

CHAPTER LXXIII

As the autumn came on, a great south-west gale burst over Madeira, and went sweeping away up the Bay of Biscay. It blew for three days and nights, and was one of the heaviest on record. When it first began, the English mail was due; but when it passed there were still no signs of her, and prophets of evil were not wanting who went to and fro shaking their heads, and suggesting that she had probably foundered in the Bay.

Two more days went by, and there were still no signs of her, though the telegraph told them that she had left Southampton Docks at the appointed time and date. By this time, people in Madeira could talk of nothing else.

"Well, Arthur, no signs of the _Roman?_" said Mildred, on the fifth day.

"No, the _Garth Castle_ is due in to-day. Perhaps she may have heard something of her."

"Yes," said Miss Terry, absently; "she may have fallen in with some of the wreckage."

"I must say that is a cheerful suggestion," answered Arthur. "She is an awful old tub, and, I daresay, ran before the gale for Vigo, that

is all."

"Let us hope so," said Mildred, doubtfully. "What is it, John?"

"The housemaid wishes to speak to you, please, ma'am."

"Very good, I will come."

It has been hinted that Agatha Terry was looking absent on the morning in question. There was a reason for it. For some time past there had been growing up in the bosom of this excellent lady a consciousness that things were not altogether as they should be. Miss Terry was not clever, indeed it may be said that she was dense, but still she could not but see that there was something odd in the relations between Arthur and Mildred. For instance, it struck her as unusual that two persons who were not married, nor even, so far as she knew, engaged, should habitually call each other "dear," and even sometimes "dearest."

But on the previous evening, when engaged in a search after that species of beetle that loves the night, she chanced to come across the pair standing together on the museum verandah, and, to her horror, she saw, even in that light, that Mildred's arm was round Arthur's neck, and her head was resting on his heart. Standing aghast, she saw more; for presently Mildred raised her hand, and, drawing Arthur's head down to the level of her own, kissed him upon the face.

There was no doubt about it, it was a most deliberate kiss--a kiss without any extenuating circumstances. He was not even going away, and Agatha could only come to one conclusion, that they were either going to be married--or "they ought to be."

She sought no more beetles that evening, but on the following morning, when Mildred departed to see the housemaid, leaving Arthur and herself together on the verandah, she thought it was her "duty" to seek a little information.

"Arthur," she said, with a beating heart, "I want to ask you something. Are you engaged to Mildred?"

He hesitated, and then answered.

"No, I suppose not, Miss Terry."

"Nor married to her?"

"No; why do you ask?"

"Because I think you ought to be."

"I quite agree with you. I suppose that you have noticed something?"

"Yes, I have. I saw her kissing you, Arthur."

He blushed like a girl.

"Oh, Arthur," she went on, bursting into tears, "don't let this sort of thing go on, or poor Mildred will lose her reputation; and you must know what a dreadful thing that is for any woman. Why don't you marry her?"

"Because she refused to marry me."

"And yet--and yet she kisses you--like that!" added Miss Terry, as the peculiar fervour of the embrace in question came back to her recollection. "Ah, I don't know what to think."

"Best not think about it at all, Miss Terry. It won't bear reflection."

"Oh, Arthur, how could you?"

He looked very uncomfortable as he answered--

"I know that I must seem a dreadful brute to you. I daresay I am; but, Miss Terry, it would, under all the circumstances, be much more to the point, if you insisted on Mildred's marrying me."

"I dare not. You do not know Mildred. She would never submit to it from me."

"Then I must; and, what is more, I will do it now."

"Thank you, Arthur, thank you. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you."

"There is no need to be grateful to the author of this mischief."

"And supposing she refuses--what will you do then?"

"Then I think that I shall go away at once. Hush! here she comes."

"Well, Arthur, what are you and Agatha plotting together? You both look serious enough."

"Nothing, Mildred--that is, only another sea-voyage."

Mildred glanced at him uneasily. She did not like the tone in his voice.

"I have a bit of bad news for you, Arthur. That fool, that idiot, Jane"--and she stamped her little foot upon the pavement--"has upset the mummy hyacinth-pot and broken the flower off just as it was coming into bloom. I have given her a quarter's wages and her passage back to

England, and packed her off."

"Why, Mildred," remonstrated Miss Terry, "what a fuss to make about a flower!"

She turned on her almost fiercely.

"I had rather have broken my arm, or anything short of my neck, than that she should have broken that flower. Arthur planted it, and now the clumsy girl has destroyed it," and Mildred looked as though she were going to cry.

As there was nothing more to be said, Miss Terry went away. As soon as she was gone, Mildred turned to Arthur and said--

"You were right, Arthur; we shall never see it bloom in this world."

"Never mind about the flower, dear; it cannot be helped. I want to speak to you of something more important. Miss Terry saw you kiss me last night, and she not unnaturally is anxious to know what it all means."

"And did you tell her?"

"Yes."

It was Mildred's turn to blush now.

"Mildred, you must listen to me. This cannot go on any more; either you must marry me, or----"

"Or what?"

"Or I must go away. At present our whole life is a lie."

"Do you really wish me to marry you, Arthur?"

"I not only wish it, I think it necessary."

"Have you nothing more to say than that?"

"Yes, I have to say that I will do my best to make you a good and faithful husband, and that I am sure you will make me a good wife."

She dropped her face upon her hands and thought.

Just then Miss Terry came hurrying up.

"Oh, Arthur!" she said, "just think, the Roman is in, after all, but all her boats are gone, and they say that half of her passengers and crew are washed overboard; do go down and see about it."

He hesitated a little.

"Go, dear," whispered Mildred. "I want time to think. I will give you my answer this afternoon."

Mildred sat still on the verandah thinking, but she had not been there many minutes before a servant came with her English letters that had been brought by the unfortunate _Roman_, and at the same time informed her that the _Garth Castle_ had been sighted, and would anchor in a few hours. Mildred reflected that it was not often they got two English mails in one day. She began idly turning over the packet before her. Of late letters had lost much of their interest for Mildred.

Presently, however, her hand made a movement of almost electric swiftness, and the colour left her face as she seized a stout envelope directed in a hand of peculiar delicacy to "Arthur Heigham, Esq., care of Mrs. Carr, Madeira." Mildred knew the handwriting, she had seen it in Arthur's pocket-book. It was Angela Caresfoot's. Next to it there was another letter addressed to Arthur in a hand that she did not know, but bearing the same postmarks, "Bratham" and "Roxham." She put them both aside, and then took up the thick letter and examined it. It had two peculiarities--first, it was open, having come unsealed in transit, and been somewhat roughly tied up with a piece of twine; and secondly, it contained some article of jewellery. Indeed, by dint of a little pressing on the outside paper, she was able to form a pretty

accurate opinion as to what it was. It was a ring. If she had turned pale before when she saw the letter, she was paler still now.

"Heavens," she thought, "why does she send him a ring? Has anything happened to her husband? If she is a free woman, I am lost."

Mildred looked at the letter lying open before her, and a terrible temptation took possession of her. She took it up and put it down again, and then again she took it up, wiping the cold perspiration from her forehead.

"My whole life is at stake," she thought.

Then she hesitated no longer, but, taking the letter, slipped off the piece of twine, and drew its contents from the envelope. The first thing to fall out, wrapped in a little cotton-wool, was the ring. She looked at it, and recognized it as Arthur's engagement ring, the same that Lady Bellamy had taken with her. Then, putting aside the statement, she deliberately unfolded the letter, and read it.

Do not think too hardly of her, my reader. The temptation was very sore. But, when one yields to temptation, retribution is not unfrequently hard upon its track, and it would only have been necessary to watch Mildred's face to see that, if she had sinned, the sin went hand in hand with punishment. In turn, it took an expression of astonishment, grief, awe, and despair. She read the letter to the

last word, then she took the statement, and glanced through it, smiling once or twice as she read. Next she replaced everything in the envelope, and, taking it, together with the other letter addressed to Arthur, unbuttoned the top of her loose-bodied white dress, and placed them in her bosom.

"It is over," she said to herself. "I can never marry him now. That woman is as far above me as the stars, and, sooner or later, he would find it all out. He must go, ah, God! he must go to marry _her_. Why should I not destroy these letters, and marry him to-morrow? bind him to me by a tie that no letters can ever break? What! purchase his presence at the price of his daily scorn? Oh, such water is too bitter for me to drink! I have sinned against you, Arthur, but I will sin no more. Good-bye, my dear, good-bye."

And she laid her throbbing head upon the rail of the verandah, and wept bitterly.