

## CHAPTER XLIII

A week or so after the departure of Lord Minster, Mildred suggested that they should, on the following day, vary their amusements by going up to the Convent, a building perched on the hills some thousand feet above the town of Funchal, in palanquins, or rather hammocks swung upon long poles. Arthur, who had never yet travelled in these luxurious conveyances, jumped at the idea, and even Miss Terry, when she discovered that she was to be carried, made no objection. The party was completed by the addition of a newly-married couple of whom Mrs. Carr had known something at home, and who had come to Madeira to spend the honeymoon. Lady Florence also had been asked, but, rather to Arthur's disappointment, she could not come.

When the long line of swinging hammocks, each with its two sturdy bearers, were marshalled, and the adventurous voyagers had settled themselves in them, they really formed quite an imposing procession, headed as it was by the extra-sized one that carried Miss Terry, who complained bitterly that "the thing wobbled and made her feel sick."

But to Arthur's mind there was something effeminate in allowing himself, a strong, active man, to be carted up hills as steep as the side of a house by two perspiring wretches; so, hot as it was, he, to the intense amusement of his bearers, elected to get out and walk. The newly-married man followed his example, and for a while they went on

together, till presently the latter gravitated towards his wife's palanquin, and, overcome at so long a separation, squeezed her hand between the curtains. Not wishing to intrude himself on their conjugal felicity, Arthur in his turn gravitated to the side of Mrs. Carr, who was being lightly swung along in the second palanquin some twenty yards behind Miss Terry's. Shortly afterwards they observed a signal of distress being flown by that lady, whose arm was to be seen violently agitating her green veil from between the curtains of her hammock, which immediately came to a dead stop.

"What is it?" cried Arthur and Mildred, in a breath, as they arrived on the scene of the supposed disaster.

"My dear Mildred, will you be so kind as to tell that man" (pointing to her front bearer, a stout, flabby individual) "that he must not go on carrying me. I must have a cooler man. It makes me positively ill to see him puffing and blowing and dripping under my nose like a fresh basted joint."

Miss Terry's realistic description of her bearer's appearance, which was, to say the least of it, limp and moist, was no exaggeration. But then she herself, as Arthur well remembered, was no feather-weight, especially when, as in the present case, she had to be carted up the side of a nearly perpendicular hill some miles long, a fact very well exemplified by the condition of the bearer.

"My dear Agatha," replied Mildred, laughing, "what is to be done? Of course the man is hot, you are not a feather-weight; but what is to be done?"

"I don't know, but I won't go on with him, it's simply disgusting; he might let himself out as a watering-cart."

"But we can't get another here."

"Then he must cool himself, the others might come and fan him. I won't go on till he is cool, and that's flat."

"He will take hours to cool, and meanwhile we are broiling on this hot road. You really must come on, Agatha."

"I have it," said Arthur. "Miss Terry must turn herself round with her head towards the back of the hammock, and then she won't see him."

To this arrangement the aggrieved lady was after some difficulty persuaded to accede, and the procession started again.

Their destination reached, they picnicked as they had arranged, and then separated, the bride and bridegroom strolling off in one direction, and Mildred and Arthur in another, whilst Miss Terry mounted guard over the plates and dishes.

Presently Arthur and Mildred came to a little English-looking grove of pine and oak, that extended down a gentle slope and was bordered by a steep bank, at the foot of which great ferns and beautiful Madeira flowers twined themselves into a shelter from the heat. Here they sat down and gazed at the splendid and many-tinted view set in its background of emerald ocean.

"What a view it is," said Arthur. "Look, Mildred, how dark the clumps of sugar-cane look against the green of the vines, and how pretty the red roofs of the town are peeping out of the groves of fruit-trees. Do you see the great shadow thrown upon the sea by that cliff? how deep and cool the water looks within it, and how it sparkles where the sun strikes."

"Yes, it is beautiful, and the pines smell sweet."

"I wish Angela could see it," he said, half to himself. Mildred, who was lying back lazily among the ferns, her hat off, her eyes closed, so that the long dark lashes lay upon her cheek, and her head resting on her arm, suddenly started up.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing, you woke me from a sort of dream, that's all."

"This spring I remember going with her to look at a view near the

Abbey House, and saying--what I often think when I look at anything beautiful and full of life--that it depressed one to know that all this was so much food for death, and its beauty a thing that to-day is and to-morrow is not."

"And what did she say?"

"She said that to her it spoke of immortality, and that in everything around her she saw evidence of eternal life."

"She must be very fortunate. Shall I tell you of what it reminds me?"

"What?"

"Of neither death nor immortality, but of the full, happy, pulsing existence of the hour, and of the beautiful world that pessimists like yourself and mystics like your Angela think so poorly of, but which is really so glorious and so rich in joy. Why, this sunlight and those flowers, and the wide sparkle of that sea, are each and all a happiness, and the health in our veins and the beauty in our eyes, deep pleasures that we never realize till we lose them. Death, indeed, comes to us all, but why add to its terrors by thinking of them whilst it is far off? And, as for life after death, it is a faint, vague thing, more likely to be horrible than happy. This world is our only reality, the only thing that we can grasp; here alone we know that we can enjoy, and yet how we waste our short opportunities for

enjoyment! Soon youth will have slipped away, and we shall be too old for love. Roses fade fastest, Arthur, when the sun is bright; in the evening when they have fallen, and the ground is red with withering petals, do you not think we shall wish that we had gathered more?"

"Yours is a pleasant philosophy, Mildred," he said, struggling faintly in his own mind against her conclusions.

But at this moment, somehow, his fingers touched her own and were presently locked fast within her little palm, and for the first time in his life they sat hand in hand. But, happily for him, he did not venture to look into her eyes, and, before many minutes had passed, Miss Terry's voice was heard calling him loudly.

"I suppose that you must go," said Mildred, with a shade of vexation in her voice and a good many shades upon her face, "or she will be blundering down here. I will come, too; it is time for tea."

On arriving at the spot whence the sounds proceeded, they found Miss Terry surrounded by a crowd of laughing and excited bearers, and pouring out a flood of the most vigorous English upon an unfortunate islander, who stood, a silver mug in each hand, bowing and shrugging his shoulders, and enunciating with every variety of movement indicative of humiliation, these mystic words:

"Mee washeeppee, signora, washeeppee--e."

"What \_is\_ the matter now, Agatha?"

"Matter, why I woke up and found this man stealing the cups; I charged him at once with my umbrella, but he dodged and I fell down, and the umbrella has gone over the rock there. Take him up at once, Arthur-- there's the stolen property on his person. Hand him over to justice."

"Good gracious, Agatha, what are you thinking about? The poor man only wants to wash the things out."

"Then I should like to know why he could not tell me so in plain English," said Miss Terry, retiring discomfited amidst shouts of laughter from the whole party, including the supposed thief.

After tea they all set out on a grand beetle-hunting expedition, and so intent were they upon this fascinating pursuit that they did not note the flight of time, till suddenly Mildred, pulling out her watch, gave a pretty cry of alarm.

"Do you know what time it is, good people? Half-past six, and the Custances are to dine with us at a quarter-past-seven. It will take us a good hour to get down; what \_shall\_ we do?"

"I know," said Arthur, "there are two sledges just below; I saw them as we came up. They will take us down to Funchal in a quarter of an

hour, and we can get to the Quinta by about seven."

"Arthur, you are invaluable; the very thing. Come on, all of you, quick."

Now these sledges are peculiar to Madeira, being made on the principle of the bullock car, with the difference that they travel down the smooth, stone-paved roadways by their own momentum, guided by two skilled conductors, each with one foot naked to prevent his slipping, who hold the ropes, and when the sledge begins to travel more swiftly than they can follow, mount upon the projecting ends of the runners and are carried with it. By means of the swift and exhilarating rush of these sledges, the traveller traverses the distance, that it takes some hours to climb, in a very few minutes. Indeed, his journey up and down may be very well compared with that of the well-known British sailor who took five hours to get up Majuba mountain, but, according to his own forcibly told story, came down again with an almost incredible rapidity. It may therefore be imagined that sledge-travelling in Madeira is not very well suited to nervous voyagers.

Miss Terry had at times seen these wheelless vehicles shoot from the top of a mountain to the bottom like a balloon with the gas out, and had also heard of occasional accidents in connection with them. Stoutly she vowed that nothing should induce her to trust her neck to one of them.



"But you must, Agatha, or else be left behind. They are as safe as a church, and I can't leave the Custances to wait till half-past eight for dinner. Come, get in. Arthur can go in front and hold you; I will sit behind."

Thus admonished--Miss Terry entered groaning, Arthur taking his seat beside her, and Mrs. Carr hers in a sort of dickey behind. The newly-married pair, who did not half like it, possessed themselves of the smaller sledge, determined to brave extinction in each other's arms. Then the conductors seized the ropes, and, planting their one naked foot firmly before them, awaited the signal to depart.

"Stop," said Miss Terry, lifting the recovered umbrella, "that man has forgotten to put on his shoe and stocking on his right leg. He will cut his foot, and, besides, it doesn't look respectable to be seen flying through a place with a one-legged ragamuffin----"

"Let her go," shouted Arthur, and they did, to some purpose, for in a minute they were passing down that hill like a flash of light. Woods and houses appeared and vanished like the visions of a dream, and the soft air went singing away on either side of them as they clove it, flying downwards at an angle of thirty degrees, and leaving nothing behind them but the sound of Miss Terry's lamentations. Soon they neared the bottom, but there was yet a dip--the deepest of them all, with a sharp turn at the end of it--to be traversed.

Away went the little connubial sled in front like a pigeon down the wind; away they sped after it like an eagle in pursuit; \_crack\_ went the little sledge into the corner, and out shot the happy pair; \_crash\_ went the big sledge into it, and Arthur became conscious of a wild yell, of a green veil fluttering through the air, and of a fall as on to a feather-bed. Miss Terry's superior weight had brought her to her mother earth the first, and he, after a higher heavenward flight, had lit upon the top of her. He picked her up and sat her down against a wall to recover her breath, and then fished Mildred, dirty and bruised, but as usual laughing, out of a gutter; the loving pair had already risen and in an agony of mutual anxiety were rubbing each other's shins. And then he started back with a cry, for there before him, surveying the disaster with an air of mingled amusement and benevolence, stood--Sir John and Lady Bellamy.

Had it been the Prince and Princess of Evil--if, as is probable, there is a Princess--Arthur could scarcely have been more astounded. Somehow he had always in his thoughts regarded Sir John and Lady Bellamy, when he thought about them at all, as possessing indeed individual characters and tendencies, but as completely "adscripti glebae" of the neighbourhood of the Abbey House as that house itself. He would as soon have expected to see Caresfoot's Staff re-rooted in the soil of Madeira, as to find them strolling about Funchal. He rubbed his eyes; perhaps, he thought, he had been knocked silly and was labouring under a hallucination. No, there was no doubt about it; there they were, just the same as he had seen them at Isleworth, except that if

possible Sir John looked even more like a ripe apple than usual, while the sun had browned his wife's Egyptian face and given her a last finish as a perfect type of Cleopatra. Nor was the recognition on his side only, for next second his hand was grasped first by Sir John and then by Lady Bellamy.

"When we last met, Mr. Heigham," said the gentleman, with a benevolent beam, "I think I expressed a wish that we might soon renew our acquaintance, but I little thought under what circumstances our next meeting would take place," and he pointed to the overturned sledges and the prostrate sledgers.

"You have had a very merciful escape," chimed in Lady Bellamy, cordially; "with so many hard stones about, affairs might have ended differently."

"Now then, Mr. Heigham, we had better set to and run, that is, if Agatha has got a run left in her, or we shall be late after all. Thank goodness nobody is hurt; but we must find a hammock for Agatha, for to judge from her groans she thinks she is. Is my nose---- Oh, I beg your pardon," and Mrs. Carr stopped short, observing for the first time that he was talking to strangers.

"Do not let me detain you, if you are in a hurry. I am so thankful that nobody is hurt," said Lady Bellamy. "I believe that we are stopping at the same hotel, Mr. Heigham, I saw your name in the book,

so we shall have plenty of opportunities of meeting."

But Arthur felt that there was one question which he must ask before he went on, whether or no it exceeded the strict letter of his agreement with Philip; so, calling to Mrs. Carr that he was coming, he said, with a blush,

"How was Miss Caresfoot when--when you last saw her, Lady Bellamy?"

"Perfectly well," she answered, smiling.

"And more lovely than ever," added her husband.

"Thank you for that news, it is the best I have heard for some time. Good-bye for the present, we shall meet to-morrow at breakfast," and he ran on after the others, happier than he had been for months, feeling that he had come again within call of Angela, and as though he had never sat hand in hand with Mildred Carr.