

CHAPTER XLVI

The departure of the Bellamys left Arthur in very low spirits. His sensations were similar to those which one can well imagine an ancient Greek might have experienced who, having sent to consult the Delphic oracle, had got for his pains a very unsatisfactory reply, foreshadowing evils but not actually defining them. Lady Bellamy was in some way connected with the idea of an oracle in his mind. She looked oracular. Her dark face and inscrutable eyes, the stamp of power upon her brow, all suggested that she was a mistress of the black arts. Her words, too, were mysterious, and fraught with bitter wisdom and a deep knowledge distilled from the poisonous weeds of life.

Arthur felt with something like a shudder that, if Lady Bellamy prophesied evil, evil was following hard upon her words. And in warning him not to place his whole heart's happiness upon one venture, lest it should meet with shipwreck, he was sure that she was prophesying with a knowledge of the future denied to ordinary mortals. How earnestly, too, she had cautioned him against putting absolute faith in Angela--so earnestly, indeed, that her talk had left a flavour of distrust in his mind. Yet how could he mistrust Angela?

Nor was he comforted by a remark that fell from Mildred Carr the afternoon following the departure of the mail. Raising her eyes, she glanced at his hand.

"What are you looking at?" he said.

"Was not that queer emerald you wore your engagement ring?"

"Yes."

"What have you done with it?"

"I gave it to Lady Bellamy to give to Angela."

"What for?"

"To show her that I am alive and well. I may not write, you know."

"You are very confiding."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. At least, I mean that I don't think that I should care to hand over my engagement ring so easily. It might be misapplied, you know."

This view of the matter helped to fill up the cup of Arthur's nervous anxiety, and he vainly plied Mildred with questions to get her to elucidate her meaning, and state her causes of suspicion, if she had

any; but she would say nothing more on the subject, which then dropped, and was not alluded to again between them.

After the Bellamys' departure, the time wore on at Madeira without bringing about any appreciable change in the situation. But Mildred saw that their visit had robbed her of any advantages she had gained over Arthur, for they had, as it were, brought Angela's atmosphere with them, and, faint though it was, it sufficed to overpower her influence. He made no move forward, and seemed to have entirely forgotten the episode on the hills when he had gone so very near disaster. On the contrary, he appeared to her to grow increasingly preoccupied as time went on, and to look upon her more and more in the light of a sister, till at length her patience wore thin.

As for her passion, it grew almost unrestrainable in its confinement. Now she drifted like a rudderless vessel on a sea which raged continuously and knew no space of calm. And so little oil was poured upon the troubled waters, there were so few breaks in the storm-walls that rose black between her and the desired haven of her rest. Indeed, she began to doubt if even her poor power of charming him, as at first she had been able to do, with the sparkle of her wit and the half-unconscious display of her natural grace, was not on the wane, and if she was not near to losing her precarious foothold in his esteem and affection. The thought that he might be tiring of her struck her like a freezing wind, and for a moment turned her heart to ice.

Poor Mildred! higher than ever above her head bloomed that "blue rose" she longed to pluck. Would she ever reach it after all her striving, even to gather one poor leaf, one withered petal? The path which led to it was very hard to climb, and below the breakers boiled. Would it, after all, be her fate to fall, down into that gulf of which the sorrowful waters could bring neither death nor forgetfulness?

And so Christmas came and went.

One day, when they were all sitting in the drawing-room, some eight weeks after the Bellamys had left, and Mildred was letting her mind run on such thoughts as these, Arthur, who had been reading a novel, got up and opened the folding-doors at the end of the room which separated it from the second drawing-room, and also the further doors between that room and the dining-room. Then he returned, and, standing at the top of the big drawing-room, took a bird's-eye view of the whole suite.

"What are you doing, Arthur?"

"I am reflecting, Mildred, that, with such a suite of apartments at your command, it is a sin and a shame not to give a ball."

"I will give a ball, if you like, Arthur. Will you dance with me if I do?"

"How many times?" he said, laughing.

"Well, I will be moderate--three times. Let me see--the first waltz, the waltz before supper, and the last galop."

"You will dance me off my head. It is dangerous to waltz with any one so pretty," he said, in that bantering tone he often took with her, and which aggravated her intensely.

"It is more likely that my own head will suffer, as I dance so rarely. Then, that is a bargain?"

"Certainly."

"Dear me, Mildred, how silly you are; you are like a schoolgirl!" said Miss Terry.

"Agatha is put out because you do not offer to dance three times with her."

"Oh! but I will, though, if she likes; three quadrilles."

And so the matter passed off in mutual badinage; but Mildred did not forget her intention. On the contrary, "society" at Madeira was soon profoundly agitated by the intelligence that the lady Croesus, Mrs. Carr, was about to give a magnificent ball, and so ill-natured--or,

rather, so given to jumping to conclusions--is society, that it was freely said it was in order to celebrate her engagement to Arthur Heigham. Arthur heard nothing of this; one is always the last to hear things about oneself. Mildred knew of it, however, but, whether from indifference or from some hidden motive, she neither took any steps to contradict it herself, nor would she allow Miss Terry to do so.

"Nonsense," she said; "let them talk. To contradict such things only makes people believe them the more. Mind now, Agatha, not a word of this to Mr. Heigham; it would put him out."

"Well, Mildred, I should have thought that you would be put out too."

"I!--oh, no! Worse things might happen," and she shrugged her shoulders.

At length the much-expected evening came, and the arriving guests found that the ball had been planned on a scale such as Madeira had never before beheld. The night was lovely and sufficiently still to admit of the illumination of the gardens by means of Chinese lanterns that glowed all around in hundreds, and were even hung like golden fruit amongst the topmost leaves of the lofty cabbage palms, and from the tallest sprays of the bamboos. Within, the scene was equally beautiful. The suite of three reception-rooms had been thrown into one, two for dancing, and one for use as a sitting-room. They were quite full, for the Madeira season was at its height, and all the

English visitors who were "anybody" were there. There happened, too, to be a man-of-war in the harbour, every man-jack, or, rather, every officer-jack of which, with the exception of those on watch--and they were to be relieved later on--was there, and prepared to enjoy himself with a gusto characteristic of the British sailor-man.

The rooms, too, were by no means devoid of beauty, but by far the loveliest woman in them was Mrs. Carr herself. She was simply dressed in a perfectly-fitting black satin gown, looped up with diamond stars that showed off the exquisite fairness of her skin to great perfection. Her ornaments were also diamonds, but such diamonds--not little flowers and birds constructed of tiny stones, but large single gems, each the size of a hazel-nut. On her head she wore a tiara of these, eleven stones in all, five on each side, and surmounted over the centre of the forehead by an enormous gem as large as a small walnut, which, standing by itself above the level of the others, flashed and blazed like a fairy star. Around her neck, wrists, and waist were similar points of concentrated light, that, shining against the black satin as she moved, gave her a truly magnificent appearance. Never before had Mildred Carr looked so perfectly lovely, for her face and form were well worthy of the gems and dress; indeed, most of the men there that night thought her eyes as beautiful as her diamonds.

The ball opened with a quadrille, but in this Mrs. Carr did not dance, being employed in the reception of her guests. Then followed a waltz, and, as its first strains struck up, several applicants came to

compete for the honour of her hand; but she declined them all, saying that she was already engaged; and presently Arthur, looking very tall and quite the typical young Englishman in his dress-clothes, came hurrying up.

"You are late, Mr. Heigham," she said; "the music has begun."

"Yes; I am awfully sorry. I was dancing with Lady Florence, and could not find her old aunt."

"Indeed, to me Mrs. Velley is pretty conspicuous, with that green thing on her head; but come along, we are wasting time."

Putting his arm round her waist, they sailed away together amidst of the murmurs of the disappointed applicants.

"Lucky dog," said one.

"Infernal puppy," muttered another.

Arthur enjoyed his waltz very much, for the rooms, though full, were not crowded, and Mildred waltzed well. Still he was a little uneasy, for he felt that, in being chosen to dance the first waltz with the giver of this splendid entertainment over the heads of so many of his superiors in rank and position, he was being put rather out of his place. He did not as a rule take any great degree of notice of

Mildred's appearance, but to-night it struck him as unusually charming.

"You look very beautiful to-night, Mildred," he said, when they halted for breath; "and what splendid diamonds you have on!"

She flushed with pleasure at his compliment.

"You must not laugh at my diamonds. I know that I am too insignificant to wear such jewels. I had two minds about putting them on."

"Laugh at them, indeed. I should as soon think of laughing at the Bank of England. They are splendid."

"Yes," she said, bitterly; "they would be splendid on your Angela. They want a splendid woman to carry them off."

Oddly enough, he was thinking the same thing: so, having nothing to say, he went on dancing. Presently the waltz came to an end, and Mildred was obliged to hurry off to receive the Portuguese Governor, who had just put in an appearance. Arthur looked at his card, and found that he was down for the next galop with Lady Florence Claverley.

"Our dance again, Lady Florence."

"Really, Mr. Heigham, this is quite shocking. If everybody did not know that you belonged body and soul to the lovely widow, I should be accused of flirting with you."

"Who was it made me promise to dance five times?"

"I did. I want to make Mrs. Carr angry."

"Why should my dancing five or fifty dances with you make Mrs. Carr angry?"

Lady Florence shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Are you blind?" she said.

Arthur felt uncomfortable.

In due course, however, the last waltz before supper came round, and he, as agreed upon, danced it with his hostess. As the strains of the music died away, the doors of the supper-room and tent were thrown open.

"Now, Arthur," said Mildred, "take me in to supper."

He hesitated.

"The Portuguese Governor----" he began.

She stamped her little foot, and her eyes gave an ominous flash.

"Must I ask you twice?" she said.

Then he yielded, though the fact of being for the second time that night placed in an unnecessarily prominent position made him feel more uncomfortable than ever, for they were seated at the head of the top table. Mildred Carr was in the exact centre, with himself on her right and the Portuguese Governor on the left. To Arthur's left was Lady Florence, who took an opportunity to assure him solemnly that he really "bore his blushing honours, very nicely," and to ask him "how he liked the high places at feasts?"

The supper passed off as brilliantly as most successful suppers do. Mrs. Carr looked charming, and her conversation sparkled like her own champagne; but it seemed to him that, as in the case of the wine, there was too much sting in it. The wine was a little too dry, and her talk a little too full of suppressed sarcasm, though he could not quite tell what it was aimed at, any more than he could trace the source of the champagne bubbles.

Supper done, he led her back to the ball-room. The second extra was just beginning, and she stood as though she were expecting him to ask her to dance it.

"I am sorry, Mildred, but I must go now. I am engaged this dance."

"Indeed--who to?" This was very coldly said.

"Lady Florence," he answered, confusedly, though there really was no reason why he should be ashamed.

She looked at him steadily.

"Oh! I forgot, for to-night you are her monopoly. Good-bye."

A little while after this, Arthur thought that he had had about enough dancing for awhile, and went and sat by himself in a secluded spot under the shadow of a tree-fern in a temporary conservatory put up outside a bow-window. The Chinese lantern that hung upon the fern had gone out, leaving his chair in total darkness. Presently a couple, whom he did not recognize, for he only saw their backs, strayed in, and placed themselves on a bench before him in such a way as to entirely cut off his retreat. He was making up his mind to disturb them, when they began a conversation, in which the squeezing of hands and mild terms of endearment played a part. Fearing to interrupt, lest he should disturb their equanimity, he judged it best to stop where he was. Presently, however, their talk took a turn that proved intensely interesting to him. It was something as follows:--

She. "Have you seen the hero of the evening?"

He. "Who? Do you mean the Portuguese Governor in his war-paint?"

She. "No, of course not. You don't call him a hero, do you? I mean our hostess's _fiance_, the nice-looking young fellow who took her in to supper."

He. "Oh, yes. I did not think much of him. Lucky dog! but he must be rather mean. They say that he is engaged to a girl in England, and has thrown her over for the widow."

She. "Ah, you're jealous! I know that you would like to be in his shoes. Come, confess."

He. "You are very unkind. Why should I be jealous when----"

She. "Well, you need not hurt my hand, and will you _never_ remember that black shows against white!"

He. "It's awfully hot here; let's go into the garden." [_Exuent_.]