

## CHAPTER LXII

Next morning Arthur cashed his cheque, and started on his travels. He had no very clear idea why he was going back to Madeira, or what he meant to do when he got there; but then, at this painful stage of his existence, none of his ideas could be called clear. Though he did not realize it, what he was searching for was sympathy, female sympathy of course; for in trouble members of either sex gravitate instinctively to the other for comfort. Perhaps they do not quite trust their own, or perhaps they are afraid of being laughed at.

Arthur's was not one of those natures that can lock their griefs within the bosom, and let them lie there till in process of time they shrivel away. Except among members of the peerage, as pictured in current literature, these stern, proud creatures are not common. Man, whether he figures in the world as a peer or a hedge-carpenter, is, as a matter of fact, mentally as well as physically, gregarious, and adverse to loneliness either in his joys or sorrows.

Decidedly, too, the homoeopathic system must be founded on great natural facts, and there is philosophy, born of the observation of human nature, in the somewhat vulgar proverb that recommends a "hair of the dog that bit you." Otherwise, nine men out of every ten who have been badly treated, or think that they have been badly treated, by a woman, would not at once rush headlong for refuge to another, a

proceeding which also, in nine cases out of ten, ends in making confusion worse confounded.

Arthur, though he was not aware of it, was exemplifying a natural law that has not yet been properly explained. But, even if he had known it, it is doubtful if the knowledge would have made him any happier; for it is irritating to reflect that we are the slaves of natural laws, that our action is not the outcome of our own volition, but of a vague force working silently as the Gulf Stream--since such knowledge makes a man measure his weakness, and so strikes at his tenderest point, his vanity.

But, whilst we have been reflecting together, my reader and I, Arthur was making his way to Madeira, so we may as well all come to a halt off Funchal.

Very shortly after the vessel had dropped her anchor, Arthur was greeted by his friend, the manager of "Miles' Hotel."

"Glad to see you, sir, though I can't say that you look well. I scarcely expected to find anybody for us at this time of year. Business is very slack in the summer."

"Yes, I suppose that Madeira is pretty empty."

"There is nobody here at all, sir."

"Is Mrs. Carr gone, then?" asked Arthur, in some alarm.

"No; she is still here. She has not been away this year. But she has been very quiet; no parties or anything, which makes people think that she has lost money."

By this time the boat was rising on the roll of the last billow, to be caught next moment by a dozen hands, and dragged up the shingle. It was evening, or rather, verging that way, and from under the magnolia-trees below the cathedral there came the sound of the band summoning the inhabitants of Funchal to congregate, chatter, and flirt.

"I think," said Arthur, "that I will ask you to take my things up to the hotel. I will come by-and-by. I should like the same room I had before, if it is empty."

"Very good, Mr. Heigham. You will have the place nearly all to yourself now."

Having seen his baggage depart, Arthur turned, and resisting the importunities of beggars, guides, and parrot-sellers, who had not yet recognized him as an old hand, made his way towards the Quinta Carr. How well he knew the streets and houses, even to the withered faces of the women who sat by the doors, and yet he seemed to have grown old since he had seen them. Ten minutes of sharp walking brought him to

the gates of the Quinta, and he paused before them, and thought how, a few months ago, he had quitted them, miserable at the grief of another, now to re-enter them utterly crushed by his own.

He walked on through the beautiful gardens to the house. The hall-door stood open. He did not wait to ring, but, driven by some impulse, entered. After the glare of the sun, which at that time of the year was powerful even in its decline, the carefully shaded hall seemed quite dark. But by degrees his eyes adapted themselves to the altered light, and began to distinguish the familiar outline of the furniture. Next they travelled to the door of the drawing-room, where another sight awaited them. For there, herself a perfect picture, standing in the doorway for a frame, her hands outstretched in welcome, and a loving smile upon her lips, was Mildred.

"I was waiting for you," she said, gently. "I thought that you would come."

"Mildred, my idol has been cast down, and, as you told me to do, I have come back to you."

"Dear," she answered, "you are very welcome."

And then came Miss Terry, pleased with all her honest heart to see him, and utterly ignorant of the fierce currents that swept under the smooth surface of their little social sea. Miss Terry was not by

nature a keen observer.

"Dear me, Mr. Heigham, who would have thought of seeing you again so soon? You are brave to cross the bay so often" (her thoughts ran a great deal on the Bay of Biscay); "but I don't think you look quite well, you have such black lines under your eyes, and, I declare, there's a grey hair!"

"Oh, I assure you your favourite bay was enough to turn anybody's hair grey, Miss Terry."

And so, talking cheerfully, they went in to the pleasant little dinner, Mildred leaning over so slightly on his arm, and gazing into his sad face with full and happy eyes. After all that he had gone through, it seemed to Arthur as though he had dropped into a haven of rest.

"See here," said Mildred, when they rose from table, "a wonder has come to pass since you deserted us. Look, sceptic that you are!" and she led him to the window, and, lifting a glass shade which protected a flower-pot, showed him a green spike peeping from the soil.

"What is that?"

"What is it?--why, it is the mummy hyacinth which you declared that we should never see blossom in this world. It has budded; whether or not

it will blossom, who can say?"

"It is an omen," he said, with a little laugh; and for the first time that evening their eyes met.

"Come into the garden, and you can smoke on the museum verandah; it is pleasant there these hot nights."

"It is dangerous, your garden."

She laughed softly. "You have proved yourself superior to danger."

Then they passed out together. The evening was still and very sultry. Not a breath stirred the silence of the night. The magnolia, the moon-flower, and a thousand other blooms poured out their fragrance upon the surrounding air, where it lay in rich patches, like perfume thrown on water. A thin mist veiled the sea, and the little wavelets struck with a sorrowful sound against the rock below.

"Tell me all about it, Arthur."

She had settled herself upon a long low chair, and as she leant back the starlight glanced white upon her arms and bosom.

"There is not much to tell. It is a common story--at least, I believe so. She threw me over, and the day before I should have married her,

married another man."

"Well?"

"Well, I saw her the morning following her marriage. I do not remember what I said, but I believe I spoke what was in my mind. She fainted, and I left her."

"Ah, you spoke harshly, perhaps."

"Spoke harshly! Now that I have had time to think of it, I wish that I could have had ten imaginations to shape my thoughts, and ten tongues to speak them with! Do you understand what this woman has done? She has sold herself to a brute--oh, Mildred, such a brute--she has deserted me for a man who is not even a gentleman."

"Perhaps she was forced into it."

"Forced!--nonsense; we are not in the Middle Ages. A good woman should have been forced to drown herself before she consented to commit such a sacrilege against herself as to marry a man she hated. But she, 'my love, my dove, my undefiled'--she whom I thought whiter than the snow--she could do this, and do it deliberately. I had rather have seen her dead, and myself dead with her."

"Don't you take a rather exaggerated view, Arthur? Don't you think,

perhaps, that some of the fault lies with you for overrating women? Believe me, so far as my experience goes, and I have seen a good many, the majority of them do not possess the exalted purity of mind you and many very young men attribute to them. They are, on the contrary, for the most part quite ready to exercise a wise discretion in the matter of marriage, even when the feeble tendencies which represent their affections point another way. A little pressure goes a long way with them; they are always glad to make the most of it; it is the dust they throw up to hide their retreat. Your Angela, for instance, was no doubt, and probably still is, very fond of you. You are a charming young man, with nice eyes and a taking way with women, and she would very much have liked to marry you; but then she also liked her cousin's estates. She could not have both, and, being forced to choose, she chose the latter. You should take a common-sense view of the matter; you are not the first who has suffered. Women, especially young women, who do not understand the value of affection, must be very much in love before they submit to the self-sacrifice that is supposed to be characteristic of them, and what men talk of as stains upon them they do not consider as such. They know, if they know nothing else, that a good income and an establishment will make them perfectly clean in the opinion of their own small world--a little world of shams and forms that cares nothing for the spirit of the moral law, provided the letter is acted up to. It is by this that they mark their standard of personal virtues, not by the high rule you men imagine for them. There is no social fuller's soap so effectual as money and position."



"You speak like a book, and give your own sex a high character. Tell me, then, would you do such a thing?"

"I, Arthur? How can you ask me? I had rather be torn to pieces by wild horses. I spoke of the majority of the women, not of them all."

"Ah, and yet she could do it, and I thought her better than you."

"I do not think that you should speak bitterly of her, Arthur; I think that you should be sorry for her."

"Sorry for her? Why?"

"Because from what I have gathered about her, she is not quite an ordinary young woman: however badly she may have treated you, she is a person of refined feelings and susceptibilities. Is it not so?"

"Without a doubt."

"Well, then, you should pity her, because she will bitterly expiate her mistake. For myself, I do not pity her much, because I will not waste my sympathy on a fool; for, to my mind, the woman who could do what she has done, and deliberately throw away everything that can make life really worth living to us women, is a most contemptible fool. But you love her, and, therefore, you should be sorry for her."

"But why?"

"Because she is a woman who at one-and-twenty has buried all the higher part of life, who has, of her own act, for ever deprived herself of joys that nothing else can bring her. Love, true love, is almost the only expression, of which we women are capable, of all the nobler instincts and vague yearnings after what is higher and better than the things we see and feel around us. When we love most, and love happily, then we are at our topmost bent, and soar further above the earth than anything else can carry us. Consequently, when a woman is faithless to her love, which is the purest and most honourable part of her, the very best thing to which she can attain, she clips her wings, and can fly no more, but must be tossed, like a crippled gull, hither and thither upon the stormy surface of her little sea. Of course, I speak of women of the higher stamp. Many, perhaps most, will feel nothing of all this. In a little while they will grow content with their dull round and the alien nature which they have mated with, and in their children, and their petty cares and dissipations, will forget that they possess a higher part, if indeed they do possess it. Like everything else in the world, they find their level. But with women like your Angela it is another thing. For them time only serves to increasingly unveil the Medusa-headed truth, till at last they see it as it is, and their hearts turn to stone. Backed with a sick longing to see a face that is gone from them, they become lost spirits, wandering everlastingly in the emptiness they have chosen, and finding

no rest. Even her children will not console her."

Arthur uttered a smothered exclamation.

"Don't start, Arthur; you must accustom yourself to the fact that that woman has passed away from you, and is as completely the personal property of another man, as that chair is mine. But, there, the subject is a painful one to you; shall we change it?"

"It is one that you seem to have studied pretty deeply."

"Yes, because I have realized its importance to a woman. For some years I have longed to be able to fall in love, and when at last I did so, Arthur," and here her voice grew very soft, "it was with a man who could care nothing for me. Such has been my unlucky chance. That a woman, herself loving and herself worthily beloved, could throw her blessed opportunity away is to me a thing inconceivable, and that, Arthur, is what your Angela has done."