

## CHAPTER XLVII

Arthur emerged from his hiding-place, horror-struck at hearing what was being said about him, and wondering, so far as he was at the moment capable of accurate thought, how long this report had been going about, and whether by any chance it had reached the ears of the Bellamys. If it had, the mischief might be very serious. In the confusion of his mind, only two things were clear to him--one was, that both for Mildred's and his own sake, he must leave Madeira at once; and, secondly, that he would dance no more with her that night.

Meanwhile the ball was drawing to a close, and presently he heard the strains of the last galop strike up. After the band had been playing for a minute or two, a natural curiosity drew him to the door of the ball-room, to see if Mildred was dancing with anybody else. Here he found Lady Florence, looking rather disconsolate.

"How is it that you are not dancing?" she asked.

He murmured something inaudible about "partner."

"Well, we are in the same box. What do you think? I promised this galop to Captain Clemence, and now there he is, vainly trying to persuade Mrs. Carr, who won't look at him, and appears to be waiting for somebody else--you, I should think--to give him the dance. I will be even with him, though."

Just then the music reached a peculiarly seductive passage.

"Oh, come along!" said Lady Florence, quite regardless of the proprieties; and, before Arthur well knew where he was, he was whirling round the room.

Mrs. Carr was standing at the top corner, where the crush obliged him to slacken his pace, and, as he did so, he caught her eye. She was talking to Lady Florence's faithless partner, with a smile upon her lips; but one glance at her face sufficed to tell him that she was in a royal rage, and, what was more, with himself. His partner noticed it, too, and was amused.

"Unless I am mistaken, Mr. Heigham, you have come into trouble. Look at Mrs. Carr." And she laughed.

But that was not all. Either from sheer mischief, or from curiosity to see what would happen, she insisted upon stopping, as the dance drew to a close, by Mildred's corner. That lady, however, proved herself equal to the occasion.

"Mr. Heigham," she said sweetly, "do you know that that was our dance?"

"Oh, was it?" he replied, feeling very much a fool.

"Yes, certainly it was; but with such a temptation to error"--and she smiled towards Lady Florence--"it is not wonderful that you made a mistake, and, as you look so contrite, you shall be forgiven. Agatha, there's a dear, just ask that man to go up to the band, and tell them to play another waltz, 'La Berceuse,' before 'God save the Queen.'"

Arthur felt all the while, though she was talking so suavely, that she was in a state of suppressed rage; once he glanced at her, and saw that her eyes seemed to flash. But her anger only made her look more lovely, supplying as it did an added dignity and charm to her sweet features. Nor did she allow it to have full play.

Mildred felt that the crisis in her fortunes was far too serious to admit of being trifled with. She knew how unlikely it was that she would ever have a better chance with Arthur than she had now, for the mirrors told her that she was looking her loveliest, which was very lovely indeed. In addition, she was surrounded by every seductive circumstance that could assist to compel a young man, however much engaged, to commit himself by some act or words of folly. The sound and sights of beauty, the rich odour of flowers, the music's voluptuous swell, and last, but not least, the pressure of her

gracious form and the glances from her eyes, which alone were enough to make fools of ninety-nine out of every hundred young men in Europe --all these things combined to help her. And to them must be added her

determination, that concentrated strength of will employed to a single end, which, if there be any truth in the theories of the action of mind on mind, cannot fail to influence the individual on whom it is directed.

"Now, Arthur."

The room was very nearly clear, for it was drawing towards daylight when they floated away together. Oh! what a waltz that was! The incarnate spirit of the dance took possession of them. She waltzed divinely, and there was scarcely anything to check their progress. On, on they sped with flying feet as the music rose and fell above them. And soon things began to change for Arthur. All sense of embarrassment and regret vanished from his mind, which now appeared to be capable of holding but one idea of the simplest and yet the most soaring nature. He thought that he was in heaven with Mildred Carr. On, still on; now he saw nothing but her shell-like face and the large flash of the circling diamonds, felt nothing but the pressure of her form and her odorous breath upon his cheek, heard nothing but the soft sound of her breathing. Closer he clasped her; there was no sense of weariness in his feet or oppression in his lungs; he could have danced for ever. But all too soon the music ceased with a crash, and they were standing with quick breath and sparkling eyes by the spot that they had started from. Close by Miss Terry was sitting yawning.

"Agatha, say good-bye to those people for me. I must get a breath of

fresh air. Give me a glass of water, please, Arthur."

He did so, and, by way of composing his own nerves, took a tumbler of champagne. He had no longer any thought of anxiety or danger, and he, too, longed for air. They passed out into the garden, and, by a common consent, made their way to the museum verandah, which was, as it proved, quite deserted.

The night, which was drawing to its close, was perfect. Far over the west the setting moon was sinking into the silver ocean, whilst the first primrose hue of dawn was creeping up the eastern sky. It was essentially a dangerous night, especially after dancing and champagne --a night to make people do and say regrettable things; for, as one of the poets--is it not Byron?--has profoundly remarked, there is the very devil in the moon at times.

They stood and gazed awhile at the softness of its setting splendours, and listened to the sounds of the last departing guests fading into silence, and to the murmurs of the quiet sea. At last she spoke, very low and musically.

"I was angry with you. I brought you here to scold you; but on such a night I cannot find the heart."

"What did you want to scold me about?"

"Never mind; it is all forgotten. Look at that setting moon and the silver clouds above her," and she dropped her hand, from which she had slipped the glove, upon his own.

"And now look at me and tell me how I look, and how you liked the ball. I gave it to please you."

"You look very lovely, dangerously lovely, and the ball was splendid. Let us go."

"Do you think me lovely, Arthur?"

"Yes; who could help it? But let us go in."

"Stay awhile, Arthur; do not leave me yet. Tell me, is not this necklace undone? Fasten it for me, Arthur."

He turned to obey, but his hand shook too much to allow him to do so. Her eyes shone into his own, her fragrant breath played upon his brow, and her bosom heaved beneath his shaking hand. She too was moved; light tremors ran along her limbs, the colour came and went upon her neck and brow, and a dreamy look had gathered in her tender eyes. Beneath them the sea made its gentle music, and above the wind was whispering to the trees. Presently his hand dropped, and he stood fascinated.

"I cannot. What makes you look like that? You are bewitching me."

Next moment he heard a sigh, the next Mildred's sweet lips were upon his own, and she was in his arms. She lay there still, quite still, but even as she lay there rose, as it were, in the midst of the glamour and confusion of his mind, that made him see all things distraught, and seemed to blot out every principle of right and honour, another and far different scene. For, as in a vision, he saw a dim English landscape and a grey ruin, and himself within its shadows with a nobler woman in his arms, "Dethrone me," said a remembered voice, "desert me, and I will still thank you for this hour of imperial happiness." The glamour was gone, the confusion made straight, and clear above him shone the light of duty.

"Mildred, dear Mildred, this cannot be. Sit down. I want to speak to you."

She turned quite white, and sank from his arms without a word.

"Mildred, you know that I am engaged."

The lips moved, but no sound issued from them. Again she tried.

"I know."

"Then why do you tempt me? I am only a man, and weak as water in your

presence. Do not make me dishonourable to myself and her."

"I love you as well as she. There--take the shameful truth."

"Yes, but--forgive me if I pain you, for I must, I must. I love  
\_her\_."

The beautiful face hid itself in the ungloved hands. No answer came, only the great diamond sparkled and blazed in the soft light like a hard and cruel eye.

"Do not, Mildred, for pity's sake, involve us all in shame and ruin, but let us part now. If I could have foreseen how this would end! But I have been a blind and selfish fool. I have been to blame."

She was quite calm now, and spoke in her usual singularly clear voice.

"Arthur dear, I do not blame you. Loving \_her\_, how was it likely that you should think of love from \_me\_? I only blame myself. I have loved you, God help me, ever since we met--loved you with a despairing, desperate love such as I hope that you may never know. Was I to allow your phantom Angela to snatch the cup from my lips without a struggle, the only happy cup I ever knew? For, Arthur, at the best of times, I have not been a happy woman; I have always wanted love, and it has not come to me. Perhaps I should be, but I am not--a high ideal being. I am as Nature made me, Arthur, a poor creature, unable to stand alone



against such a current as has lately swept me with it. But you are quite right, you must leave me, we \_must\_ separate, you \_must\_ go; but oh God! when I think of the future, the hard, loveless future----"

She paused awhile, and then went on--

"I did not think to harm you or involve you in trouble, though I hoped to win some small portion of your love, and I had something to give you in exchange, if beauty and great wealth are really worth anything. But you must go, dear, now, whilst I am brave. I hope that you will be happy with your Angela. When I see your marriage in the paper, I shall send her this tiara as a wedding present. I shall never wear it again. Go, dear; go quick."

He turned to leave, not trusting himself to speak, for the big tears stood in his eyes, and his throat was choked. When he had reached the steps, she called him back.

"Kiss me once before you go, and I see your dear face no more. I used to be a proud woman, and to think that I can stoop to rob a kiss from Angela. Thank you; you are very kind. And now one word; you know a woman always loves a last word. Sometimes it happens that we put up idols, and a stronger hand than ours shatters them to dust before our eyes. I trust this may not be your lot. I love you so well that I can say that honestly; but, Arthur, if it should be, remember that in all the changes of this cold world there is one heart which will never

forget you, and never set up a rival to your memory, one place where you will always find a home. If anything should ever happen to break your life, come back to me for comfort, Arthur. I can talk no more; I have played for high stakes--and lost. Good-bye."

He went without a word.