

CHAPTER XIV

THE TIGER SHOWS HER CLAWS

After this very chilling reception at the hands of the object of his affection, Edward Cossey continued his drive in an even worse temper than before. He reached his rooms, had some luncheon, and then in pursuance of a previous engagement went over to the Oaks to see Mrs. Quest.

He found her waiting for him in the drawing-room. She was standing at the window with her hands behind her, a favourite attitude of hers. As soon as the door was shut, she turned, came up to him, and grasped his hand affectionately between her own.

"It is an age since I have seen you, Edward," she said, "one whole day. Really, when I do not see you, I do not live, I only exist."

He freed himself from her clasp with a quick movement. "Really, Belle," he said impatiently, "you might be a little more careful than to go through that performance in front of an open window--especially as the gardener must have seen the whole thing."

"I don't much care if he did," she said defiantly. "What does it matter? My husband is certainly not in a position to make a fuss about other people."

"What does it matter?" he said, stamping his foot. "What does it /not/ matter? If you have no care for your good name, do you suppose that I am indifferent to mine?"

Mrs. Quest opened her large violet eyes to the fullest extent, and a curious light was reflected from them.

"You have grown wonderfully cautious all of a sudden, Edward," she said meaningly.

"What is the use of my being cautious when you are so reckless? I tell you what it is, Belle. We are talked of all over this gossiping town, and I don't like it, and what is more, once and for all, I won't have it. If you will not be more careful, I will break with you altogether, and that is the long and short of it."

"Where have you been this morning?" she asked in the same ominously calm voice.

"I have been to Honham Castle on a matter of business."

"Oh, and yesterday you were there on a matter of pleasure. Now did you happen to see Ida in the course of your business?"

"Yes," he answered, looking her full in the face, "I did see her, what

about it?"

"By appointment, I suppose."

"No, not by appointment. Have you done your catechism?"

"Yes--and now I am going to preach a homily on it. I see through you perfectly, Edward. You are getting tired of me, and you want to be rid of me. I tell you plainly that you are not going the right way to work about it. No woman, especially if she be in my--unfortunate position, can tamely bear to see herself discarded for another. Certainly I cannot--and I caution you--I caution you to be careful, because when I think of such a thing I am not quite myself," and suddenly, without the slightest warning (for her face had been hard and cold as stone), she burst into a flood of tears.

Now Edward Cossey was naturally somewhat moved at this sight. Of course he did his best to console her, though with no great results, for she was still sobbing bitterly when suddenly there came a knock at the door. Mrs. Quest turned her face towards the wall and pretended to be reading a letter, and he tried to look as unconcerned as possible.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the girl with a sharp glance at her mistress. "The telegraph boy brought it on here, when he heard that you were not at home, because he said he would be sure to find you here--and please, sir, he hopes that you will give him sixpence for

bringing it round, as he thought it might be important."

Edward felt in his pocket and gave the girl a shilling, telling her to say that there was no answer. As soon as she had gone, he opened the telegram. It was from his sister in London, and ran as follows:

"Come up to town at once. Father has had a stroke of paralysis.
Shall expect you by the seven o'clock train."

"What is it?" said Mrs. Quest, noting the alarm on his face.

"Why, my father is very ill. He has had a stroke of paralysis, and I must go to town by the next train."

"Shall you be long away?"

"I do not know. How can I tell? Good-bye, Belle. I am sorry that we should have had this scene just as I am going, but I can't help it."

"Oh, Edward," she said, catching him by the arm and turning her tear-stained face up towards his own, "you are not angry with me, are you? Do not let us part in anger. How can I help being jealous when I love you so? Tell me that you do not hate me--or I shall be wretched all the time that you are away."

"No, no, of course not--but I must say, I wish that you would not make such shocking scenes--good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered as she gave him her shaking hand. "Good-bye, my dear. If only you knew what I feel here," she pointed to her breast, "you would make excuses for me." Almost before she had finished her sentence he was gone. She stood near the door, listening to his retreating footsteps till they had quite died away, and then flung herself in the chair and rested her head upon her hands. "I shall lose him," she said to herself in the bitterness of her heart.

"I know I shall. What chance have I against her? He already cares for Ida a great deal more than he does for me, in the end he will break from me and marry her. Oh, I had rather see him dead--and myself too."

Half-an-hour later, Mr. Quest came in.

"Where is Cossey?" he asked.

"Mr. Cossey's father has had a stroke of paralysis and he has gone up to London to look after him."

"Oh," said Mr. Quest. "Well, if the old gentleman dies, your friend will be one of the wealthiest men in England."

"Well, so much the better for him. I am sure money is a great

blessing. It protects one from so much."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest with emphasis, "so much the better for him, and all connected with him. Why have you been crying? Because Cossey has gone away--or have you quarrelled with him?"

"How do you know that I have been crying? If I have, it's my affair. At any rate my tears are my own."

"Certainly, they are--I do not wish to interfere with your crying--cry when you like. It will be lucky for Cossey if that old father of his dies just now, because he wants money."

"What does he want money for?"

"Because he has undertaken to pay off the mortgages on the Castle estates."

"Why has he done that, as an investment?"

"No, it is a rotten investment. I believe that he has done it because he is in love with Miss de la Molle, and is naturally anxious to ingratiate himself with her. Don't you know that? I thought perhaps that was what you had been crying about?"

"It is not true," she answered, her lips quivering with pain.

Mr. Quest laughed gently. "I think you must have lost your power of observation, which used to be sufficiently keen. However, of course it does not matter to you. It will in many ways be a most suitable marriage, and I am sure they will make a very handsome couple."

She made no answer, and turned her back to hide the workings of her face. For a few moments her husband stood looking at her, a gentle smile playing on his refined features. Then remarking that he must go round to the office, but would be back in time for tea, he went, reflecting with satisfaction that he had given his wife something to think about which would scarcely be to her taste.

As for Belle Quest, she waited till the door had closed, and then turned round towards it and spoke aloud, as though she were addressing her vanished husband.

"I hate you," she said, with bitter emphasis. "I hate you. You have ruined my life, and now you torment me as though I were a lost soul. Oh, I wish I were dead! I wish I were dead!"

On reaching his office, Mr. Quest found two letters for him, one of which had just arrived by the afternoon post. The first was addressed in the Squire's handwriting and signed with his big seal, and the other bore a superscription, the sight of which made him turn momentarily faint. Taking up this last with a visible effort, he

opened it.

It was from the "Tiger," alias Edith, and its coarse contents need not be written here. Put shortly they came to this. She was being summoned for debt. She wanted more money and would have it. If five hundred pounds were not forthcoming and that shortly--within a week, indeed--she threatened with no uncertain voice to journey down to Boisingham and put him to an open shame.

"Great heavens!" he said, "this woman will destroy me. What a devil! And she'd be as good as her word unless I found her the money. I must go up to town at once. I wonder how she got that idea into her head. It makes me shudder to think of her in Boisingham," and he dropped his face upon his hands and groaned in the bitterness of his heart.

"It is hard," he thought to himself; "here have I for years and years been striving and toiling, labouring to become a respectable and respected member of society, but always this old folly haunts my steps and drags me down, and by heaven I believe that it will destroy me after all." With a sigh he lifted his head, and taking a sheet of paper wrote on it, "I have received your letter, and will come and see you to-morrow or the next day." This note he placed in an envelope, which he directed to the high-sounding name of Mrs. d'Aubigne, Rupert St., Pimlico--and put it in his pocket.

Then with another sigh he took up the Squire's letter, and glanced

through it. Its length was considerable, but in substance it announced his acceptance of the arrangement proposed by Mr. Edward Cossey, and requested that he would prepare the necessary deeds to be submitted to his lawyers. Mr. Quest read the letter absently enough, and threw it down with a little laugh.

"What a queer world it is," he said to himself, "and what a ludicrous side there is to it all. Here is Cossey advancing money to get a hold over Ida de la Molle, whom he means to marry if he can, and who is probably playing her own hand. Here is Belle madly in love with Cossey, who will break her heart. Here am I loving Belle, who hates me, and playing everybody's game in order to advance my own, and become a respected member of a society I am superior to. Here is the Squire blundering about like a walrus in a horse-pond, and fancying everything is being conducted for his sole advantage, and that all the world revolves round Honham Castle. And there at the end of the chain is this female harpy, Edith Jones, otherwise d'Aubigne, alias the Tiger, gnawing at my vitals and holding my fortunes in her hand.

"Bah! it's a queer world and full of combinations, but the worst of it is that plot as we will the solution of them does not rest with us, no --not with us."