

CHAPTER LXXII

Nothing occurred to mar the prosperity of the voyage of the *Evening Star*. That beautiful little vessel declined to simplify the course of this history by going to the bottom with Mildred and Arthur, as the imaginative reader may have perhaps expected. She did not even get into a terrific storm, in order to give Arthur the opportunity of performing heroic feats, and the writer of this history the chance of displaying a profound knowledge of the names of ropes and spars. On the contrary, she glided on upon a sea so still that even Miss Terry was persuaded to arouse herself from her torpor, and come upon deck, till at last, one morning, the giant peak of Teneriffe, soaring high above its circling clouds, broke upon the view of her passengers.

Here they stopped for a week or so, enjoying themselves very much in their new surroundings, till at length Arthur grew tired of the islands, which was of course the signal for their departure. So they returned, reaching Madeira after an absence of close upon a month. As they dropped anchor in the little bay, Mildred came up to Arthur, and, touching him with that gentle deference which she always showed towards him, asked him if he was not glad to be home again.

"Home!" he said. "I have no home."

"Oh, Arthur;" she answered, "why do you try to pain me? Is not my home yours also?"

So soon as they landed, he started off to "Miles' Hotel," to see if any letters had come for him during his absence, and returned, looking very much put out.

"What is the matter, Arthur?" asked Miss Terry, once again happy at feeling her feet upon solid soil.

"Why, those idiots at the hotel have returned a letter sent to me by my lawyer. They thought that I had left Madeira for good, and the letter was marked, 'If left, return to Messrs. Borley and Son,' with the address. And the mail went out this afternoon into the bargain, so it will be a month before I can get it back again."

Had Arthur known that this letter contained clippings of the newspaper reports of the inquest on George Caresfoot, of whose death even he was in total ignorance, he would have had good reason to be put out.

"Never mind, Arthur," said Mildred's clear voice at his elbow--she was rarely much further from him than his shadow; "lawyers' letters are not, as a rule, very interesting. I never yet had one that would not keep. Come and see if your pavilion--isn't that a grand name?--is arranged to your liking, and then let us go to dinner, for Agatha here is dying of hunger--she has to make up for her abstinence at sea."

"I was always told," broke in that lady, "that yachting was charming,

but I tell you frankly I have never been more miserable in my life than I was on board your _Evening Star_."

"Never mind, dear, you shall have a nice long rest before we start for the coast of Spain."

And so Arthur soon settled down again into the easy tenor of Madeira life. He now scarcely made a pretence of living at the hotel, since, during their cruise, Mildred had had a pavilion which stood in the garden luxuriously set up for his occupation. Here he was happy enough in a dull, numb way, and, as the days went on, something of the old light came back to his eyes, and his footfall again grew quick and strong as when it used to fall in the corridors of the Abbey House. Of the past he never spoke, nor did Mildred ever allude to Angela after that conversation at sea which had ended so strangely. She contented herself with attempting to supplant her, and to a certain extent she was successful. No man could have for very long remained obdurate to such beauty and such patient devotion, and it is not wonderful that he grew in a way to love her.

But there was this peculiarity about the affair--namely, that the affection which he bore her was born more of her stronger will than of his own feelings, as was shown by the fact that, so long as he was actually with her and within the circle of her influence, her power over him was predominant; but, the moment that he was out of her sight, his thoughts would fall back into their original channels, and

the old sores would begin to run. However much, too, he might be successful in getting the mastery of this troubles by day, at night they would assert themselves, and from the constant and tormenting dreams which they inspired he could find no means of escape.

For at least four nights out of every seven, from the moment that he closed his eyes till he opened them again the morning, it would seem to him that he had been in the company of Angela, under every possible variety of circumstance, talking to her, walking with her, meeting her suddenly or unexpectedly in crowded places or at dinner-parties--always her, and no one else--till at last poor Arthur began to wonder if his spirit took leave of his body in sleep and went to seek her, and, what is more, found her. Or was it nothing but a fantasy? He could not tell; but, at any rate, it was a fact, and it would have been hard to say if it distressed or rejoiced him most.

Occasionally, too, he would fall into a fit of brooding melancholy that would last him for a day or two, and which Mildred would find it quite impossible to dispel. Indeed, when he got in that way, she soon discovered that the only thing to do was to leave him alone. He was suffering acutely, there was no doubt about that, and when any animal suffers, including man, it is best left in solitude. A sick or wounded beast always turns out of the herd to recover or die.

When Mildred saw him in this state of mental desolation, she would shake her head and sigh, for it told her that she was as far as ever

from the golden gate of her Eldorado. As has been said, hers was the strongest will, and, even if he had not willed it, she could have married him any day she wished; but, odd as it may seem, she was too conscientious. She had determined that she would not marry him unless she was certain that he loved her, and to this resolution, as yet, she firmly held. Whatever her faults may have been, Mildred Carr had all the noble unselfishness that is so common in her sex. For herself and her own reputation she cared, comparatively speaking, nothing; whilst for Arthur's ultimate happiness she was very solicitous.

One evening--it was one of Arthur's black days, when he had got a fit of what Mildred called "Angela fever"--they were walking together in the garden, Arthur in silence, with his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, and Mildred humming a little tune by way of amusing herself, when they came to the wall that edged the precipice. Arthur leant over it and gazed at the depths below.

"Don't, dear, you will tumble over," said Mildred, in some alarm.

"I think it would be a good thing if I did," he answered, moodily.

"Are you, then, so tired of the world--and me?"

"No, dear, I am not tired of you; forgive me, Mildred, but I am dreadfully miserable. I know that it is very ungracious and ungrateful of me, but it is the fact."

"You are thinking of her again, Arthur?"

"Yes, I have got a fit of it. I suppose that she has not been out of my mind for an hour altogether during the last forty-eight hours. Talk of being haunted by a dead person, it is infinitely worse being haunted by a living one."

"I am very sorry for you, dear."

"Do you suppose, Mildred, that this will go on for all my life, that I shall always be at the mercy of these bitter memories and thoughts?"

"I don't know, Arthur. I hope not."

"I wish I were dead--I wish I were dead," he broke out, passionately.

"She has destroyed my life, all that was happy in me is dead, only my body lives on. I am sure I don't know, Mildred, how you can care for anything so worthless."

She kissed him, and answered,

"Dearest, I had rather love you as you are than any other man alive. Time does wonders; perhaps in time you will get over it. Oh! Arthur, when I think of what she has made you, and what you might have been if you had never known her, I long to tell that woman all my mind. But

you must be a man, dear; it is weak to give way to a mad passion, such as this is now. Try to think of something else; work at something."

"I have no heart for it, Mildred, I don't feel as though I could work; and, if you cannot make me forget, I am sure I do not know what will."

Mildred sighed, and did not answer. Though she spoke hopefully about it to him, she had little faith in his getting over his passion for Angela now. Either she must marry him as he was, or else let him go altogether; but which? The struggle between her affection and her idea of duty was very sore, and as yet she could come to no conclusion.

One thing there was that troubled her considerably, and this was that, though Madeira was almost empty, there were enough people in it to get up a good deal of gossip about herself and Arthur. Now, it would have been difficult to find anybody more entirely careless of the judgments of society than Mildred, more especially as her great wealth and general popularity protected her from slights. But, for all her oddities, she was a thorough woman of the world; and she knew, none better, that, in pursuance of an almost invariable natural law, there is nothing that lowers a woman so much in the estimation of a man as the knowledge that she is talked about, even though he himself is the cause of the talk. This may be both illogical and unjust, but it is, none the less, true.

But, if Mildred still hesitated, Arthur did not. He was very anxious

that they should be married; indeed, he almost insisted on it. The position was one that was far from being agreeable to him, for all such intimacies must, from their very nature, necessitate a certain amount of false swearing. They are throughout an acted lie; and, when the lie is acted, it must sometimes be spoken. Now, this is a state of affairs that is repugnant to an honourable man, and one that not unfrequently becomes perfectly intolerable. Many is the love-affair that comes to a sudden end because the man finds it impossible to permanently constitute himself a peregrinating falsehood. But, oddly enough, it has been found difficult to persuade the other contracting party of the validity of the excuse, and, however unjust it may be, one has known of men who have seen their defection energetically set down to more vulgar causes.

Arthur was no exception to this rule. He found himself in a false position, and he hated it. Indeed, he determined before long he would place it before Mildred in the light of an alternative, that he should either marry her, or that an end should be put to their existing relations.