

CHAPTER LVI

Arthur did not delay his departure from Madeira. The morning following Mildred's ball he embarked on board a Portuguese boat, a very dirty craft which smelt of garlic and rancid oil, and sailed for Lisbon. He arrived there safely, and mooned about that city for a while, himself a monument of serious reflections, and then struck across into Spain, where he spent a month or so inspecting the historical beauties of that fallen country. Thence he penetrated across the Pyrenees into Southern France, which was pleasant in the spring months. Here he remained another month, meeting with no adventures worthy of any note, and improving his knowledge of the French language. Tiring at last of this, he travelled to Paris, and went to the theatres, but found his own thoughts too absorbing to allow of his taking any keen interest in their sensationalisms; so, after a brief stay, he made his way up to Brittany and Normandy, and went in for inspecting old castles and cathedrals, and finally ended up his continental travels by spending a week on the island rock of Saint Michel.

This place pleased him more than any he had visited. He liked to wander about among the massive granite pillars of that noble ecclesiastical fortress, and at night to watch the phosphoric tide come rushing in with all the speed of a race-horse, over the wide sands, which separate it from the mainland. There the thirty-first day of May found him, and he bethought him that it was time to return to London and see about getting the settlements drawn and ordering the

wedding bouquet. To speak the truth, he thought more about the bouquet than the settlements.

He arrived in London on the first of June, and went to see his family lawyer, a certain Mr. Borley, who had been solicitor to the trust during his minority.

"Bless me, Heigham, how like your father you have grown!" said that legal gentleman, as soon as Arthur was ensconced in the client's chair --a chair that, had it been endowed with the gift of speech, could have told some surprising stories. "It seems only the other day that he was sitting there dictating the terms of his will, and yet that was before the Crimean war, more than twenty years ago. Well, my boy, what is it?"

Arthur, thus encouraged, entered into a rather blundering recital of the circumstances of his engagement.

Mr. Borley did not say much, but, from his manner and occasional comments, it was evident that he considered the whole story very odd--regarding it, indeed, with some suspicion.

"I must tell you frankly, Mr. Heigham," he said, at last, "I don't quite understand this business. The young lady, no doubt, is charming --young ladies, looking at them from my clients' point of view, always are--but I can't say I like your story about her father. Why did you

not tell me all this before? I might then have been able to give you some advice worth having, or, at any rate, to make a few confidential"--he laid great emphasis on the word "confidential"--"inquiries."

Arthur replied that it had not occurred to him to do so.

"Umph, pity--great pity; but there is no time for that sort of thing now, if you think you are going to get married on the tenth; so I suppose the only thing to do is to go through with it and await the upshot. What do you wish done?"

Arthur explained his views, which apparently included settling all his property on his bride in the most absolute fashion possible. To this Mr. Borley forcibly objected, and in the end Arthur had to give way and make such arrangements as the old gentleman thought proper--arrangements differing considerably from those proposed by himself.

This interview over, he had other and pleasanter duties to perform, such as ordering his wedding clothes, making arrangements with a florist for the bridal bouquet, and last, but not least, having his mother's diamonds re-set as a present for his bride.

But still the days went very slowly, there seemed to be no end to them. He had no relations to go and see, and in his present anxious excited state he preferred to avoid his friends and club acquaintances. Fifth, sixth, seventh; never did a schoolboy await the

coming of the day that marked the advent of his holidays with such intense anxiety.

At length the eighth of June arrived. Months before, he had settled what his programme should be on that day. His promise, as the reader may remember, forbade him to see Angela till the ninth, that is, at any hour after twelve on the night of the eighth, or, practically, as early as possible on the following morning. Now the earliest train would not get him down to Roxham till eleven o'clock, which would involve a wicked waste of four or five hours of daylight that might be spent with Angela, so he wisely resolved to start on the evening of the eighth, by a train leaving Paddington at six o'clock, and reaching Roxham at nine.

The day he spent in signing the settlements, finally interviewing the florist, and giving him directions as to forwarding the wedding-bouquet, which was to be composed of orange-blossoms, lilies of the valley, and stephanois, and in getting the marriage-license. But, notwithstanding these manifold employments, he managed to be three-quarters of an hour before his train, the longest forty-five minutes he ever spent.

He had written to the proprietor of the inn at Rewtham, where he had slept a year ago the night after he had left Isleworth, to send a gig to meet him at the station, and, on arriving at Roxham, a porter told him that a trap was waiting for him. On emerging from the station,

even in the darkness, he was able to recognize the outlines of the identical vehicle which had conveyed him to the Abbey House some thirteen months ago, whilst the sound of an ancient, quavering voice informed him that the Jehu was likewise the same. His luggage was soon bundled up behind, and the steady-going old nag departed into the darkness.

"Well, Sam, do you remember me?"

"Well, no, sir, I can't rightly say how I do: wait a bit; bean't you the gemman as travels in the dry line, and as I seed a-kissing the chambermaid?"

"No, I don't travel at present, and I have not kissed a chambermaid for some time. Do you remember driving a gentleman over to the Abbey House a year or so ago?"

"Why, yes, in course I does. Lord, now, and be you he? and we seed old Devil's Caresfoot's granddaughter. Ah! many's the time that he has damned me, and all so soft and pleasant like; but it was his eyes that did the trick. They was awful, just awful; and you gave me half-a-crown, you did. But somehow I thought I heard summat about you, sir, but I can't rightly remember what it be, my head not being so good as it used to."

"Perhaps you heard what I was going to be married?"

"No. I don't think how as it was that neither."

"Well, never mind me; have you seen Miss Caresfoot--the young lady you saw the day you drove me to the Abbey House--anywhere about lately?"

Arthur waited for the old man's lingering answer with all his heart upon his lips.

"Lor', yes, sir, that I have; I saw her this morning driving through the Roxham market-place."

"And how did she look?"

"A bit pale, I thought, sir; but well enough, and wonnerful handsome."

Arthur gave a sigh of relief. He felt like a man who has just come scatheless through some horrible crisis, and once more knows the sweet sensation of safety. What a load the old man's words had lifted from his mind? In his active imagination he had pictured all sorts of evils which might have happened to Angela during his year of absence. Lovers are always prone to such imaginings, and not altogether without reason, for there would seem to be a special power of evil that devotes itself to the derangement of their affairs, and the ingenious disappointment of their hopes. But now the vague dread was gone, Angela was not spirited away or dead, and to know her alive was to

know her faithful.

As they drove along, the old ostler continued to volunteer various scraps of information which fell upon his ears unheeded, till presently his attention was caught by the name Caresfoot.

"What about him?" he asked, quickly.

"He be a-dying, they do say."

"Which of them?"

"Why, the red-haired one, him as lives up at the Hall yonder."

"Poor fellow," said Arthur, feeling quite fond of George in his happiness.

They had by this time reached the inn, where he had some supper, for old Sam's good news had brought back his appetite, which of late had not been quite up to par, and then went straight to his room that faced towards the Abbey House. It was, he noticed, the same in which he had slept the year before, and looking at the bed he remembered his dream, and smiled as he thought that the wood was passed, and before him lay nothing but the flowery meadows. Mildred Carr, too, crossed his mind, but of her he did not think much, not that he was by any means heartless--indeed, what had happened had pained him acutely, the

more so because his own conscience told him he had been a fool. He was very sorry, but, love being here below one of the most selfish of the passions, he had not time to be sorry just then.

For just on the horizon he could distinguish a dense mass which was the trees surrounding the Abbey House, and between the trees there glimmered a faint light which might proceed from some rising star, or from Angela's window. He preferred to believe it was the latter. The propinquity made him very happy. What was she doing? he wondered--sitting by her window and thinking of him! He would ask her on the morrow. It was worth while going through that year of separation in order to taste the joy of meeting. It seemed like a dream to think that within six-and-thirty hours he would probably be Angela's husband, and how nobody in the world would be able to take her away from him. He stretched out his arms towards her.

"My darling, my darling," he cried aloud into the still night. "My darling, my darling," the echo answered sadly.