

CHAPTER XXXV

Had Arthur been a little less wrapped up in thoughts of Angela, and a little more alive to the fact that, being engaged or even married to one woman, does not necessarily prevent complications arising with another, it might have occurred to him to doubt the prudence of the course of life that he was pursuing at Madeira. And, as it is, it is impossible to acquit him of showing a want of knowledge of the world amounting almost to folly, for he should have known upon general principles that, for a man in his position, a grizzly bear would have been a safer daily companion than a young and lovely widow, and the North Pole a more suitable place of residence than Madeira. But he simply did not think about the matter, and, as thin ice has a treacherous way of not cracking till it suddenly breaks, so outward appearances gave him no indication of his danger.

And yet the facts were full of evil promise, for, as time went on, Mildred Carr fell headlong in love with him. There was no particular reason why she should have done so. She might have had scores of men, handsomer, cleverer, more distinguished, for the asking, or, rather, for the waiting to be asked. Beyond a certain ability of mind, a taking manner, and a sympathetic, thoughtful face, with that tinge of melancholy upon it which women sometimes find dangerously interesting, there was nothing so remarkable about Arthur that a woman possessing her manifold attractions and opportunities, should, unsought and without inquiry, lavish her affection upon him. There is only one

satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon, which, indeed, is a very common one, and that is, that he was her fate, the one man whom she was to love in the world, for no woman worth the name ever loves two, however many she may happen to marry. For this curious difference would appear to exist between the sexes. The man can attach himself, though in varying degree, to several women in the course of a lifetime, whilst the woman, the true, pure-hearted woman, cannot so adapt her best affection. Once given, like the law of the Medes and Persians, it altereth not.

Mildred felt, when her eyes first met Arthur's in Donald Currie's office, that this man was for her different from all other men, though she did not put the thought in words even to herself. And from that hour till she embarked on board the boat he was continually in her mind, a fact which so irritated her that she nearly missed the steamer on purpose, only changing her mind at the last moment. And then, when she had helped him to carry Miss Terry to her cabin, their hands had accidentally met, and the contact had sent a thrill through her frame such as she had never felt before. The next development that she could trace was her jealousy of the black-eyed girl whom she saw him helping about the deck, and her consequent rudeness.

Up to her present age, Mildred Carr had never known a single touch of love: she had not even felt particularly interested in her numerous admirers, but now this marble Galatea had by some freak of fate found a woman's heart, awkwardly enough, without the semblance of a

supplication on the part of him whom she destined to play Pygmalion. And, when she examined herself by the light of the flame thus newly kindled, she shrank back dismayed, like one who peeps over the crater of a volcano commencing its fiery work. She had believed her heart to be callous to all affection of this nature, it had seemed as dead as the mummied hyacinth; and now it was a living, suffering thing, and all alight with love. She had tasted of a new wine, and it burnt her, and was bitter sweet, and yet she longed for more. And thus, by slow and sad degrees, she learnt that her life, which had for thirty years flowed on its quiet way unshadowed by love's wing, must henceforth own his dominion, and be a slave to his sorrows and caprices. No wonder that she grew afraid!

But Mildred was a woman of keen insight into character, and it did not require that her powers of observation should be sharpened by the condition of her affections, to show her that, however deeply she might be in love with Arthur Heigham, he was not one little bit in love with her. Knowing the almost irresistible strength of her own beauty and attractions, she quickly came to the conclusion--and it was one that sent a cold chill through her--that there must be some other woman blocking the path to his heart. For some reason or other, Arthur had never spoken to her of Angela, either because a man very rarely volunteers information to a woman concerning his existing relationship with another of her sex, knowing that to do so would be to depreciate his value in her eyes, or from an instinctive knowledge that the subject would not be an agreeable one, or perhaps because the whole

matter was too sacred to him. But she, on her part, was determined to probe his secret to the bottom. So one sleepy afternoon, when they were sitting on the museum verandah, about six weeks after the date of their arrival in the island, she took her opportunity.

Mildred was sitting, or rather half lying, in a cane-work chair, gazing out over the peaceful sea, and Arthur, looking at her, thought what a lovely woman she was, and wondered what it was that had made her face and eyes so much softer and more attractive of late. Miss Terry was also there, complaining of the heat, but presently she moved off after an imaginary beetle, and they were alone.

"Oh, by-the-by, Mr. Heigham," Mildred said, presently, "I was going to ask you a question, if only I can remember what it is."

"Try to remember what it is about. 'Shoes, sealing-wax, cabbages, or kings.' Does it come under any of those heads?"

"Ah, I remember now. If you had added 'queens,' you would not have been far out. What I wanted to ask you----" and she turned her large, brown eyes full upon him, and yawned slightly. "Dear me, Agatha is right; it is hot!"

"Well, I am waiting to give you any information in my power."

"Oh! to be sure, the question. Well, it is a very simple one. Who are

you engaged to?"

Arthur nearly sprang off his chair with astonishment.

"What makes you think that I am engaged?" he asked.

She broke into a merry peal of laughter. Ah! if he could have known what that laugh cost her.

"What makes me think that you are engaged!" she answered, in a tone of raillery. "Why, of course you would have been at my feet long ago, if it had not been so. Come, don't be reticent. I shall not laugh at you. What is she like?" (Generally a woman's first question about a rival.) "Is she as good-looking--well, as I am, say--for, though you may not think it, I have been thought good-looking."

"She is quite different from you; she is very tall and fair, like an angel in a picture, you know."

"Oh! then there is a 'she,' and a 'she like an angel.' Very different _indeed_ from me, I should think. How nicely I caught you out;" and she laughed again.

"Why did you want to catch me out?" said Arthur, on whose ear Mrs. Carr's tone jarred; he could not tell why.

"Feminine curiosity, and a natural anxiety to fathom the reasons of your sighs, that is all. But never mind, Mr. Heigham, you and I shall not quarrel because you are engaged to be married. You shall tell me the story when you like, for I am sure there is a story--no, not this afternoon; the sun has given me a headache, and I am going to sleep it off. Other people's love-stories are very interesting to me, the more so because I have reached the respectable age of thirty without being the subject of one myself;" and again she laughed, this time at her own falsehood. But, when he had gone, there was no laughter in her eyes, nothing but tears, bitter, burning tears.

"Agatha," said Mildred that evening, "I am sick of this place. I want to go to the Isle of Wight. It must be quite nice there now. We will go by the next Currie boat."

"My dear Mildred," replied Miss Terry, aghast, "if you were going back so soon, why did you not leave me behind you? And just as we were getting so nicely settled here too, and I shall be so sorry to say good-bye to that young Heigham, he is such a nice young man! Why don't you marry him? I really thought you liked him. But, perhaps he is coming to the Isle of Wight too. Oh, that dreadful bay!"

Mildred winced at Miss Terry's allusions to Arthur, of whom that lady had grown extremely fond.

"I am very sorry, dear," she said, hastily; "but I am bored to death,

and it is such a bad insect year: so really you must begin to pack up."

Miss Terry began to pack accordingly, but, when next she alluded to the subject of their departure, Mildred affected surprise, and asked her what she meant. The astonished Agatha referred her to her own words, and was met by a laughing disclaimer.

"Why, you surely did not think that I was in earnest, did you? I was only a little cross."

"Well, really, Mildred, you've got so strange lately that I never know when you are in earnest and when you are not, though, for my part, I am very glad to stay in peace and quiet."

"Strange, grown strange, have I!" said Mrs. Carr, looking dreamily out of a window that commanded the carriage-drive, with her hands crossed behind her. "Yes, I think that you are right. I think that I have lost the old Mildred somewhere or other, and picked up a new one whom I don't understand."

"Ah, indeed," remarked Miss Terry, in the most matter-of-fact way, without having the faintest idea of what her friend was driving at.

"How it rains! I suppose that he won't come to-day."

"He! Who's he?"

"Why, how stupid you are! Mr. Heigham, of course!"

"So you always mean him, when you say 'he!'"

"Yes, of course I do, if it isn't ungrammatical. It is miserable this afternoon. I feel wretched. Why, actually, here he comes!" and she tore off like a school-girl into the hall, to meet him.

"Ah, indeed," again remarked Miss Terry, solemnly, to the empty walls.

"I am not such a fool as I look. I suppose that Mr. Heigham wouldn't come to the Isle of Wight."

It is perhaps needless to say that Mrs. Carr had never been more in earnest in her life than when she announced her intention of departing to the Isle of Wight. The discovery that her suspicions about Arthur had but too sure a foundation had been a crushing blow to her hopes, and she had formed a wise resolution to see no more of him. Happy would it have been for her, if she could have found the moral courage to act up to it, and go away, a wiser, if a sadder, woman. But this was not to be. The more she contemplated it, the more did her passion --which was now both wild and deep--take hold upon her heart, eating into it like acid into steel, and graving one name there in ineffaceable letters. She could not bear the thought of parting from him, and felt, or thought she felt, that her happiness was already too

deeply pledged to allow her to throw up the cards without an effort.

Fortune favours the brave. Perhaps, after all, it would declare itself for her. She was modest in her aspirations. She did not expect that he would ever give her the love he bore this other woman; she only asked to live in the sunlight of his presence, and would be glad to take him at his own price, or indeed at any price. Man, she knew, is by nature as unstable as water, and will mostly melt beneath the eyes of more women than one, as readily as ice before a fire when the sun has hid his face. Yes, she would play the game out: she would not throw away her life's happiness without an effort. After all, matters might have been worse: he might have been actually married.

But she knew that her hand was a difficult one to lead from, though she also knew that she held the great trumps--unusual beauty, practically unlimited wealth, and considerable fascination of manner. Her part must be to attract without repelling, charm without alarming, fascinate by slow degrees, till at length he was involved in a net from which there was no escape, and, above all, never to allow him to suspect her motives till the ripe moment came. It was a hard task for a proud woman to set herself, and, in a manner, she was proud; but, alas, with the best of us, when love comes in at the door, pride, reason, and sometimes honour, fly out the window.

And so Miss Terry heard no more talk of the Isle of Wight.

Thenceforward, under the frank and open guise of friendship, Mildred contrived to keep Arthur continually at her side. She did more. She drew from him all the history of his engagement to Angela, and listened, with words of sympathy on her lips, and wrath and bitter jealousy in her heart, to his enraptured descriptions of her rival's beauty and perfections. So benighted was he, indeed, that once he went so far as to suggest that he should, when he and Angela were married, come to Madeira to spend their honeymoon, and dilated on the pleasant trips which they three might take together.

"Truly," thought Mildred to herself, "that would be delightful." Once, too, he even showed her a tress of Angela's hair, and, strange to say, she found that there still lingered in her bosom a sufficient measure of vulgar first principles to cause her to long to snatch it from him and throw it into the sea. But, as it was, she smiled faintly, and admired openly, and then went to the glass to look at her own nut-brown tresses. Never had she been so dissatisfied with them, and yet her hair was considered lovely, and an aesthetic hair-dresser had once called it a "poem."

"Blind fool," she muttered, stamping her little foot upon the floor, "why does he torture me so?"

Mildred forgot that all love is blind, and that none was ever blinder or more headstrong than her own.

And so this second Calypso of a lovely isle set herself almost as unblushingly as her prototype to get our very unheroic Ulysses into her toils. And Penelope, poor Penelope, she sat at home and spun, and defied her would-be lovers.

But as yet Ulysses--I mean Arthur--was conscious of none of those things. He was by nature an easy-going young gentleman, who took matters as he found them, and asked no questions. And he found them very pleasant at Madeira, or, rather, at the Quinta Carr, for he did everything except sleep there. Within its precincts he was everywhere surrounded with that atmosphere of subtle and refined flattery, flattery addressed chiefly to the intellect, that is one of the most effective weapons of a clever woman. Soon the drawing-room tables were loaded with his favourite books, and no songs but such as he approved were ordered from London.

He discovered one evening, for instance, that Mildred looked best at night in black and silver, and next morning Mr. Worth received a telegram requesting him to forward without delay a large consignment of dresses in which those colours predominated.

On another occasion he casually threw out a suggestion about the erection of a terrace in the garden, and shortly afterwards was surprised to find a small army of Portuguese labourers engaged upon the work. He had made this suggestion in total ignorance of the science of garden engineering, and its execution necessitated the

removal of vast quantities of soil and the blasting of many tons of rock. The contractor employed by Mrs. Carr pointed out how the terrace could be made equally well at a fifth of the expense, but it did not happen to take exactly the direction that Arthur had indicated, so she would have none of it. His word was law, and, because he had spoken, the whole place was for a month overrun with dirty labourers, whilst, to the great detriment of Miss Terry's remaining nerves, and even to the slight discomfort of His Royal Highness himself, the air resounded all day long with the terrific bangs of the blasting powder.

But, so long as he was pleased with the progress of the improvement, Mildred felt no discomfort, nor would she allow any one else to express any. It even aggravated her to see Miss Terry put her hands to her head and jump, whenever a particularly large piece of ordnance was discharged, and she would vow that it must be affectation, because she never even noticed it.

In short, Mildred Carr possessed to an extraordinary degree that faculty for blind, unreasoning adoration which is so characteristic of the sex, an adoration that is at once magnificent in the entirety of its own self-sacrifice, and extremely selfish. When she thought that she could please Arthur, the state of Agatha's nerves became a matter of supreme indifference to her, and in the same way, had she been an absolute monarch, she would have spent the lives of thousands, and shaken empires till thrones came tumbling down like apples in the wind, if she had believed that she could thereby advance herself in

his affections.

But, as it never occurred to Arthur that Mrs. Carr might be in love with him, he saw nothing abnormal about all this. Not that he was conceited, for nobody was ever less so, but it is wonderful what an amount of flattery and attention men will accept from women as their simple right. If the other sex possesses the faculty of admiration, we in compensation are perfectly endowed with that of receiving it with careless ease, and when we fall in with some goddess who is foolish enough to worship *_us_*, and to whom *_we_* should be on our knees, we merely label her "sympathetic," and say that she "understands us."

From all of which wise reflections the reader will gather that our friend Arthur was not a hundred miles off an awkward situation.