

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOUSE WITH THE RED PILLARS

Two days after his receipt of the second letter from the "Tiger," Mr. Quest announced to his wife that he was going to London on business connected with the bank, and expected to be away for a couple of nights.

She laughed straight out. "Really, William," she said, "you are a most consummate actor. I wonder that you think it worth while to keep up the farce with me. Well, I hope that Edith is not going to be very expensive this time, because we don't seem to be too rich just now, and you see there is no more of my money for her to have."

Mr. Quest winced visibly beneath this bitter satire, which his wife uttered with a smile of infantile innocence playing upon her face, but he made no reply. She knew too much. Only in his heart he wondered what fate she would mete out to him if ever she got possession of the whole truth, and the thought made him tremble. It seemed to him that the owner of that baby face could be terribly merciless in her vengeance, and that those soft white hands would close round the throat of a man she hated and utterly destroy him. Now, if never before, he realised that between him and this woman there must be enmity and a struggle to the death; and yet strangely enough he still loved her!

Mr. Quest reached London about three o'clock, and his first act was to drive to Cossey and Son's, where he was informed that old Mr. Cossey was much better, and having heard that he was coming to town had sent to say that he particularly wished to see him, especially about the Honham Castle estates. Accordingly Mr. Quest drove on to the old gentleman's mansion in Grosvenor Street, where he asked for Mr. Edward Cossey. The footman said that Mr. Edward was upstairs, and showed him to a study while he went to tell him of the arrival of his visitor.

Mr. Quest glanced round the luxuriously-furnished room, which he saw was occupied by Edward himself, for some letters directed in his handwriting lay upon the desk, and a velveteen lounging coat that Mr. Quest recognised as belonging to him was hanging over the back of a chair. Mr. Quest's eye wandering over this coat, was presently caught by the corner of a torn flap of an envelope which projected from one of the pockets. It was of a peculiar bluish tinge, in fact of a hue much affected by his wife. Listening for a moment to hear if anybody was coming, he stepped to the coat and extracted the letter. It /was/ in his wife's handwriting, so he took the liberty of hastily transferring it to his own pocket.

In another minute Edward Cossey entered, and the two men shook hands.

"How do you do, Quest?" said Edward. "I think that the old man is going to pull through this bout. He is helpless but keen as a knife, and has all the important matters from the bank referred to him. I

believe that he will last a year yet, but he will scarcely allow me out of his sight. He preaches away about business the whole day long and says that he wants to communicate the fruits of his experience to me before it is too late. He wishes to see you, so if you will you had better come up."

Accordingly they went upstairs to a large and luxurious bedroom on the first floor, where the stricken man lay upon a patent couch.

When Mr. Quest and Edward Cossey entered, a lady, old Mr. Cossey's eldest daughter, put down a paper out of which she had been reading the money article aloud, and, rising, informed her father that Mr. Quest had come.

"Mr. Quest?" said the old man in a high thin voice. "Ah, yes, I want to see Mr. Quest very much. Go away now, Anna, you can come back by-and-by, business before pleasure--most instructive, though, that sudden fall in American railways. But I thought it would come and I got Cossey's clear of them," and he sniffed with satisfaction and looked as though he would have rubbed his hands if he had not been physically incapacitated from so doing.

Mr. Quest came forward to where the invalid lay. He was a gaunt old man with white hair and a pallid face, which looked almost ghastly in contrast to his black velvet skull cap. So far as Mr. Quest could see, he appeared to be almost totally paralysed, with the exception of his

head, neck, and left arm, which he could still move a little. His black eyes, however, were full of life and intelligence, and roamed about the room without ceasing.

"How do you do, Mr. Quest?" he said; "sorry that I can't shake hands with you but you see I have been stricken down, though my brain is clear enough, clearer than ever it was, I think. And I ain't going to die yet--don't think that I am, because I ain't. I may live two years more--the doctor says I am sure to live one at least. A lot of money can be made in a year if you keep your eyes open. Once I made a hundred and twenty thousand for Cossey's in one year; and I may do it again before I die. I may make a lot of money yet, ah, a lot of money!" and his voice went off into a thin scream that was not pleasant to listen to.

"I am sure I hope you will, sir," said Mr. Quest politely.

"Thank you; take that for good luck, you know. Well, well, Mr. Quest, things haven't done so bad down in your part of the world; not at all bad considering the times. I thought we should have had to sell that old de la Molle up, but I hear that he is going to pay us off. Can't imagine who has been fool enough to lend him the money. A client of yours, eh? Well, he'll lose it I expect, and serve him right for his pains. But I am not sorry, for it is unpleasant for a house like ours to have to sell an old client up. Not that his account is worth much, nothing at all--more trouble than profit--or we should not have done

it. He's no better than a bankrupt and the insolvency court is the best place for him. The world is to the rich and the fulness thereof. There's an insolvency court especially provided for de la Molle and his like--empty old windbags with long sounding names; let him go there and make room for the men who have made money--hee! hee! hee!" And once more his voice went off into a sort of scream.

Here Mr. Quest, who had enjoyed about enough of this kind of thing, changed the conversation by beginning to comment on various business transactions which he had been conducting on behalf of the house. The old man listened with the greatest interest, his keen black eyes attentively fixed upon the speaker's face, till at last Mr. Quest happened to mention that amongst others a certain Colonel Quaritch had opened an account with their branch of the bank.

"Quaritch?" said the old man eagerly, "I know that name. Was he ever in the 105th Foot?"

"Yes," said Mr. Quest, who knew everything about everybody, "he was an ensign in that regiment during the Indian Mutiny, where he was badly wounded when still quite young, and got the Victoria Cross. I found it all out the other day."

"That's the man; that's the man," said old Mr. Cossey, jerking his head in an excited manner. "He's a blackguard; I tell you he's a blackguard; he jilted my wife's sister. She was twenty years younger

than my wife--jilted her a week before her marriage, and would never give a reason, and she went mad and is in a madhouse how. I should like to have the ruining of him for it. I should like to drive him into the poor-house."

Mr. Quest and Edward looked at each other, and the old man let his head fall back exhausted.

"Now good-bye, Mr. Quest, they'll give you a bit of dinner downstairs," he said at length. "I'm getting tired, and I want to hear the rest of that money article. You've done very well for Cossey's and Cossey's will do well for you, for we always pay by results; that's the way to get good work and make a lot of money. Mind, Edward, if ever you get a chance don't forget to pay that blackguard Quaritch out pound for pound, and twice as much again for compound interest--hee! hee! hee!"

"The old gentleman keeps his head for business pretty well," said Mr. Quest to Edward Cossey as soon as they were well outside the door.

"Keeps his head?" answered Edward, "I should just think he did. He's a regular shark now, that's what he is. I really believe that if he knew I had found thirty thousand for old de la Molle he would cut me off with a shilling." Here Mr. Quest pricked up his ears. "And he's close, too," he went on, "so close that it is almost impossible to get anything out of him. I am not particular, but upon my word I think

that it is rather disgusting to see an old man with one foot in the grave hanging on to his moneybags as though he expected to float to heaven on them."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest, "it is a curious thing to think of, but, you see, money /is/ his heaven."

"By the way," said Edward, as they entered the study, "that's queer about that fellow Quaritch, isn't it? I never liked the look of him, with his pious air."

"Very queer, Mr. Cossey," said he, "but do you know, I almost think that there must be some mistake? I do not believe that Colonel Quaritch is the man to do things of that sort without a very good reason. However, nobody can tell, and it is a long while ago."

"A long while ago or not I mean to let him know my opinion of him when I get back to Boisingham," said Edward viciously. "By Jove! it's twenty minutes past six, and in this establishment we dine at the pleasant hour of half-past. Won't you come and wash your hands."

Mr. Quest had a very good dinner, and contrary to his custom drank the best part of a bottle of old port after it. He had an unpleasant business to face that evening, and felt as though his nerves required bracing. About ten o'clock he took his leave, and getting into a hansom bade the cabman drive to Rupert Street, Pimlico, where he

arrived in due course. Having dismissed his cab, he walked slowly down the street till he reached a small house with red pillars to the doorway. Here he rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman with a cunning face and a simper. Mr. Quest knew her well. Nominally the Tiger's servant, she was really her jackal.

"Is Mrs. d'Aubigne at home, Ellen?" he said.

"No, sir," she answered with a simper, "but she will be back from the music hall before long. She does not appear in the second part. But please come in, sir, you are quite a stranger here, and I am sure that Mrs. d'Aubigne will be very glad to see you, for she have been dreadfully pressed for money of late, poor dear; nobody knows the trouble that I have had with those sharks of tradesmen."

By this time they were upstairs in the drawing-room, and Ellen had turned the gas up. The room was well furnished in a certain gaudy style, which included a good deal of gilt and plate glass. Evidently, however, it had not been tidied since the Tiger had left it, for there on the table were cards thrown this way and that amidst an array of empty soda-water bottles, glasses with dregs of brandy in them, and other /debris/, such as the ends of cigars and cigarettes, and a little copper and silver money. On the sofa, too, lay a gorgeous tea gown resplendent with pink satin, also a pair of gold embroidered slippers, not over small, and an odd gant de Suede, with such an extraordinary number of buttons that it almost looked like the cast-

off skin of a brown snake.

"I see that your mistress has been having company, Ellen," he said coldly.

"Yes, sir, just a few lady friends to cheer her up a bit," answered the woman, with her abominable simper; "poor dear, she do get that low with you away so much, and no wonder; and then all these money troubles, and she night by night working hard for her living at the music hall. Often and often have I seen her crying over it all----"

"Ah," said he, breaking in upon her eloquence, "I suppose that the lady friends smoke cigars. Well, clear away this mess and leave me-- stop, give me a brandy-and-soda first. I will wait for your mistress."

The woman stopped talking and did as she was bid, for there was a look in Mr. Quest's eye which she did not quite like. So having placed the brandy-and-soda-water before him she left him to his own reflections.

Apparently they were not very pleasant ones. He walked round the room, which was reeking of patchouli or some such compound, well mixed with the odour of stale cigar smoke, looking absently at the gee-gar ornaments. On the mantelpiece were some photographs, and among them, to his disgust, he saw one of himself taken many years ago. With something as near an oath as he ever indulged in, he seized it, and setting fire to it over the gas, waited till the flames began to

scorch his fingers, and then flung it, still burning, into the grate. Then he looked at himself in the glass in the mantelpiece--the room was full of mirrors--and laughed bitterly at the incongruity of his gentlemanlike, respectable, and even refined appearance, in that vulgar, gaudy, vicious-looking room.

Suddenly he bethought him of the letter in his wife's handwriting which he had stolen from the pocket of Edward Cossey's coat. He drew it out, and throwing the tea gown and the interminable glove off the sofa, sat down and began to read it. It was, as he had expected, a love letter, a wildly passionate love letter, breathing language which in some places almost touched the beauty of poetry, vows of undying affection that were throughout redeemed from vulgarity and even from silliness by their utter earnestness and self-abandonment. Had the letter been one written under happier circumstances and innocent of offence against morality, it would have been a beautiful letter, for passion at its highest has always a wild beauty of its own.

He read it through and then carefully folded it and restored it to his pocket. "The woman has a heart," he said to himself, "no one can doubt it. And yet I could never touch it, though God knows however much I wronged her I loved her, yes, and love her now. Well, it is a good bit of evidence, if ever I dare to use it. It is a game of bluff between me and her, and I expect that in the end the boldest player will win."

He rose from the sofa--the atmosphere of the place stifled him, and

going to the window threw it open and stepped out on to the balcony. It was a lovely moonlight night, though chilly, and for London the street was a quiet one.

Taking a chair he sat down there upon the balcony and began to think. His heart was softened by misery and his mind fell into a tender groove. He thought of his long-dead mother, whom he had dearly loved, and of how he used to say his prayers to her, and of how she sang hymns to him on Sunday evenings. Her death had seemed to choke all the beauty out of his being at the time, and yet now he thanked heaven that she was dead. And then he thought of the accursed woman who had been his ruin, and of how she had entered into his life and corrupted and destroyed him. Next there rose up before him a vision of Belle, Belle as he had first seen her, a maid of seventeen, the only child of that drunken old village doctor, now also long since dead, and of how the sight of her had for a while stayed the corruption of his heart because he grew to love her. And then he married Belle by foul means, and the woman rose up in his path again, and he learnt that his wife hated him with all the energy of her passionate heart. Then came degradation after degradation, and the abandonment of principle after principle, replaced only by a fierce craving for respectability and rest, a long, long struggle, which ever ended in new lapses from the right, till at length he saw himself a hardened schemer, remorselessly pursued by a fury from whom there was no escape. And yet he knew that under other circumstances he might have been a good and happy man--leading an honourable life. But now all hope had gone, that which he

was he must be till the end. He leaned his head upon the stone railing in front of him and wept, wept in the anguish of his soul, praying to heaven for deliverance from the burden of his sins, well knowing that he had none to hope for.

For his chance was gone and his fate fixed.