

CHAPTER XVII

THE TIGRESS IN HER DEN

Presently a hansom cab came rattling down the street and pulled up at the door.

"Now for it," said Mr. Quest to himself as he metaphorically shook himself together.

Next minute he heard a voice, which he knew only too well, a loud high voice say from the cab, "Well, open the door, stupid, can't you?"

"Certainly, my lady fair," replied another voice--a coarse, somewhat husky male voice--"adored Edithia, in one moment."

"Come stow that and let me out," replied the adored Edithia sharply; and in another moment a large man in evening clothes, a horrible vulgar, carnal-looking man with red cheeks and a hanging under-lip, emerged into the lamp-light and turned to hand the lady out. As he did so the woman Ellen advanced from the doorway, and going to the cab door whispered something to its occupant.

"Hullo, Johnnie," said the lady, as she descended from the cab, so loudly that Mr. Quest on the balcony could hear every word, "you must be off; Mr. d'Aubigne has turned up, and perhaps he won't think three

good company, so you had just best take this cab back again, my son, and that will save me the trouble of paying it. Come, cut."

"D'Aubigne," growled the flashy man with an oath, "what do I care about d'Aubigne? Advance, d'Aubigne, and all's well! You needn't be jealous of me, I'm----"

"Now stop that noise and be off. He's a lawyer and he might not freeze on to you; don't you understand?"

"Well I'm a lawyer too and a pretty sharp one--/arcades ambo/," said Johnnie with a coarse laugh; "and I tell you what it is, Edith, it ain't good enough to cart a fellow down in this howling wilderness and then send him away without a drink; lend us another fiver at any rate. It ain't good enough, I say."

"Good enough or not you'll have to go and you don't get any fivers out of me to-night. Now pack sharp, or I'll know the reason why," and she pointed towards the cab in a fashion that seemed to cow her companion, for without another word he got into it.

In another moment the cab had turned, and he was gone, muttering curses as he went.

The woman, who was none other than Mrs. d'Aubigne, /alias/ Edith Jones, /alias/ the Tiger, turned and entered the house accompanied by

her servant, Ellen, and presently Mr. Quest heard the rustle of her satin dress upon the stairs. He stepped back into the darkness of the balcony and waited. She opened the door, entered, and closed it behind her, and then, a little dazzled by the light, stood for some seconds looking about for her visitor. She was a thin, tall woman, who might have been any age between forty and fifty, with the wrecks of a very fine agile-looking figure. Her face, which was plentifully bedaubed with paint and powder, was sharp, fierce, and handsome, and crowned with a mane of false yellow hair. Her eyes were cold and blue, her lips thin and rather drawn, so as to show a double line of large and gleaming teeth. She was dressed in a rich and hideous tight-fitting gown of yellow satin, barred with black, and on her arms were long bright yellow gloves. She moved lightly and silently, and looked around her with a long-searching gaze, like that of a cat, and her general appearance conveyed an idea of hunger and wicked ferocity. Such was the outward appearance of the Tiger, and of a truth it justified her name. "Why, where the dickens has he got to?" she said aloud; "I wonder if he has given me the slip?"

"Here I am, Edith," said Mr. Quest quietly, as he stepped from the balcony into the room.

"Oh, there you are, are you?" she said, "hiding away in the dark--just like your nasty mean ways. Well, my long-lost one, so you have come home at last, and brought the tin with you. Well, give us a kiss," and she advanced on him with her long arms outspread.

Mr. Quest shivered visibly, and stretching out his hand, stopped her from coming near him.

"No, thank you," he said; "I don't like paint."

The taunt stopped her, and for a moment an evil light shone in her cold eyes.

"No wonder I have to paint," she said, "when I am so worn out with poverty and hard work--not like the lovely Mrs. Q., who has nothing to do all day except spend the money that I ought to have. I'll tell you what it is, my fine fellow: you had better be careful, or I'll have that pretty cuckoo out of her soft nest, and pluck her borrowed feathers off her, like the monkey did to the parrot."

"Perhaps you had better stop that talk, and come to business. I am in no mood for this sort of thing, Edith," and he turned round, shut the window, and drew the blind.

"Oh, all right; I'm agreeable, I'm sure. Stop a bit, though--I must have a brandy-and-soda first. I am as dry as a lime-kiln, and so would you be if you had to sing comic songs at a music hall for a living. There, that's better," and she put down the empty glass and threw herself on to the sofa. "Now then, tune up as much as you like. How much tin have you brought?"

Mr. Quest sat down by the table, and then, as though suddenly struck by a thought, rose again, and going to the door, opened it and looked out into the passage. There was nobody there, so he shut the door again, locked it, and then under cover of drawing the curtain which hung over it, slipped the key into his pocket.

"What are you at there?" said the woman suspiciously.

"I was just looking to see that Ellen was not at the key-hole, that's all. It would not be the first time that I have caught her there."

"Just like your nasty low ways again," she said. "You've got some game on. I'll be bound that you have got some game on."

Mr. Quest seated himself again, and without taking any notice of this last remark began the conversation.

"I have brought you two hundred and fifty pounds," he said.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds!" she said, jumping up with a savage laugh. "No, my boy, you don't get off for that if I know it. Why, I owe all that at this moment."

"You had better sit down and be quiet," he said, "or you will not get two hundred and fifty pence. In your own interest I recommend you to

sit down."

There was something about the man's voice and manner that scared the female savage before him, fierce as she was, and she sat down.

"Listen," he went on, "you are continually complaining of poverty; I come to your house--your house, mind you, not your rooms, and I find the /debris/ of a card party lying about. I see champagne bottles freshly opened there in the corner. I see a dressing gown on the sofa that must have cost twenty or thirty pounds. I hear some brute associate of yours out in the street asking you to lend him another 'fiver.' You complain of poverty and you have had over four hundred pounds from me this year alone, and I know that you earn twelve pounds a week at the music hall, and not five as you say. No, do not trouble to lie to me, for I have made enquiries."

"Spying again," said the woman with a sneer.

"Yes, spying, if you like; but there it is. And now to the point--I am not going on supplying you with money at this rate. I cannot do it and I will not do it. I am going to give you two hundred and fifty pounds now, and as much every year, and not one farthing more."

Once more she sat up. "You must be mad," she said in a tone that sounded more like a snarl than a human voice. "Are you such a fool as to believe that I will be put off with two hundred and fifty pounds a

year, I, /your legal wife?/ I'll have you in the dock first, in the dock for bigamy."

"Yes," he answered, "I do believe it for a reason that I shall give you presently. But first I want to go through our joint history, very briefly, just to justify myself if you like. Five-and-twenty years ago, or was it six-and-twenty, I was a boy of eighteen and you were a woman of twenty, a housemaid in my mother's house, and you made love to me. Then my mother was called away to nurse my brother who died at school at Portsmouth, and I fell sick with scarlet fever and you nursed me through it--it would have been kinder if you had poisoned me, and in my weak state you got a great hold over my mind, and I became attached to you, for you were handsome in those days. Then you dared me to marry you, and partly out of bravado, partly from affection, I took out a licence, to do which I made a false declaration that I was over age, and gave false names of the parishes in which we resided. Next day, half tipsy and not knowing what I did, I went through the form of marriage with you, and a few days afterwards my mother returned, observed that we were intimate, and dismissed you. You went without a word as to our marriage, which we both looked on as a farce, and for years I lost sight of you. Fifteen years afterwards, when I had almost forgotten this adventure of my youth, I became acquainted with a young lady with whom I fell in love, and whose fortune, though not large, was enough to help me considerably in my profession as a country lawyer, in which I was doing well. I thought that you were dead, or that if you lived, the

fact of my having made the false declaration of age and locality would be enough to invalidate the marriage, as would certainly have been the case if I had also made a false declaration of names; and my impulses and interests prompting me to take the risk, I married that lady. Then it was that you hunted me down, and then for the first time I did what I ought to have done before, and took the best legal opinions as to the validity of the former marriage, which, to my horror, I found was undoubtedly a binding one. You also took opinions and came to the same conclusion. Since then the history has been a simple one. Out of my wife's fortune of ten thousand pounds, I paid you no less than seven thousand as hush money, on your undertaking to leave this country for America, and never return here again. I should have done better to face it out, but I feared to lose my position and practice. You left and wrote to me that you too had married in Chicago, but in eighteen months you returned, having squandered every farthing of the money, when I found that the story of your marriage was an impudent lie."

"Yes," she put in with a laugh, "and a rare time I had with that seven thousand too."

"You returned and demanded more blackmail, and I had no choice but to give, and give, and give. In eleven years you had something over twenty-three thousand pounds from me, and you continually demand more. I believe you will admit that this is a truthful statement of the case," and he paused.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I am not going to dispute that, but what then? I am your wife, and you have committed bigamy; and if you don't go on paying me I'll have you in gaol, and that's all about it, old boy. You can't get out of it any way, you nasty mean brute," she went on, raising her voice and drawing up her thin lips so as to show the white teeth beneath. "So you thought that you were going to play it down low on me in that fashion, did you? Well, you've just made a little mistake for once in your life, and I'll tell you what it is, you shall smart for it. I'll teach you what it is to leave your lawful wife to starve while you go and live with another woman in luxury. You can't help yourself; I can ruin you if I like. Supposing I go to a magistrate and ask for a warrant? What can you do to keep me quiet?"

Suddenly the virago stopped as though she were shot, and her fierce countenance froze into an appearance of terror, as well it might. Mr. Quest, who had been sitting listening to her with his hand over his eyes, had risen, and his face was as the face of a fiend, alight with an intense and quiet fury which seemed to be burning inwardly. On the mantelpiece lay a sharp-pointed Goorka knife, which one of Mrs. d'Aubigne's travelled admirers had presented to her. It was an awful looking weapon, and keen-edged as a razor. This he had taken up and held in his right hand, and with it he was advancing towards her as she lounged on the sofa.

"If you make a sound I will kill you at once," he said, speaking in a low and husky voice.

She had been paralysed with terror, for like most bullies, male and female, she was a great coward, but the sound of his voice roused her. The first note of a harsh screech had already issued from her lips, when he sprang upon her, and placing the sharp point of the knife against her throat, pricked her with it. "Be quiet," he said, "or you are a dead woman."

She stopped screaming and lay there, her face twitching, and her eyes bright with terror.

"Now listen," he said, in the same husky voice. "You incarnate fiend, you asked me just now how I could keep you quiet. I will tell you; I can keep you quiet by running this knife up to the hilt in your throat," and once more he pricked her with its point. "It would be murder," he went on, "but I do not care for that. You and others between you have not made my life so pleasant for me that I am especially anxious to preserve it. Now, listen. I will give you the two hundred and fifty pounds that I have brought, and you shall have the two hundred and fifty a year. But if you ever again attempt to extort more, or if you molest me either by spreading stories against my character or by means of legal prosecution, or in any other way, I swear by the Almighty that I will murder you. I may have to kill myself afterwards--I don't care if I do, provided I kill you first. Do you understand me? you tiger, as you call yourself. If I have to hunt you down, as they do tigers, I will come up with you at last and

/kill/ you. You have driven me to it, and, by heaven! I will! Come, speak up, and tell me that you understand, or I may change my mind and do it now," and once more he touched her with the knife.

She rolled off the sofa on to the floor and lay there, writhing in abject terror, looking in the shadow of the table, where her long lithe form was twisting about in its robe of yellow barred with black, more like one of the great cats from which she took her name than a human being. "Spare me," she gasped, "spare me, I don't want to die. I swear that I will never meddle with you again."

"I don't want your oaths, woman," answered the stern form bending over her with the knife. "A liar you have been from your youth up, and a liar you will be to the end. Do you understand what I have said?"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Ah! put away that knife, I can't bear it! It makes me sick."

"Very well then, get up."

She tried to rise, but her knees would not support her, so she sat upon the floor.

"Now," said Mr. Quest, replacing the knife upon the mantelpiece, "here is your money," and he flung a bag of notes and gold into her lap, at which she clutched eagerly and almost automatically. "The two hundred

and fifty pounds will be paid on the 1st of January in each year, and not one farthing more will you get from me. Remember what I tell you, try to molest me by word or act, and you are a dead woman; I forbid you even to write to me. Now go to the devil in your own way," and without another word he took up his hat and umbrella, walked to the door, unlocked it and went, leaving the Tiger huddled together upon the floor.

For half-an-hour or more the woman remained thus, the bag of money in her hand. Then she struggled to her feet, her face livid and her body shaking.

"Ugh," she said, "I'm as weak as a cat. I thought he meant to do it that time, and he will too, for sixpence. He's got me there. I am afraid to die. I can't bear to die. It is better to lose the money than to die. Besides, if I blow on him he'll be put in chokey and I shan't be able to get anything out of him, and when he comes out he'll do for me." And then, losing her temper, she shook her fist in the air and broke out into a flood of language such as would neither be pretty to hear nor good to repeat.

Mr. Quest was a man of judgment. At last he had realised that in one way, and one only, can a wild beast be tamed, and that is by terror.