, please be quick with that chloroform bottle."

"If this sort of thing happens often, I don't think that I should collect beetles from choice, at least not large ones," groaned Arthur.

"Oh, dear," laughed Mrs. Carr, "I never saw anything so absurd. I don't know which looks most savage, you or the beetle."

"Don't make all that noise, Mildred, you will frighten him, and if once he flies we shall never catch him in this big room."

Here, fortunately for Arthur, the servant arrived with the required bottle, into which the ferocious insect was triumphantly stoppered by Miss Terry.

"I am so much obliged to you, Mr. Heigham, you are a true collector."

"For the first and last time," mumbled Arthur, who was sucking his finger.

"I am infinitely obliged to you, too, Mr. Heigham," said Mrs. Carr, as soon as she had recovered from her fit of laughing; "the beetle is really very rare; it is not even in the British Museum. But come, let us go in to luncheon."

After that meal was over, Mrs. Carr asked her guest which he would like to see, her collection of beetles or of mummies.

"Thank you, Mrs. Carr, I have had enough of beetles for one day, so I vote for the mummies."

"Very well. Will you come, Agatha?"

"Now, Mildred, you know very well that I won't come. Just think, Mr. Heigham: I only saw the nasty things once, and then they gave me the creeps every night for a fortnight. As though those horrid Egyptian

'fellahs' weren't ugly enough when they were alive without going and making great skin and bone dolls of them--pah!"

"Agatha persists in believing that my mummies are the bodies of people like she saw in Egypt last year."

"And so they are, Mildred. That last one you got is just like the boy who used to drive my donkey at Cairo--the one that died, you know--I believe they just stuffed him, and said that he was an ancient king. Ancient king, indeed!" And Miss Terry departed, in search for more beetles.

"Now, Mr. Heigham, you must follow me. The museum is not in the house. Wait, I will get a hat."

In a minute she returned, and led the way across a strip of garden to a detached building, with a broad verandah, facing the sea. Scarcely ten feet from this verandah, and on the edge of the sheer precipice, was built a low wall, leaning over which Arthur could hear the wavelets lapping against the hollow rock two hundred feet beneath him. Here they stopped for a moment to look at the vast expanse of ocean, glittering in the sunlight like a sea of molten sapphires and heaving as gently as an infant's bosom.

"It is very lovely; the sea moves just enough to show that it is only asleep."

"Yes; but I like it best when it is awake, when it blows a hurricane-- it is magnificent. The whole cliff shakes with the shock of the waves, and sometimes the spray drives over in sheets. That is when I like to sit here; it exhilarates me, and makes me feel as though I belonged to the storm, and was strong with its strength. Come, let us go in."

The entrance to the verandah was from the end that faced the house, and to gain it they passed under the boughs of a large magnolia-tree. Going through glass doors that opened outwards into the verandah, Mrs. Carr entered a room luxuriously furnished as a boudoir. This had apparently no other exit, and Arthur was beginning to wonder where the museum could be, when she took a tiny bramah key from her watch-chain, and with it opened a door that was papered and painted to match the wall exactly. He followed her, and found himself in a stone passage, dimly lighted from above, and sloping downwards, that led to a doorway graven in the rock, on the model of those to be seen at the entrance of Egyptian temples.

"Now, Mr. Heigham," she said, flinging open another door, and stepping forward, "you are about to enter 'The Hall of the Dead.'"

He went in, and a strange sight met his gaze. They were standing in the centre of one side of a vast cave, that ran right and left at right angles to the passage. The light poured into it in great rays from skylights in the roof, and by it he could see that it was

hollowed out of the virgin rock, and measured some sixty feet or more in length, by about forty wide, and thirty high. Down the length of each side of the great chamber ran a line of six polished sphinxes, which had been hewn out of the surrounding granite, on the model of those at Carnac, whilst the walls were elaborately painted after the fashion of an Egyptian sepulchre. Here Osiris held his dread tribunal on the spirit of the departed; here the warrior sped onward in his charging chariot; here the harper swept his sounding chords; and here, again, crowned with lotus flowers, those whose corpses lay around held their joyous festivals.

In the respective centres of each end of the stone chamber a colossus towered in its silent and unearthly grandeur. That to the right was a statue of Osiris, judge of the souls of the dead, seated on his judgment-seat, and holding in his hand the source and the bent-headed sceptre. Facing him at the other end of the hall was the effigy of the mighty Ramses, his broad brow encircled by that kingly symbol which few in the world's history have worn so proudly, and his noble features impressing those who gaze upon them from age to age with a sense of scornful power and melancholy calm, such as does not belong to the countenance of the men of their own time. And all around, under this solemn guardianship, each upon a polished slab of marble, and enclosed in a case of thick glass, lay the corpses of the Egyptian dead, swathed in numberless wrappings, as in their day the true religion that they held was swathed in symbols and in mummeries.

Here were to be found the high-priest of the mysteries of Isis, the astronomer whose lore could read the prophecies that are written in the stars, the dark magician, the renowned warrior, the noble, the musician with his cymbals by his side, the fair maiden who had--so said her cedar coffin-boards--died of love and sorrow, and the royal babe, all sleeping the same sleep, and waiting the same awakening. This princess must have been well known to Joseph, that may have been her who rescued Moses from the waters, whilst the babe belongs to a dynasty of which the history was already merging into tradition when the great pyramid reared its head on Egypt's fertile plains.

Arthur stood, awed at the wonderful sight.

"Never before," said he, in that whisper which we involuntarily use in the presence of the dead, "did I realize my own insignificance."

The thought was abruptly put, but the words represented well what was passing in his mind, what must pass in the mind of any man of culture and sensibility when he gazes on such a sight. For in such presences the human mite of to-day, fluttering in the sun and walking on the earth that these have known and walked four thousand years ago, must indeed learn how infinitely small is the place that he occupies in the tale of things created; and yet, if to his culture and sensibility he adds religion, a word of living hope hovers on those dumb lips. For where are the spirits of those that lie before him in their eternal silence! Answer, withered lips, and tell us what judgment has Osiris

given, and what has Thoth written in his awful book? Four thousand years! Old human husk, if thy dead carcass can last so long, what limit is there to the life of the soul it held?

"Did you collect all these?" asked Arthur, when he had made a superficial examination of the almost countless treasures of the museum.

"Oh, no; Mr. Carr spent half his long life, and more money than I can tell you, in getting this collection together. It was the passion of his life, and he had this cave hollowed at enormous cost, because he thought that the air here would be less likely to injure them than the English fogs. I have added to it, however. I got those papyri and that beautiful bust of Berenice, the one in black marble. Did you ever see such hair?"

Arthur thought to himself that he had at that moment some not far from his heart that must be quite as beautiful, but he did not say so.

"Look, there are some curious things;" and she opened an air-tight case that contained some discoloured grains and a few lumps of shrivelled substance.

"What are they?"

"This is wheat taken from the inside of a mummy, and those are

supposed to be hyacinth bulbs. They came from the mummy-case of that baby prince, and I have been told that they would still grow if planted."

"I can scarcely believe that: the principle of life must be extinct."

"Wise people, say, you know, that the principle of life can never become extinct in anything that has once lived, though it may change its form; but I do not pretend to understand these things. However, we will settle the question, for we will plant one, and, if it grows, I will give the flower to you. Choose one."

Arthur took the biggest lump from the case, and examined it curiously.

"I have not much faith in your hyacinth; I am sure that it is dead."

"Ah! but many things that seem more dead than that have the strangest way of suddenly breaking into life," she said, with a little sigh.

"Give it to me; I will have it planted;" and then, with a quick glance upward, "I wonder if you will be here to see it bloom."

"I don't think that either of us will see it bloom in this world," he answered, laughing, and took his leave.