

## CHAPTER XLV

A few days after the dinner at the Quinta Carr, the Bellamys' visit to Madeira drew to a close. On the evening before their departure, Arthur volunteered to take Lady Bellamy down to the parade to hear the band play. After they had walked about a while under the shade of the magnolia-trees, which were starred all over with creamy cups of bloom, and sufficiently inspected the gay throng of Portuguese inhabitants and English visitors, made gayer still by the amazingly gorgeous uniforms of the officials, Arthur spied two chairs in a comparatively quiet corner, and suggested that they should sit down.

"Lady Bellamy," he said, after hesitating a while, "you are a woman of the world, and I believe a friend of my own. I want to ask your advice about something."

"It is entirely at your service, Mr. Heigham."

"Well, really it is very awkward----"

"Shall I turn my head so as not to see your blushes?"

"Don't laugh at me, Lady Bellamy. Of course you will say nothing of this."

"If you doubt my discretion, Mr. Heigham, do not choose me as a

confidante. You are going, unless I am mistaken, to speak to me about Mrs. Carr."

"Yes, it is about her. But how did you know that? You always seem to be able to read one's thoughts before one speaks. Do you know, sometimes I think that she has taken a fancy to me, do you see, and I wanted to ask you what you thought about it."

"Well, supposing that she had, most young men, Mr. Heigham, would not talk of such a thing in a tone befitting a great catastrophe. But, if I am not entering too deeply into particulars, what makes you think so?"

"Well, really, I don't exactly know. She sometimes gives me a general idea."

"Oh, then, there has been nothing tangible."

"Well, yes, once she took my hand, or I took hers, I don't know which; but I don't think much of that, because it's the sort of thing that's always happening, don't you know, and nine times out of ten means nothing at all. But why I ask you about it is that, if there is anything of the sort, I had better cut and run out of this, because it would not be fair to stop, either to her, or to Angela, or myself. It would be dangerous, you see, playing with such a woman as Mildred."

"So you would go away if you thought that she took any warmer interest in you than ladies generally do in men engaged to be married."

"Certainly I should."

"Well, then, I think that I can set your mind at ease. I have observed Mrs. Carr pretty closely, and in the way you suppose she cares for you no more than she does for your coat. She is, no doubt, a bit of a flirt, and very likely wishes to get you to fall in love with her--a natural ambition on the part of a woman; but, as for being in love with you herself, the idea is absurd. Women of the world do not fall in love so readily; they are too much taken up with thinking about themselves to have time to think about anybody else. With them it is all self, self, self, from morning till night. Besides, look at the common-sense side of the thing. Do you suppose it likely that a person of Mrs. Carr's wealth and beauty, who has only to lift her hand to have all London at her feet, is likely to fix her affections upon a young man whom she knows is already engaged to be married, and who--forgive me if I say so--has not got the same recommendations to her favour that many of her suitors have? It is, of course, quite possible that Mrs. Carr's society may be dangerous to you, in which case it might be wise for you to go; but I really do not think that you need feel any anxiety on her account. She finds you a charming companion, and in some ways a useful one, and that is all. When you go, somebody else will soon fill the vacant space."

"Then that's all right," said Arthur, though somehow he did not feel as wildly delighted as he should have done at hearing it so clearly demonstrated that Mildred did not care a brass button about him; but then that is human nature. Between eighteen and thirty-five, ninety per cent. of the men in the world would like to centre in themselves the affections of every young and pretty woman they know, even if there was not the ghost of a chance of their marrying one of them. The same tendency is to be observed conversely in the other sex, only in their case with a still smaller proportion of exceptions.

"By the way," asked Arthur, presently, "how is my late guardian, Mr. George Caresfoot?"

"Not at all well, I am sorry to say. I am very anxious about his health. He is in the south of England now for a change."

"I am sorry he is ill. Do you know, I daresay you will think me absurd; but you have taken a weight off my mind. I always had an idea that he wanted to marry Angela, and sometimes I am afraid that I have suspected that Philip Caresfoot carted me off in order to give him a chance. You see, Philip is uncommonly fond of money, and George is rich."

"What an absurd idea, Mr. Heigham! Why, George looks upon matrimony as an institution of the evil one. He admires Angela, I know--he always does admire a pretty face; but as for dreaming of marrying a girl half

his age and his own cousin into the bargain, it is about the last thing that he would do."

"I am glad to hear it. I am sure I have been uncomfortable enough thinking about him sometimes. Lady Bellamy, will you do something for me?"

"What is that, Mr. Heigham?"

"Tell Angela all about me."

"But would that be quite honourable, Mr. Heigham--under the conditions of your engagement, I mean?"

"You never promised not to talk about me; I only promised not to attempt verbal or written communication with Angela."

"Well, I will tell her that I met you, and that you are well, and, if Philip will allow me, I will tell her more; but of course I don't know if he will or not. What ring is that you wear?"

"It is one that Angela gave me when we became engaged. It was her mother's."

"Will you let me look at it?"

Arthur held out his hand. The ring was an antique, a large emerald, cut like a seal and heavily set in a band of dull gold. On the face of the stone were engraved some mysterious characters.

"What is that engraved on the stone?"

"I am not sure; but Angela told me that Mr. Fraser had taken an impression of it, and forwarded it to a great Oriental scholar. His friend said that the stone must be extremely ancient, as the character is a form of Sanscrit, and that he believed the word to mean 'Forever' or 'Eternity.' Angela said that it had been in her mother's family for generations, and was supposed to have been brought from the East about the year 1700. That is all I know about it."

"The motto is better suited to a wedding-ring than to an engagement stone," said Lady Bellamy, with one of her dark smiles.

"Why?"

"Because engagements are like promises and pie-crust, made to be broken."

"I hope that will not be the case with ours, however," said Arthur, attempting a laugh.

"I hope not, I am sure; but never pin your faith absolutely to any

woman, or you will regret it. Always accept her oaths and protestations as you would a political statement, politely, and with an appearance of perfect faith, but with a certain grain of mistrust. Woman's fidelity is in the main a fiction. We are faithful just as men are, so long as it suits us to be so; with this difference however, men play false from passion or impulse, women from calculation."

"You do not draw a pleasing picture of your own sex."

"When is the truth pleasing? It is only when we clothe its nakedness with the rags of imagination, or sweeten it with fiction, that it can please. Of itself, it is so ugly a thing that society in its refinement will not even hear it, but prefers to employ a corresponding formula. Thus all passion, however vile, is called by the name of 'love,' all superstitious terror and grovelling attempts to conciliate the unseen are known as 'religion,' while selfish greed and the hungry lust for power masquerade as laudable 'ambition.' Men and women, especially women, hate the truth, because, like the electric light, it shows them as they are, and that is vile. It has grown so strange to them from disuse that, like Pilate, they do not even know what it is! I was going to say, however, that if you care to trust me with it, I think I see how I can take a message to Angela for you--without either causing you to break your promise or doing anything dishonourable myself."

"How?"

"Well, if you like, I will take her that ring. I think that is a very generous offer on my part, for I do not like the responsibility."

"But what is the use of taking her the ring?"

"It is something that there can be no mistake about, that is all, a speaking message from yourself. But don't give it me if you do not like; perhaps you had rather not!"

"I don't like parting with it at all, I confess, but I should dearly like to send her something. I suppose that you would not take a letter?"

"You would not write one, Mr. Heigham!"

"No, of course, I forget that accursed promise. Here, take the ring, and say all you can to Angela with it. You promise that you will?"

"Certainly, I promise that I will say all I can."

"You are very good and kind. I wish to Heaven that I were going to Marlshire with you. If you only knew how I long to see her again. I think that it would break my heart if anything happened to separate us," and his lips quivered at the thought.



Lady Bellamy turned her sombre face upon him--there was compassion in her eyes.

"If you bear Angela Caresfoot so great a love, be guided by me and shake it off, strangle it--be rid of it anyhow; for fulfilled affection of that nature would carry a larger happiness with it than is allowed in a world planned expressly to secure the greatest misery of the greatest number. There is a fate which fights against it; its ministers are human folly and passion. You have seen many marriages, tell me, how many have you known, out of a novel, where the people married their true loves? In novels they always do, it is another of society's pleasant fictions, but real life is like a novel without the third volume. I do not want to alarm you, Mr. Heigham; but, because I like you, I ask you to steel your mind to disappointment, so that, if a blow comes, it may not crush you."

"What do you mean, Lady Bellamy, do you know of any impending trouble?"

"I? Certainly not. I only talk on general principles. Do not be over-confident, and never trust a woman. Come, let us get home."

Next morning, when Arthur came down to breakfast, the Bellamys had sailed. The mail had come in from the Cape at midnight, and left again at dawn, taking them with it.