CHAPTER LXIII

"Then you will not marry now, Mildred?" said Arthur, after a pause.

"No, Arthur."

"No one?"

"No one, Arthur."

He rose, and, leaning over the railing of the verandah, looked at the sea. The mist that hid it was drifting and eddying hither and thither before little puffs of wind, and the clear sky was clouding up.

"There is going to be a storm," he said, presently.

"Yes, I think so, the air feels like it."

He hesitated a while, and looked down at her. She seemed very lovely in the half lights, as indeed she was. She, too, looked up at him inquiringly. At last he spoke.

"Mildred, you said just now that you would not marry anybody. Will you make an exception?--will you marry me?"

It was her turn to pause now.

"You are very good," she murmured.

"No, I am not at all good. You know how the case stands. You know that I still love Angela, and that I shall in all probability always love her. I cannot help that. But if you will have me, Mildred, I will try to be a good husband to you, and to make you happy. Will you marry me, dear?"

"No, Arthur."

"Why not? Have you, then, ceased to care for me?"

"No, dear. I love you more than ever. You cannot dream how much I do love you."

"Then why will you not marry me? Is it because of this business?"

"No," and raising herself in the low chair, she looked at him with intense earnestness, "that is not the reason. I will not marry you, because I have become a better woman since you went away, because I do not wish to ruin your life. You ask me to do so now in all sincerity, but you do not know what you ask. You come from the scene of as bitter a disappointment as can befall a man, and you are a little touched by the contrasting warmth of your reception here, a little moved by my evident interest, and perhaps a little influenced by my good looks,

though _they_ are nothing much. Supposing that I consented, supposing I said, 'Arthur, I will put my hand in yours and be your wife,' and that we were married to-morrow, do you think, when the freshness of the thing had worn off, that you would be happy with me? I do not. You would soon get horribly tired of me, Arthur, for the little leaven that leavens the whole lump is wanting. You do not love me; and the redundance of my affection would weary you, and, for my part, I should find it difficult to continually struggle against an impalpable rival, though, indeed, I should be very willing to put up with that."

"I am sorry you think so."

"Yes, Arthur, I do think so; but you do not know what it costs me to say it. I am deliberately shutting the door which bars me from my heaven; I am throwing away the chance I strove so hard to win. That will tell you how much I think it. Do you know, I must be a strange contradiction. When I knew you were engaged to another woman, I strained my every nerve to win you from her. While the object was still to be gained, I felt no compunction; I was fettered by no scruples. I wanted to steal you from her and marry you myself. But now that all this is changed, and that you of your own free will come and offer to make me your wife, I for the first time feel how wrong it would be of me to take advantage of you in a moment of pique and disappointment, and bind you for life to a nature which you do not really understand, to a violent and a jealous woman. Too late, when your life was hampered and your future spoiled, you would discover

that you hated me. Arthur dear, I will not consent to bind you to me by any tie that cannot be broken."

"Hush, Mildred! you should not say such things about yourself. If you are as violent and jealous as you say, you are also a very noble-hearted woman, for none other would so sacrifice herself. Perhaps you are right; I do not know. But, whether you are right or wrong, I cannot tell you how you have made me respect you."

"Dear, those are the most comfortable words I have ever heard; after what has passed between us, I scarcely thought to win your respect."

"Then you will not marry me, Mildred?"

"No."

"That is your fixed determination?"

"It is."

"Ah, well!" he sighed, "I suppose that I had better 'top my boom' again?"

"Do what?"

"I mean I had better leave Madeira."

"Why should you leave Madeira?"

He hesitated a little before replying.

"Well, because if I do not marry you, and still come here, people will talk. They did before, you know."

"Are you afraid of being talked about, then?"

"I? Oh! dear no. What can it matter to me now?"

"And supposing I were to tell you that what 'people' say, with or without foundation, is as much a matter of indifference to me as the blowing of next summer's breezes, would you still consider it necessary to leave Madeira?"

"I don't know."

He again rose and leant over the verandah rail.

"It is going to be a wild night," he said, presently.

"Yes; the wind will spoil all the magnolias. Pick me that bud; it is too good to be wasted."

He obeyed, and, just as he stepped back on to the verandah, a fierce rush of wind came up from the sea, and went howling away behind them.

"I love a storm," she murmured, as he brought the flower to her. "It makes me feel so strong," and she stretched out her perfect arms as though to catch the wind.

"What am I to do with this magnolia?"

"Give it to me. I will pin it in my dress--no, do you fasten it for me."

The chair in which she was lounging was so low that, to do as she bade him, Arthur was forced to kneel beside her. Kneeling thus, the sweet, upturned face was but just beneath his own; the breath from the curved lips played amongst his hair, and again there crept over him that feeling of fascination, of utter helplessness, that he had once before resisted. But this time he did not attempt to resist, and no vision came to save him. Slowly drawn by the beauty of her tender eyes, he yielded to the spell, and soon her lips were pressed upon his own, and the white arms had closed around his neck, whilst the crushed magnolia bloom shed its perfume round them.

Fiercer swept the storm, the lightning flashed, and the gale catching the crests of the rising waves dashed them in spray to where they sat.

"Dear," he said presently, "you must not stop here, the spray is wetting you."

"I wish that it would drown me," she answered, almost fiercely, "I shall never be so happy again. You think that you love me now; I should like to die before you learn to hate me. Come, let us go in!"