

CHAPTER LXXIV

About three o'clock that afternoon Arthur returned to the Quinta, having lunched on board the *Roman*. He found Mildred sitting in her favourite place on the museum verandah. She was very pale, and, if he had watched her, he would have seen that she was trembling all over, but he did not observe her particularly.

"Well," he said, "it is all nonsense about half the crew being drowned; only one man was killed, by the fall of a spar, poor chap. They ran into Vigo, as I thought. The other mail is just coming in-- but what is the matter, Mildred? You look pale."

"Nothing, dear; I have a good deal to think of, that is all."

"Ah, yes! Well, my love, have you made up your mind?"

"Why did I refuse to marry you before; for your sake, or mine, Arthur?"

"You said--absurdly, I thought--for mine!"

"And what I said I meant, and what I meant, I mean. Look me in the face, dear, and tell me, upon your honour as a gentleman, that you love me, really love me, and I will marry you to-morrow."

"I am very fond of you, Mildred, and I will make you a good and true husband."

"Precisely; that is what I expected, but it is not enough for me. There was a time when I thought that I could be well satisfied if you would only look kindly upon me, but I suppose that l'appetit vient en mangeant, for, now you do that, I am not satisfied. I long to reign alone. But that is not all. I will not consent to tie you, who do not love me, to my apron-strings for life. Believe me, the time is very near when you would curse me, if I did. You say"--and she rose and stretched out her arm--"that you will either marry me or go. I have made my choice. I will not beat out my heart against a stone. I will not marry you. Go, Arthur, go!"

A great anxiety came into his face.

"Do you fully understand what you are saying, Mildred? Such ties as exist between us cannot be lightly broken."

"But I will break them, and my own heart with them, before they become chains so heavy that you cannot bear them. Arthur"--and she came up to him, and put her hands upon his shoulders, looking, with wild and sorrowful eyes, straight into his face--"tell me now, dear--do not palter, or put me off with any courteous falsehood--tell me as truly as you will speak upon the judgment-day, do you still love Angela Caresfoot as much as ever?"

"Mildred, you should not ask me such painful questions; it is not right of you."

"It is right; and you will soon know that it is. Answer me."

"Then, if you must have it, _I do_."

Her face became quite hard. Slowly she took her hands from his shoulders.

"And you have the effrontery to ask me to marry you with one breath, and to tell me this with the next. Arthur, you had better go. Do not consider yourself under any false obligation to me. Go, and go quickly."

"For God's sake, think what you are doing, Mildred!"

"Oh! I have thought--I have thought too much. There is nothing left but to say good-bye. Yes, it is a very cruel word. Do you know that you have passed over my life like a hurricane, and wrenched it up by the roots?"

"Really, Mildred, you mystify me. I don't understand you. What can be the meaning of all this?"

She looked at him for a few seconds, and then answered, in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice.

"I forgot, Arthur; here are your English letters;" and she drew them from her bosom and gave them to him. "Perhaps they will explain things a little. Meanwhile, I will tell you something. Angela Caresfoot's husband is dead; indeed, she was never really married to him." And then she turned, and slowly walked towards the entrance of the museum. In the boudoir, however, her strength seemed to fail her, and she sank on a chair.

Arthur took the letter, written by the woman he loved, and warm from the breast of the woman he was about to leave, and stood speechless. His heart stopped for a moment, and then sent the blood bounding through his veins like a flood of joy. The shock was so great that for a second or two he staggered, and nearly fell. Presently, however, he recovered himself, and another and very different thought overtook him.

Putting the letters into his pocket, he followed Mildred into the boudoir. She was sitting, looking very faint, upon a chair, her arms hanging down helplessly by her side.

"Mildred," he said, hoarsely.

She looked up with a faint air of surprise.

"What, are you not gone?"

"Mildred, beyond what you have just said I know nothing of the contents of these letters; but whatever they may be, here and now, before I read them, I again offer to marry you. I owe it to you and to my own sense of what is right that I should marry you."

He spoke calmly, and with evident sincerity.

"Do you know that I read your letter just now, and had half a mind to burn it; that I am little better than a thief?"

"I guessed that you had read it."

"And do you understand that your Angela is unmarried, that she was never really married at all--and that she asks nothing better than to marry you?"

"I understand."

"And you still offer to make me your wife?"

"I do. What do you say?"

A flood of light filled Mildred's eyes as she rose and confronted him.

"I say, Arthur, that you are a very noble gentleman, and, that though from this day I must be a miserable woman, I shall always be proud to have loved you. Listen, my dear. When I read that letter, I felt that your Angela towered over me like the Alps, her snowy purity stained only by the reflected lights of heaven. I felt that I could not compete with such a woman as this, that I could never hope to hold you from one so calmly faithful, so dreadfully serene, and I knew that she had conquered, robbing me for Time, and, as I fear, leaving me beggared for Eternity. In the magnificence of her undying power, in the calm certainty of her command, she flings me your life as though it were nothing. 'Take it,' she says; 'he will never love you--he is mine; but I can afford to wait. I shall claim him before the throne of God.' But now, look you, Arthur, if you can behave like the generous-hearted gentleman you are, I will show you that I am not behind you in generosity. I will not marry you. I have done with you; or, to be more correct," and she gave a hard little laugh, "you have done with me. Go back to Angela, the beautiful woman with inscrutable grey eyes, who waits for you, clothed in her eternal calm, like a mountain in its snows. I shall send her that tiara as a wedding-present; it will become her well. Go back, Arthur; but sometimes, when you are cloyed with unearthly virtue and perfection, remember that a woman loved you. There, I have made you quite a speech; you will always think of me in connection with fine words. Why don't you go?"

Arthur stood utterly confused.

"And what will you do, Mildred?"

"I!" she answered, with the same hard laugh. "Oh, don't trouble yourself about me. I shall be a happy woman yet. I mean to see life now--go in for pleasure, power, ritualism, whatever comes first. Perhaps, when we meet again, I shall be Lady Minster, or some other great lady, and shall be able to tell you that I am very, very happy. A woman always likes to tell her old lover that, you know, though she would not like him to believe it. Perhaps, too"--and here her eyes grew soft, and her voice broke into a sob--"I shall have a consolation you know nothing of."

He did not know what she meant; indeed, he was half-distracted with grief and doubt.

For a moment more they stood facing each other in silence, and then suddenly she flung her arms above her head, and uttering a low cry of grief, turned, and ran swiftly down the stone passage into the museum. Arthur hesitated for a while, and then followed her.

A painful sight awaited him in that silent chamber; for there--stretched on the ground before the statue of Osiris, like some hopeless sinner before an inexorable justice, with her brown hair touched to gold by a ray of sunlight from the roof--lay Mildred, as still as though she were dead. He went to her, and tried to raise her,

but she wrenched herself loose, and, in an abandonment of misery, flung herself upon the ground again.

"I thought it was over," she said, "and that you were gone. Go, dear, or this will drive me mad. Perhaps, sometimes, you will write me."

He knelt beside her and kissed her, and then he rose and went.

But for many a year was he haunted by that scene of human misery enacted in the weird chamber of the dead. Never could he forget the sight of Mildred lying in the sunlight, with the marble face of mocking calm looking down upon her, and the mortal frames of those who, in their day, had suffered as she suffered, and ages since had found the rest that she in time would reach, scattered all around--fit emblems of the fragile vanity of passions which suck their strength from earth alone.