

CHAPTER XLIV

At breakfast on the following morning Arthur, as he had anticipated, met the Bellamys. Sir John came down first, arrayed in true English fashion, in a tourist suit of grey, and presently Lady Bellamy followed. As she entered, dressed in trailing white, and walked slowly up the long table, every eye was turned upon her, for she was one of those women who attract attention as surely and unconsciously as a magnet attracts iron. Arthur, looking with the rest, thought that he had never seen a stranger, or at the same time a more imposing-looking, woman. Time had not yet touched her beauty or impaired her vigorous constitution, and at forty she was still at the zenith of her charms. The dark hair, that threw out glinting lights of copper when the sun struck it, still curled in its clustering ringlets and showed no line of grey, while the mysterious, heavy-lidded eyes and the coral lips were as full of rich life and beauty as they had been when she and Hilda von Holtzhausen first met at Rewtham House.

On her face, too, was the same expression of quiet power, of conscious superiority and calm command, that had always distinguished it. Arthur tried to think what it reminded him of, and remembered that the same look was to be seen upon the stone features of some of the Egyptian statues in Mildred's museum.

"How splendid Lady Bellamy looks!" he said, almost unconsciously, to his neighbour.

Sir John did not answer; and Arthur, glancing up to learn the reason, saw that he also was watching the approach of his wife, and that his face was contorted with a sudden spasm of intense malice and hatred, whilst his little, pig-like eyes glittered threateningly. He had not even heard the remark. Arthur would have liked to whistle; he had surprised a secret.

"How do you do, Mr. Heigham? I hope that you are not bruised after your tumble yesterday. Good morning, John."

Arthur rose and shook hands.

"I never was more surprised in my life," he said, "than when I saw you and Sir John at the top of the street there. May I ask what brought you to Madeira?"

"Health, sir, health," answered the little man. "Cough, catarrh, influenza, and all that's damn----ah! infernal!"

"My husband, Mr. Heigham," struck in Lady Bellamy, in her full, rich tones, "had a severe threatening of chest disease, and the doctor recommended a trip to some warmer climate. Unfortunately, however, his business arrangements will not permit of a long stay. We only stop here three weeks at most."

"I am sorry to hear that you are not well, Sir John."

"Oh! it is nothing very much," answered Lady Bellamy for him; "only he requires care. What a lovely garden this is--is it not? By the way, I forgot to inquire after the ladies who shared your tumble. I hope that they were none the worse. I was much struck with one of them, the very pretty person with the brown hair, whom you pulled out of the gutter."

"Oh, Mrs. Carr. Yes, she is pretty."

After breakfast, Arthur volunteered to take Lady Bellamy round the garden, with the ulterior object of extracting some more information about Angela. It must be remembered that he had no cause to mistrust that lady, nor had he any knowledge of the events which had recently happened in the neighbourhood of the Abbey House. He was therefore perfectly frank with her.

"I suppose that you have heard of my engagement, Lady Bellamy?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Heigham; it is quite a subject of conversation in the Roxham neighbourhood. Angela Caresfoot is a sweet and very beautiful girl, and I congratulate you much."

"You know, then, of its conditions?"

"Yes, I heard of them, and thought them ridiculous. Indeed I tried, at

Angela's suggestion, to do you a good turn with Philip Caresfoot, and get him to modify them; but he would not. He is a curious man, Philip, and, when he once gets a thing into his head, it is beyond the power of most people to drive it out again. I suppose that you are spending your year of probation here?"

"Well, yes--I am trying to get through the time in that way; but it is slow work."

"I thought you seemed pretty happy yesterday," she answered, smiling.

Arthur blushed.

"Oh! yes, I may appear to be. But tell me all about Angela."

"I have really very little to tell. She seems to be living as usual, and looks well. Her friend Mr. Fraser has come back. But I must be going in; I have promised to go out walking with Sir John. _Au revoir_, Mr. Heigham."

Left to himself, Arthur remembered that he also had an appointment to keep--namely, to meet Mildred by the Cathedral steps, and go with her to choose some Madeira jewellery, an undertaking which she did not feel competent to carry out without his assistance.

When he reached the Cathedral, he found her rather cross at having

been kept waiting for ten minutes.

"It is very rude of you," she said; "but I suppose that you were so taken up with the conversation of your friends that you forgot the time. By the way, who are they? anybody you have told me about?"

In the pauses of selecting the jewellery, Arthur told her all he knew about the Bellamys, and of their connection with the neighbourhood of the Abbey House. The story caused Mildred to open her brown eyes and look thoughtful. Just as they came out of the shop, who should they run into but the Bellamys themselves, chaffering for Madeira work with a woman in the street. Arthur stopped and spoke to them, and then introduced Mrs. Carr, who, after a little conversation, asked them up to lunch.

After this Mildred and Lady Bellamy met a good deal. The two women interested each other.

One night, when the Bellamys had been about ten days in Madeira, the conversation took a personal turn. Sir John and Arthur were sitting over their wine (they were dining with Mrs. Carr), Agatha Terry was fast asleep on a sofa, so that Lady Bellamy and Mildred, seated upon lounging-chairs, by a table with a light on it, placed by an open window, were practically alone.

"Oh, by the way, Lady Bellamy," said Mildred, after a pause, "I

believe that you are acquainted with the young lady to whom Mr. Heigham is engaged?" She had meant to say, "to be married," but the words stuck in her throat.

"Oh, yes, I know her well."

"I am so glad. I am quite curious to hear what she is like; one can never put much faith in lovers' raptures, you know."

"Do you mean in person or in character?"

"Both."

"Well, Angela Caresfoot is as lovely a woman as ever I saw, with a noble figure, well-set head, and magnificent eyes and hair."

Mildred turned a little pale and bit her lips.

"As to her character, I can hardly describe it. She lives in an atmosphere of her own, an atmosphere that I cannot reach, or, at any rate, cannot breathe. But if you can imagine a woman whose mind is enriched with learning as profound as that of the first classical scholars of the day, and tinged with an originality all her own; a woman whose faith is as steady as that star, and whose love is deep as the sea and as definite as its tides; who lives to higher ends than those we strive for; whose whole life, indeed, gives one the idea that

it is the shadow--imperfect, perhaps, but still the shadow--of an immortal light: then you will get some idea of Angela Caresfoot. She is a woman intellectually, physically, and spiritually immeasurably above the man on whom she has set her affections."

"That cannot be," said Mildred, softly, "like draws to like; she must have found something in him, some better part, some affinity of which you know nothing."

After this she fell into silence. Presently Lady Bellamy raised her eyes, just now filled up with the great pupils, and fixed them on Mildred.

"You are thinking," she said, slowly, "that Angela Caresfoot is a formidable rival."

Mildred started.

"How can you pretend to read my thoughts?"

She laughed a little.

"I am an adept at the art. Don't be down-hearted. I should not be surprised if, after all, the engagement between Mr. Heigham and Angela Caresfoot should come to nothing. Of course, I speak in perfect confidence."

"Of course."

"Well, the marriage is not altogether agreeable to the father, who would prefer another and more suitable match. But, unfortunately, there is no way of shaking the young lady's determination."

"Indeed."

"But I think that, with assistance, a way might be found."

Their eyes met, and this time Mildred took up the parable.

"Should I be wrong, Lady Bellamy, if I supposed that you have not come to Madeira solely for pleasure?"

"A wise person always tries to combine business and pleasure."

"And in this case the business combined is in connection with Mr. Heigham's engagement?"

"Exactly."

"And supposing that I were to tell him this?"

"Had I not known that you would on no account tell Mr. Heigham, I

should not have told you."

"And how do you know that?"

"I will answer your question by another. Did you ever yet know a woman, who loved a man, willingly help him to the arms of a rival, unless indeed she was forced to it?" she added, with something like a sigh.

Mildred Carr's snowy bosom heaved tumultuously, and the rose-leaf hue faded from her cheeks.

"You mean that I am in love with Arthur Heigham. On what do you base that belief?"

"On a base as broad as the pyramids of which you were talking at dinner. Public report, not nearly so misleading a guide as people think, your face, your voice, your eyes, all betray you. Why do you always try to get near him to touch him?--answer me that. I have seen you do it three times this evening. Once you handed him a book in order to touch his hand beneath it; but there is no need to enumerate what you doubtless very well remember. No nice woman, Mrs. Carr, ever likes to continually touch a man unless she loves him. You are always listening for his voice and step, you are listening for them now. Your eyes follow his face as a dog does his master's--when you speak to him, your voice is a caress in itself. Shall I go on?"

"I think that it is unnecessary. Whether you be right or not, I will give you the credit of being a close observer."

"To observe with me is at once a task and an amusement, and the habit is one that leads me to accurate conclusions, as I think you will admit. The conclusion I have come to in your case is that you do not wish to see Arthur Heigham married to another woman. I spoke just now of assistance----"

"I have none to give, I will give none. How could I look him in the face?"

"You are strangely scrupulous for a woman in your position."

"I have always tried to behave like an honourable woman, Lady Bellamy, and I do not feel inclined to do otherwise now."

"Perhaps you will think differently when it comes to the point. But in the meanwhile remember, that people who will not help themselves, cannot expect to be helped."

"Once and for all, Lady Bellamy, understand me. I fight for my own hand with the weapons which Nature and fortune have given me, and by myself I will stand or fall. I will join in no schemes to separate Arthur from this woman. If I cannot win him for myself by myself, I

will at any rate lose him fairly. I will respect what you have told me, but I will do no more."

Lady Bellamy smiled as she answered--

"I really admire your courage. It is quite quixotic. Hush, here come the gentlemen."