

## CHAPTER LXV

When dinner was over--Miss Terry would have none--they went and sat upon the moonlit deck. The little vessel was under all her canvas, for the breeze was light, and skimmed over the water like a gull with its wings spread. In the low light Madeira was nothing but a blot on the sky-line. The crew were forward, with the solitary exception of the man steering the vessel from his elevated position on the bridge; and sitting as they were, abaft the deck-cabin, the two were utterly alone between the great silence of the stars and of the sea. She looked into his face, and it was tender towards her--that night was made for lovers--and tears of happiness stood in her eyes. She took his hand in hers, and her head nestled upon his breast.

"I should like to sail on for ever so, quite alone with you. I never again wish to see the land or the sun, or any other sea than this, or any other eyes than yours, to hear any more of the things that I have known, to learn to know any fresh things. If I could choose, I would ask that I might now glide gently from your arms into those of eternal sleep. Oh! Arthur, I am so happy now--so happy that I scarcely dare to speak, for fear lest I should break the spell, and I feel so good--so much nearer heaven. When I think of all my past life, it seems like a stupid dream full of little nothings, of which I cannot recall any memory except that they were empty and without meaning. But the future is worse than the past, because it looks fair, and snakes always hide in flowers. It makes me afraid. How do I know what the future will

bring? I wish that the present--the pleasant, certain present that I hold with my hand--could last for ever."

"Who does know, Mildred? If the human race could see the pleasant surprises in store for it individually, I believe that it would drown itself *\_en masse\_*. Who has not sometimes caught at the skirt of to-day and cried, 'Stay a little--do not let to-morrow come yet!' You know the lines--

"O temps suspends ton vol, et vous heures propices  
Suspendez votre cours,  
Laissez nous savourer les rapides delices  
Des plus beaux de nos jours.'

"Lamartine only crystallized a universal aspiration when he wrote that."

"Oh! Arthur, I tell you of love and happiness wide as the great sea round us, and you talk of 'universal aspirations.' It is the first cold breath from that grey-skied future that I fear. Oh! dear, I wonder--you do not know how I wonder--if, should you ask me again, I shall ever with a clear conscience be able to say, 'Arthur, I will marry you.'"

"My dear, I asked you to be my wife last night, and what I said then I say again now. In any case, until you dismiss me, I consider myself

bound to you; but I tell you frankly that I should myself prefer that you would marry me for both our sakes."

"How cold and correct you are, how clearly you realize the position in which I am likely to be put, and in what a gentlemanlike way you assure me that your honour will always keep you bound to me! That is a weak thread, Arthur, in matters of the heart. Let Angela reappear as my rival--would honour keep you to my side? Honour, forsooth! it is like a nurse's bogey in the cupboard--it is a shibboleth men use to frighten naughty women with, which for themselves is almost devoid of meaning. Even in this light I can see your face flush at her name. What chance shall I ever have against her?"

"Do not speak of her, Mildred; let her memory be dead between us. She who belonged to me before God, and whom I believed in as I believe in my God, she offered me the most deadly insult that a woman can offer to a man she loves--she sold herself. What do I care what the price was, whether it were money, or position, or convenience, or the approbation of her surroundings? The result is the same. Never mention her name to me again; I tell you that I hate her."

"What a tirade! There is warmth enough about you now. I shall be careful how I touch on the subject again; but your very energy shows that you are deceiving yourself. I wish I could hear you speak of me like that, because then I should know you loved me. Oh! if she only knew it--she has her revenge for all your bitter words. You are lashed

to her chariot-wheels, Arthur. You do not hate her; on the contrary, you still long to see her face; it is still your secret and most cherished hope that you will meet her again either in this or another world. You love her as much as ever. If she were dead, you could bear it; but the sharpest sting of your suffering lies in the humiliating sense that you are forced to worship a god you know to be false, and to give your own pure love to a woman whom you see debased."

He put his hands to his face and groaned aloud.

"You are right," he said. "I would rather have known her dead than know her as she is. But there is no reason why I should bore you with all this."

"Arthur, you are nothing if not considerate, and I do not pretend that this is a very pleasant conversation for me; but I began it, so I suppose I must endure to see you groaning for another woman. You say," she went on, with a sudden flash of passion, "that you should like to see her dead. I say that I should like to kill her, for she has struck me a double blow--she has injured you whom I love, and she has beggared me of your affection. Oh! Arthur," she continued, changing her voice and throwing a caressing arm about his neck, "have you no heart left to give me? is there no lingering spark that I can cherish and blow to flame? I will never treat you so, dear. Learn to love me, and I will marry you and make you happy, make you forget this faithless woman with the angel face. I will----" here her voice broke

down in sobs, and in the starlight the great tears glistened upon her coral-tinted face like dew-drops on a pomegranate's blushing rind.

"There, there, dear, I will try to forget; don't cry," and he touched her on the forehead with his lips.

She stopped, and then said, with just the faintest tinge of bitterness in her voice: "If it had been Angela who cried, you would not be so cold, you would have kissed away her tears."

Who can say what hidden chord of feeling those words touched, or what memories they awoke? but their effect upon Arthur was striking. He sprang up upon the deck, his eyes blazing, and his face white with anger.

"How often," he said, "must I forbid you to mention the name of that woman to me? Do you take a pleasure in torturing me? Curse her, may she eat out her empty heart in solitude, and find no living thing to comfort her! May she suffer as she makes me suffer, till her life becomes a hell----"

"Be quiet, Arthur, it is shameful to say such things."

He stopped, and after the sharp ring of his voice, that echoed like the cry wrung from a person in intense pain, the loneliness and quiet of the night were very deep. And then an answer came to his mad,

unmanly imprecations. For suddenly the air round them was filled with the sound of his own name uttered in such wild, despairing accents as, once heard, were not likely to be forgotten, accents which seemed to be around them and over them, and heard in their own brains, and yet to come travelling from immeasurable distances across the waste of waters.

"\_Arthur! Arthur!\_"

The sound that had sprung from nothing died away into nothingness again, and the moonlight glanced, and the waters heaved, and gave no sign of the place of its birth. It had come and gone, awful, untraceable, and in the place of its solemnity reigned silence absolute.

They looked at each other with scared eyes.

"\_As I am a living man that voice was Angela's!\_"

This was all he said.