

## CHAPTER XVIII

### "WHAT SOME HAVE FOUND SO SWEET"

Time went on. Mr. Quest had been back at Boisingham for ten days or more, and was more cheerful than Belle (we can no longer call her his wife) had seen him for many a day. Indeed he felt as though ten years had been lifted off his back. He had taken a great and terrible decision and had acted upon it, and it had been successful, for he knew that his evil genius was so thoroughly terrified that for a long while at least he would be free from her persecution. But with Belle his relations remained as strained as ever.

Now that the reader is in the secret of Mr. Quest's life, it will perhaps help him to understand the apparent strangeness of his conduct with reference to his wife and Edward Cossey. It is quite true that Belle did not know the full extent of her husband's guilt. She did not know that he was not her husband, but she did know that nearly all of her little fortune had been paid over to another woman, and that woman a common, vulgar woman, as one of Edith's letters which had fallen into her hands by chance very clearly showed her. Therefore, had he attempted to expose her proceedings or even to control her actions, she had in her hand an effective weapon of defence wherewith she could and would have given blow for blow. This state of affairs of necessity forced each party to preserve an armed neutrality towards the other, whilst they waited for a suitable opportunity to assert themselves.

Not that their objects were quite the same. Belle merely wished to be free from her husband, whom she had always disliked, and whom she now positively hated with that curious hatred which women occasionally conceive toward those to whom they are legally bound, when they have been bad enough or unfortunate enough to fall in love with somebody else. He, on the contrary, had that desire for revenge upon her which even the gentler stamp of man is apt to conceive towards one who, herself the object of his strong affection, daily and hourly repels and repays it with scorn and infidelity. He did love her truly; she was the one living thing in all his bitter lonely life to whom his heart had gone out. True, he put pressure on her to marry him, or what comes to the same thing, allowed and encouraged her drunken old father to do so. But he had loved her and still loved her, and yet she mocked at him, and in the face of that fact about the money--her money, which he had paid away to the other woman, a fact which it was impossible for him to explain except by admission of guilt which would be his ruin, what was he to urge to convince her of this, even had she been open to conviction? But it was bitter to him, bitter beyond all conception, to have this, the one joy of his life, snatched from him. He threw himself with ardour into the pursuit after wealth and dignity of position, partly because he had a legitimate desire for these things, and partly to assuage the constant irritation of his mind, but to no purpose. These two spectres of his existence, his tiger wife and the fair woman who was his wife in name, constantly marched side by side before him, blotting out the beauty from every scene and souring the sweetness of every joy. But if in his pain he thirsted for revenge

upon Belle, who would have none of him, how much more did he desire to be avenged upon Edward Cossey, who, as it were, had in sheer wantonness robbed him of the one good thing he had? It made him mad to think that this man, to whom he knew himself to be in every way superior, should have had the power thus to injure him, and he longed to pay him back measure for measure, and through /his/ heart's affections to strike him as mortal a blow as he had himself received.

Mr. Quest was no doubt a bad man; his whole life was a fraud, he was selfish and unscrupulous in his schemes and relentless in their execution, but whatever may have been the measure of his iniquities, he was not doomed to wait for another world to have them meted out to him again. His life, indeed, was full of miseries, the more keenly felt because of the high pitch and capacity of his nature, and perhaps the sharpest of them all was the sickening knowledge that had it not been for that one fatal error of his boyhood, that one false step down the steep of Avernus, he might have been a good and even a great man.

Just now, however, his load was a little lightened, and he was able to devote himself to his money-making and to the weaving of the web that was to destroy his rival, Edward Cossey, with a mind a little less preoccupied with other cares.

Meanwhile, things at the Castle were going very pleasantly for everybody. The Squire was as happy in attending to the various details connected with the transfer of the mortgages as though he had been

lending thirty thousand pounds instead of borrowing them. The great George was happy in the accustomed flow of cash, that enabled him to treat Janter with a lofty scorn not unmingled with pity, which was as balm to his harassed soul, and also to transact an enormous amount of business in his own peculiar way with men up trees and otherwise. For had he not to stock the Moat Farm, and was not Michaelmas at hand?

Ida, too, was happy, happier than she had been since her brother's death, for reasons that have already been hinted at. Besides, Mr. Edward Cossey was out of the way, and that to Ida was a very great thing, for his presence to her was what a policeman is to a ticket-of-leave man--a most unpleasant and suggestive sight. She fully realised the meaning and extent of the bargain into which she had entered to save her father and her house, and there lay upon her the deep shadow of evil that was to come. Every time she saw her father bustling about with his business matters and his parchments, every time the universal George arrived with an air of melancholy satisfaction and a long list of the farming stock and implements he had bought at some neighbouring Michaelmas sale, the shadow deepened, and she heard the clanking of her chains. Therefore she was the more thankful for her respite.

Harold Quaritch was happy too, though in a somewhat restless and peculiar way. Mrs. Jobson (the old lady who attended to his wants at Molehill, with the help of a gardener and a simple village maid, her niece, who smashed all the crockery and nearly drove the Colonel mad by banging the doors, shifting his papers and even dusting his trays

of Roman coins) actually confided to some friends in the village that she thought the poor dear gentleman was going mad. When questioned on what she based this belief, she replied that he would walk up and down the oak-panelled dining-room by the hour together, and then, when he got tired of that exercise, whereby, said Mrs. Jobson, he had already worn a groove in the new Turkey carpet, he would take out a "rokey" (foggy) looking bit of a picture, set it upon a chair and stare at it through his fingers, shaking his head and muttering all the while. Then--further and conclusive proof of a yielding intellect--he would get a half-sheet of paper with some writing on it and put it on the mantelpiece and stare at that. Next he would turn it upside down and stare at it so, then sideways, then all ways, then he would hold it before a looking-glass and stare at the looking-glass, and so on. When asked how she knew all this, she confessed that her niece Jane had seen it through the key-hole, not once but often.

Of course, as the practised and discerning reader will clearly understand, this meant only that when walking and wearing out the carpet the Colonel was thinking of Ida. When contemplating the painting that she had given him, he was admiring her work and trying to reconcile the admiration with his conscience and his somewhat peculiar views of art. And when glaring at the paper, he was vainly endeavouring to make head or tale of the message written to his son on the night before his execution by Sir James de la Molle in the reign of Charles I., confidently believed by Ida to contain a key to the whereabouts of the treasure he was supposed to have secreted.

Of course the tale of this worthy soul, Mrs. Jobson, did not lose in the telling, and when it reached Ida's ears, which it did at last through the medium of George--for in addition to his numberless other functions, George was the sole authorised purveyor of village and county news--it read that Colonel Quaritch had gone raving mad.

Ten minutes afterwards this raving lunatic arrived at the Castle in dress clothes and his right mind, whereon Ida promptly repeated her thrilling history, somewhat to the subsequent discomfort of Mrs. Jobson and Jane.

No one, as somebody once said with equal truth and profundity, knows what a minute may bring forth, much less, therefore, does anybody know what an evening of say two hundred and forty minutes may produce. For instance, Harold Quaritch--though by this time he had gone so far as to freely admit to himself that he was utterly and hopelessly in love with Ida, in love with her with that settled and determined passion which sometimes strikes a man or woman in middle age--certainly did not know that before the evening was out he would have declared his devotion with results that shall be made clear in their decent order.

When he put on his dress clothes to come up to dinner, he had no more intention of proposing to Ida than he had of not taking them off when he went to bed. His love was deep enough and steady enough, but perhaps it did not possess that wild impetuosity which carries people so far in their youth, sometimes indeed a great deal further than

their reason approves. It was essentially a middle-aged devotion, and bore the same resemblance to the picturesque passion of five-and-twenty that a snow-fed torrent does to a navigable river. The one rushes and roars and sweeps away the bridges and devastates happy homes, while the other bears upon its placid breast the argosies of peace and plenty and is generally serviceable to the necessities of man. Still, there is something attractive about torrents. There is a grandeur in that first rush of passion which results from the sudden melting of the snows of the heart's purity and faith and high unstained devotion.

But both torrents and navigable rivers are liable to a common fate, they may fall over precipices, and when this comes to pass even the latter cease to be navigable for a space. Now this catastrophe was about to overtake our friend the Colonel.

Well, Harold Quaritch had dined, and had enjoyed a pleasant as well as a good dinner. The Squire, who of late had been cheerful as a cricket, was in his best form, and told long stories with an infinitesimal point. In anybody else's mouth these stories would have been wearisome to a degree, but there was a gusto, an originality, and a kind of Tudor period flavour about the old gentleman, which made his worst and longest story acceptable in any society. The Colonel himself had also come out in a most unusual way. He possessed a fund of dry humour which he rarely produced, but when he did produce it, it was of a most satisfactory order. On this particular night it was all on view,

greatly to the satisfaction of Ida, who was a witty as well as a clever woman. And so it came to pass that the dinner was a very pleasant one.

Harold and the Squire were still sitting over their wine. The latter was for the fifth time giving his guest a full and particular account of how his deceased aunt, Mrs. Massey, had been persuaded by a learned antiquarian to convert or rather to restore Dead Man's Mount into its supposed primitive condition of an ancient British dwelling, and of the extraordinary expression of her face when the bill came in, when suddenly the servant announced that George was waiting to see him.

The old gentleman grumbled a great deal, but finally got up and went to enjoy himself for the next hour or so in talking about things in general with his retainer, leaving his guest to find his way to the drawing-room.

When the Colonel reached the room, he found Ida seated at the piano, singing. She heard him shut the door, looked round, nodded prettily, and then went on with her singing. He came and sat down on a low chair some two paces from her, placing himself in such a position that he could see her face, which indeed he always found a wonderfully pleasant object of contemplation. Ida was playing without music--the only light in the room was that of a low lamp with a red fringe to it. Therefore, he could not see very much, being with difficulty able to trace the outlines of her features, but if the shadow thus robbed him,



it on the other hand lent her a beauty of its own, clothing her face with an atmosphere of wonderful softness which it did not always possess in the glare of day. The Colonel indeed (we must remember that he was in love and that it was after dinner) became quite poetical (internally of course) about it, and in his heart compared her first to St. Cecilia at her organ, and then to the Angel of the Twilight. He had never seen her look so lovely. At her worst she was a handsome and noble-looking woman, but now the shadow from without, and though he knew nothing of that, the shadow from her heart within also, aided maybe by the music's swell, had softened and purified her face till it did indeed look almost like an angel's. It is strong, powerful faces that are capable of the most tenderness, not the soft and pretty ones, and even in a plain person, when such a face is in this way seen, it gathers a peculiar beauty of its own. But Ida was not a plain person, so on the whole it is scarcely wonderful that a certain effect was produced upon Harold Quaritch. Ida went on singing almost without a break--to outward appearance, at any rate, all unconscious of what was passing in her admirer's mind. She had a good memory and a sweet voice, and really liked music for its own sake, so it was no great effort to her to do so.

Presently, she sang a song from Tennyson's "Maud," the tender and beautiful words whereof will be familiar to most readers of her story. It began:

"O let the solid ground  
Not fail beneath my feet  
Before my life has found  
What some have found so sweet."

The song is a lovely one, nor did it suffer from her rendering, and the effect it produced upon Harold was of a most peculiar nature. All his past life seemed to heave and break beneath the magic of the music and the magic of the singer, as a northern field of ice breaks up beneath the outburst of the summer sun. It broke, sank, and vanished into the depths of his nature, those dread unmeasured depths that roll and murmur in the vastness of each human heart as the sea rolls beneath its cloak of ice; that roll and murmur here, and set towards a shore of which we have no chart or knowledge. The past was gone, the frozen years had melted, and once more the sweet strong air of youth blew across his heart, and once more there was clear sky above, wherein the angels sailed. Before the breath of that sweet song the barrier of self fell down, his being went out to meet her being, and all the sleeping possibilities of life rose from the buried time.

He sat and listened, trembling as he listened, till the gentle echoes of the music died upon the quiet air. They died, and were gathered into the emptiness which receives and records all things, leaving him broken.

She turned to him, smiling faintly, for the song had moved her also, and he felt that he must speak.

"That is a beautiful song," he said; "sing it again if you do not mind."

She made no answer, but once more she sang:

"O let the solid ground  
Not fail beneath my feet  
Before my life has found  
What some have found so sweet;"

and then suddenly broke off.

"Why are you looking at me?" she said. "I can feel you looking at me and it makes me nervous."

He bent towards her and looked her in the eyes.

"I love you, Ida," he said, "I love you with all my heart," and he stopped suddenly.

She turned quite pale, even in that light he could see her pallor, and

her hands fell heavily on the keys.

The echo of the crashing notes rolled round the room and slowly died away--but still she said nothing.