CHAPTER XV

THE HAPPY DAYS

This is a troublesome world enough, but thanks to that mitigating fate which now and again interferes to our advantage, there do come to most of us times and periods of existence which, if they do not quite fulfil all the conditions of ideal happiness, yet go near enough to that end to permit in after days of our imagining that they did so. I say to most of us, but in doing so I allude chiefly to those classes commonly known as the "upper," by which is understood those who have enough bread to put into their mouths and clothes to warm them; those, too, who are not the present subjects of remorseless and hideous ailments, who are not daily agonised by the sight of their famished offspring; who are not doomed to beat out their lives against the madhouse bars, or to see their hearts' beloved and their most cherished hope wither towards that cold space from whence no message comes. For such unfortunates, and for their million-numbered kin upon the globe--the victims of war, famine, slave trade, oppression, usury, over-population, and the curse of competition, the rays of light must be few indeed; few and far between, only just enough to save them from utter hopelessness. And even to the favoured ones, the well warmed and well fed, who are to a great extent lifted by fortune or by their native strength and wit above the degradations of the world, this light of happiness is but as the gleam of stars, uncertain, fitful, and continually lost in clouds. Only the utterly selfish or the

utterly ignorant can be happy with the happiness of savages or children, however prosperous their own affairs, for to the rest, to those who think and have hearts to feel, and imagination to realise, and a redeeming human sympathy to be touched, the mere weight of the world's misery pressing round them like an atmosphere, the mere echoes of the groans of the dying and the cries of the children are sufficient, and more than sufficient, to dull, aye, to destroy the promise of their joys. But, even to this finer sort there do come rare periods of almost complete happiness--little summers in the tempestuous climate of our years, green-fringed wells of water in our desert, pure northern lights breaking in upon our gloom. And strange as it may seem, these breadths of happy days, when the old questions cease to torment, and a man can trust in Providence and without one qualifying thought bless the day that he was born, are very frequently connected with the passion which is known as love; that mysterious symbol of our double nature, that strange tree of life which, with its roots sucking their strength from the dust-heap of humanity, yet springs aloft above our level and bears its blooms in the face of heaven.

Why it is and what it means we shall perhaps never know for certain. But it does suggest itself, that as the greatest terror of our being lies in the utter loneliness, the unspeakable identity, and unchanging self-completeness of every living creature, so the greatest hope and the intensest natural yearning of our hearts go out towards that passion which in its fire heats has the strength, if only for a little

while, to melt down the barriers of our individuality and give to the soul something of the power for which it yearns of losing its sense of solitude in converse with its kind. For alone we are from infancy to death!--we, for the most part, grow not more near together but rather wider apart with the widening years. Where go the sympathies between the parent and the child, and where is the close old love of brother for his brother?

The invisible fates are continually wrapping us round and round with the winding sheets of our solitude, and none may know all our heart save He who made it. We are set upon the world as the stars are set upon the sky, and though in following our fated orbits we pass and repass, and each shine out on each, yet are we the same lonely lights, rolling obedient to laws we cannot understand, through spaces of which none may mark the measure.

Only, as says the poet in words of truth and beauty:

"Only but this is rare--
When a beloved hand is laid in ours,
When jaded with the rush and glare
Of the interminable hours,
Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear;
When our world-deafened ear
Is by the tones of a loved voice caressed

A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again--
And what we mean we say and what we would we know.

* * * * *

And then he thinks he knows
The hills where his life rose
And the sea whereunto it goes."

Some such Indian summer of delight and forgetfulness of trouble, and the tragic condition of our days, was now opening to Harold Quaritch and Ida de la Molle. Every day, or almost every day, they met and went upon their painting expeditions and argued the point of the validity or otherwise of the impressionist doctrines of art. Not that of all this painting came anything very wonderful, although in the evening the Colonel would take out his canvases and contemplate their rigid proportions with singular pride and satisfaction. It was a little weakness of his to think that he could paint, and one of which he was somewhat tenacious. Like many another man he could do a number of things exceedingly well and one thing very badly, and yet had more faith in that bad thing than in all the good.

But, strange to say, although he affected to believe so firmly in his own style of art and hold Ida's in such cheap regard, it was a little

painting of the latter's that he valued most, and which was oftenest put upon his easel for purposes of solitary admiration. It was one of those very impressionist productions that faded away in the distance, and full of soft grey tints, such as his soul loathed. There was a tree with a blot of brown colour on it, and altogether (though as a matter of fact a clever thing enough) from his point of view of art it was utterly "anathema." This little picture in oils faintly shadowed out himself sitting at his easel, working in the soft grey of the autumn evening, and Ida had painted it and given it to him, and that was why he admired it so much. For to speak the truth, our friend the Colonel was going, going fast--sinking out of sight of his former self into the depths of the love that possessed his soul.

He was a very simple and pure-minded man. Strange as it may appear, since that first unhappy business of his youth, of which he had never been heard to speak, no living woman had been anything to him. Therefore, instead of becoming further vulgarised and hardened by association with all the odds and ends of womankind that a man travelling about the globe comes into contact with, generally not greatly to his improvement, his faith had found time to grow up stronger even than at first. Once more he looked upon woman as a young man looks before he has had bitter experience of the world--as a being to be venerated and almost worshipped, as something better, brighter, purer than himself, hardly to be won, and when won to be worn like a jewel prized at once for value and for beauty.

Now this is a dangerous state of mind for a man of three or four and forty to fall into, because it is a soft state, and this is a world in which the softest are apt to get the worst of it. At four and forty a man, of course, should be hard enough to get the better of other people, as indeed he generally is.

When Harold Quaritch, after that long interval, set his eyes again upon Ida's face, he felt a curious change come over him. All the vague ideas and more or less poetical aspirations which for five long years had gathered themselves about that memory, took shape and form, and in his heart he knew he loved her. Then as the days went on and he came to know her better, he grew to love her more and more, till at last his whole heart went out towards his late found treasure, and she became more than life to him, more than aught else had been or could be. Serene and happy were those days which they spent in painting and talking as they wandered about the Honham Castle grounds. By degrees Ida's slight but perceptible hardness of manner wore away, and she stood out what she was, one of the sweetest and most natural women in England, and with it all, a woman having brains and force of character.

Soon Harold discovered that her life had been anything but an easy one. The constant anxiety about money and her father's affairs had worn her down and hardened her till, as she said, she began to feel as though she had no heart left. Then too he heard all her trouble about her dead and only brother James, how dearly she had loved him, and

what a sore trouble he had been with his extravagant ways and his continual demands for money, which had to be met somehow or other. At last came the crushing blow of his death, and with it the certainty of the extinction of the male line of the de la Molles, and she said that for a while she had believed her father would never hold up his head again. But his vitality was equal to the shock, and after a time the debts began to come in, which although he was not legally bound to do so, her father would insist upon meeting to the last farthing for the honour of the family and out of respect for his son's memory. This increased their money troubles, which had gone on and on, always getting worse as the agricultural depression deepened, till things had reached their present position.

All this she told him bit by bit, only keeping back from him the last development of the drama with the part that Edward Cossey had played in it, and sad enough it made him to think of that ancient house of de la Molle vanishing into the night of ruin.

Also she told him something of her own life, how companionless it had been since her brother went into the army, for she had no real friends about Honham, and not even an acquaintance of her own tastes, which, without being gushingly so, were decidedly artistic and intellectual. "I should have wished," she said, "to try to do something in the world. I daresay I should have failed, for I know that very few women meet with a success which is worth having. But still I should have liked to try, for I am not afraid of work. But the current of my life

is against it; the only thing that is open to me is to strive and make both ends meet upon an income which is always growing smaller, and to save my father, poor dear, from as much worry as I can.

"Don't think that I am complaining," she went on hurriedly, "or that I want to rush into pleasure-seeking, because I do not--a little of that goes a long way with me. Besides, I know that I have many things to be thankful for. Few women have such a kind father as mine, though we do quarrel at times. Of course we cannot have everything our own way in this world, and I daresay that I do not make the best of things. Still, at times it does seem a little hard that I should be forced to lead such a narrow life, just when I feel that I could work in a wide one."

Harold looked up at her face and saw that a tear was gathering in her dark eyes and in his heart he registered a vow that if by any means it ever lay within his power to improve her lot he would give everything he had to do it. But all he said was:

"Don't be downhearted, Miss de la Molle. Things change in a wonderful way, and often they mend when they look worst. You know," he went on a little nervously, "I am an old-fashioned sort of individual, and I believe in Providence and all that sort of thing, you see, and that matters generally come pretty well straight in the long run if people deserve it."

Ida shook her head a little doubtfully and sighed.

"Perhaps," she said, "but I suppose that we do not deserve it. Anyhow, our good fortune is a long while coming," and the conversation dropped.

Still her friend's strong belief in the efficacy of Providence, and generally his masculine sturdiness, did cheer her up considerably. Even the strongest women, if they have any element that can be called feminine left in them, want somebody of the other sex to lean on, and she was no exception to the rule. Besides, if Ida's society had charms for Colonel Quaritch, his society had almost if not quite as much charm for her. It may be remembered that on the night when they first met she had spoken to herself of him as the kind of man whom she would like to marry. The thought was a passing one, and it may be safely said that she had not since entertained any serious idea of marriage in connection with Colonel Quaritch. The only person whom there seemed to be the slightest probability of her marrying was Edward Cossey, and the mere thought of this was enough to make the whole idea of matrimony repugnant to her.

But this notwithstanding, day by day she found Harold Quaritch's society more congenial. Herself by nature, and also to a certain degree by education, a cultured woman, she rejoiced to find in him an entirely kindred spirit. For beneath his somewhat rugged and unpromising exterior, Harold Quaritch hid a vein of considerable

richness. Few of those who associated with him would have believed that the man had a side to his nature which was almost poetic, or that he was a ripe and finished scholar, and, what is more, not devoid of a certain dry humour. Then he had travelled far and seen much of men and manners, gathering up all sorts of quaint odds and ends of information. But perhaps rather than these accomplishments it was the man's transparent honesty and simple-mindedness, his love for what is true and noble, and his contempt of what is mean and base, which, unwittingly peeping out through his conversation, attracted her more than all the rest. Ida was no more a young girl, to be caught by a handsome face or dazzled by a superficial show of mind. She was a thoughtful, ripened woman, quick to perceive, and with the rare talent of judgment wherewith to weigh the proceeds of her perception. In plain, middle-aged Colonel Quaritch she found a very perfect gentleman, and valued him accordingly.

And so day grew into day through that lovely autumn-tide. Edward Cossey was away in London, Quest had ceased from troubling, and journeying together through the sweet shadows of companionship, by slow but sure degrees they drew near to the sunlit plain of love. For it is not common, indeed, it is so uncommon as to be almost impossible, that a man and woman between whom there stands no natural impediment can halt for very long in those shadowed ways. There is throughout all nature an impulse that pushes ever onwards towards completion, and from completion to fruition. Liking leads to sympathy, sympathy points the path to love, and then love demands its own. This

is the order of affairs, and down its well-trodden road these two were quickly travelling.

George the wily saw it, and winked his eye with solemn meaning. The Squire also saw something of it, not being wanting in knowledge of the world, and after much cogitation and many solitary walks elected to leave matters alone for the present. He liked Colonel Quaritch, and thought that it would be a good thing for Ida to get married, though the idea of parting from her troubled his heart sorely. Whether or no it would be desirable from his point of view that she should marry the Colonel was a matter on which he had not as yet fully made up his mind. Sometimes he thought it would, and sometimes he thought the reverse. Then at times vague ideas suggested by Edward Cossey's behaviour about the loan would come to puzzle him. But at present he was so much in the dark that he could come to no absolute decision, so with unaccustomed wisdom for so headstrong and precipitate a man, he determined to refrain from interference, and for a while at any rate allow events to take their natural course.