

CHAPTER LXXV

When Arthur got out of the gates of the Quinta Carr, he hurried to the hotel, with the intention of reading the letters Mildred had given him, and, passing through the dining-room, seated himself upon the "stoep" which overlooked the garden in order to do so. At this time of year it was, generally speaking, a quiet place enough; but on this particular day scarcely had Arthur taken the letter from his pocket, and--having placed the ring that it contained upon his trembling finger, and repudiating the statement, marked "to be read first," on account of its business-like appearance--glanced at the two first lines of Angela's own letter, when the sound of hurrying feet and many chattering voices reminded him that he could expect no peace anywhere in the neighbourhood of the hotel. The second English mail was in, and all the crowd of passengers, who were at this time pouring out to the Cape to escape the English winter, had come, rejoicing, ashore, to eat, drink, be merry, and buy parrots and wicker chairs while the vessel coaled.

He groaned and fled, in his hurry leaving the statement on the bench on which he was seated.

Some half-mile or so away, to the left of the town, where the sea had encroached a little upon the shore of the island, there was a nook of peculiar loveliness. Here the giant hand of Nature had cleft a ravine in the mountains that make Madeira, down which a crystal streamlet

trickled to the patch of yellow sand that edged the sea. Its banks sloped like a natural terrace, and were clothed with masses of maidenhair ferns interwoven with feathery grasses, whilst up above among the rocks grew aloes and every sort of flowering shrub.

Behind, clothed in forest, lay the mass of mountains, varied by the rich green of the vine-clad valleys, and in front heaved the endless ocean, broken only by one lonely rock that stood grimly out against the purpling glories of the evening sky. This spot Arthur had discovered in the course of his rambles with Mildred, and it was here that he bent his steps to be alone to read his letters. Scarcely had he reached the place, however, when he discovered, to his intense vexation, that he had left the enclosure in Angela's letter upon the verandah at the hotel. But, luckily, it chanced that, within a few yards of the spot where he had seated himself, there was a native boy cutting walking-sticks from the scrub. He called to him in Portuguese, of which he had learnt a little, and, writing something on a card, told him to take it to the manager of the hotel, and to bring back what he would give him. Delighted at the chance of earning sixpence, the boy started at a run, and at last he was able to begin to read his letter.

Had Arthur not been in quite such a hurry to leave the hotel, he might have seen something which would have interested him, namely, a very

lovely woman--so lovely, indeed, that everybody turned their heads to look at her as she passed, accompanied by another woman clad in a stiff black gown, not at all lovely, and rather ancient, but, for all that, well-favoured and pleasant to look on, being duly conveyed to their room in the hotel by his friend the manager.

"Well, thank my stars, here we be at last," said the elderly stout person, with a gasp, as the door of the room closed upon the pair; "and it's my opinion that here I shall stop till my dying day, for, as for getting on board one of those beastly ships again, I couldn't do it, and that's flat. Now look here, dearie, don't you sit there and look frightened, but just set to and clean yourself up a bit. I'm off downstairs to see if I can find out about things; everybody's sure to know everybody else's business in a place like this, because, you see, the gossip can't get out of a bit of an island, it must travel round and round till it ewaporates. I shall soon know if he is married or not, and if he is, why, what's done can't be undone, and it's no use crying over spilt milk, and we'll be off home, though I doubt I sha'n't live to get there, and if he isn't why so much the better."

"Oh! nurse, do stop talking, and go quickly; can't you see that I am in an agony of suspense? I must get it over one way or the other."

"Hurry no man's cattle, my dear, or I shall make a mess of it. Now, Miss Angela, just you keep cool, it ain't no manner of use flying into a state. I'll be back presently."

But, as soon as she was gone, poor Angela flew into a considerable state; for, flinging herself upon her knees by the bed, she broke into hysterical prayers to her Maker that Arthur might not be taken from her. Poor girl! alternately racked by sick fears and wild hopes, hers was not a very enviable position during the apparently endless ten minutes that followed.

Meanwhile, Pigott had descended to the cool hall, round which were arranged rows of hammocks, and was looking out for some one with whom to enter into conversation. A Portuguese waiter approached her, but she majestically waved him away, under the impression that he could not speak English, though as a matter of fact his English was purer than her own.

Presently a pretty little woman, leading a baby by the hand, came up to her.

"Pray, do you want anything? I am the wife of the manager."

"Yes, ma'am. I want a little information--at least, there's another that does. Did you ever happen to hear of a Mr. Heigham?"

"Mr. Heigham? Indeed, yes; I know him well. He was here a few minutes since."

"Then perhaps, ma'am, you can tell me if he is married to a Mrs. Carr that lives on this island?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, with a little smile; "but there is a good deal of talk about them--people say that, though they are not married, they ought to be, you know."

"That's the best bit of news I have heard for many a day. As for the talk, I don't pay no manner of heed to that. If he ain't married to her, he won't marry her now, I'll go bail. Thank you kindly, ma'am."

At that moment they were interrupted by the entrance of a little ragged boy into the hall, who timidly held out a card to the lady to whom Pigott was talking.

"Do you want to find Mr. Heigham?" she said. "Because if so, this boy will show you where he is. He has sent here for a paper that he left. I found it on the verandah just now, and wondered what it was. Perhaps you would take it to him if you go. I don't like trusting this boy--as likely as not he will lose it."

"That will just suit. Just you tell the boy to wait while I fetch my young lady, and we will go with him. Is this the paper? And in her writing, too! Well, I never! There, I'll be back in no time."

Pigott went upstairs far too rapidly for a person of her size and

years, with the result that when she reached their room, where Angela was waiting half dead with suspense, she could only gasp.

"Well," said Angela, "be quick and tell me."

"Oh, Lord! them stairs!" gasped Pigott.

"For pity's sake, tell me the worst!"

"Now, miss, _do_ give a body time, and don't be a fool--begging pardon for----"

"Oh, Pigott, you are torturing me!"

"Well, miss, you muddle me so--but I am coming to it. I went down them dratted stairs, and there I see a wonderful nice-looking party with a baby."

"For God's sake tell me--_is Arthur married?_"

"Why, no, dearie--of course not. I was just a-going to say----"

But whatever valuable remark Pigott was going to make was lost to the world for ever, for Angela flung her arms round her neck and began kissing her.

"Oh, oh! thank God--thank God! Oh, oh, oh!"

Whereupon Pigott, being a very sensible person, took her by the shoulders and tried to shake her, but it was no joke shaking a person of her height. Angela stood firm, and Pigott oscillated--that was the only visible result.

"Now, then, miss," she said, giving up the shaking as a bad job, "no highstrikes, if you please. Just you put on your hat and come for a bit of a walk in this queer place with me. I haven't brought you up by hand this two-and-twenty year or thereabouts, to see you go off in highstrikes, like a housemaid as has seen a ghost."

Angela stopped, and did as she was bid.