

## CHAPTER XXVI

### BELLE PAYS A VISIT

Mr. Quest got into his dog-cart and drove homewards, full of feelings which it would be difficult to describe.

The hour of his revenge was come. He had played his cards and he had won the game, and fortune with it, for his enemy lay in the hollow of his hand. He looked behind him at the proud towers of the Castle, reflecting as he did so, that in all probability they would belong to him before another year was over his head. At one time he had earnestly longed to possess this place, but now this was not so much the object of his desire. What he wanted now was the money. With thirty thousand pounds in his hand he would, together with what he had, be a rich man, and he had already laid his plans for the future. Of Edith he had heard nothing lately. She was cowed, but he well knew that it was only for a while. By-and-by her rapacity would get the better of her fear and she would recommence her persecutions. This being so, he came to a determination--he would put the world between them. Once let him have this money in his hand and he would start his life afresh in some new country; he was not too old for it, and he would be a rich man, and then perhaps he might get rid of the cares which had rendered so much of his existence valueless. If Belle would go with him, well and good--if not, he could not help it. If she did go, there must be a reconciliation first, for he could not any longer

tolerate the life they lived.

In due course he reached the Oaks and went in. Luncheon was on the table, at which Belle was sitting. She was, as usual, dressed in black, and beautiful to look on; but her round babyish face was pale and pinched, and there were black lines beneath her eyes.

"I did not know that you were coming back to luncheon," she said; "I am afraid there is not much to eat."

"Yes," he said, "I finished my business up at the Castle, so I thought I might as well come home. By-the-by, Belle, I have a bit of news for you."

"What is it?" she asked, looking up sharply, for something in his tone attracted her attention and awoke her fears.

"Your friend, Edward Cossey, is going to be married to Ida de la Molle."

She blanched till she looked like death itself, and put her hands to her heart as though she had been stabbed.

"The Squire told me so himself," he went on, keeping his eyes remorselessly fixed upon her face. She leaned forward and he thought that she was going to faint, but she did not. By a supreme effort she

recovered herself and drank a glass of sherry which was standing by her side.

"I expected it," she said in a low voice.

"You mean that you dreaded it," answered Mr. Quest quietly. He rose and locked the door and then came and stood close to her and spoke.

"Listen, Belle. I know all about your affair with Edward Cossey. I have proofs of it, but I have forborne to use them, because I saw that in the end he would weary of you and desert you for some other woman, and that would be my best revenge upon you. You have all along been nothing but his toy, the light woman with whom he amused his leisure hours."

She put her hands back over her heart but said no word and he went on.

"Belle, I did wrong to marry you when you did not want to marry me, but, being married, you have done wrong to be unfaithful to your vows. I have been rewarded by your infidelity, and your infidelity has been rewarded by desertion. Now I have a proposal to make, and if you are wise you will accept it. Let us set the one wrong against the other; let both be forgotten. Forgive me, and I will forgive you, and let us make peace--if not now, then in a little while, when your heart is not so sore--and go right away from Edward Cossey and Ida de la Molle and Honham and Boisingham, into some new part of the world where we can

begin life again and try to forget the past."

She looked up at him and shook her head mournfully, and twice she tried to speak and twice she failed. The third time her words came.

"You do not understand me," she said. "You are very kind and I am very grateful to you, but you do not understand me. I cannot get over things so easily as I know most women can; what I have done I never can undo. I do not blame him altogether, it was as much or more my fault than his, but having once loved him I cannot go back to you or any other man. If you like I will go on living with you as we live, and I will try to make you comfortable, but I can say no more."

"Think again, Belle," he said almost pleadingly; "I daresay that you have never given me credit for much tenderness of heart, and I know that you have as much against me as I have against you. But I have always loved you, and I love you now, really and truly love you, and I will make you a good husband if you will let me."

"You are very good," she said, "but it cannot be. Get rid of me if you like and marry somebody else. I am ready to take the penalty of what I have done."

"Once more, Belle, I beg you to consider. Do you know what kind of man this is for whom you are giving up your life? Not only has he deserted you, but do you know how he has got hold of Ida de la Molle? He has,

as I know well, /bought/ her. I tell you he has bought her as much as though he had gone into the open market and paid down a price for her. The other day Cossey and Son were going to foreclose upon the Honham estates, which would have ruined the old gentleman. Well, what did your young man do? He went to the girl--who hates him, by the way, and is in love with Colonel Quaritch--and said to her, 'If you will promise to marry me when I ask you, I will find the thirty thousand pounds and take up the mortgages.' And on those terms she agreed to marry him. And now he has got rid of you and he claims her promise. There is the history. I wonder that your pride will bear such a thing. By heaven, I would kill the man."

She looked up at him curiously. "Would you?" she said. "It is not a bad idea. I dare say it is all true. He is worthless. Why does one fall in love with worthless people? Well, there is an end of it; or a beginning of the end. As I have sown, so must I reap;" and she got up, and unlocking the door left the room.

"Yes," he said aloud when she had gone, "there is a beginning of the end. Upon my word, what between one thing and another, unlucky devil as I am, I had rather stand in my own shoes than in Edward Cossey's."

Belle went to her room and sat thinking, or rather brooding, sullenly. Then she put on her bonnet and cloak and started out, taking the road that ran past Honham Castle. She had not gone a hundred yards before she found herself face to face with Edward Cossey himself. He was

coming out of a gunsmith's shop, where he had been ordering some cartridges.

"How do you do, Belle?" he said, colouring and lifting his hat.

"How do you do, Mr. Cossey?" she answered, coming to a stop and looking him straight in the face.

"Where are you going?" he asked, not knowing what to say.

"I am going to walk up to the Castle to call on Miss de la Molle."

"I don't think that you will find her. She is in bed with a headache."

"Oh! So you have been up there this morning?"

"Yes, I had to see the Squire about some business."

"Indeed." Then looking him in the eyes again, "Are you engaged to be married to Ida?"

He coloured once more, he could not prevent himself from doing so.

"No," he answered; "what makes you ask such a question?"

"I don't know," she said, laughing a little; "feminine curiosity I

suppose. I thought that you might be. Good-bye," and she went on, leaving Edward Cossey to the enjoyment of a very peculiar set of sensations.

"What a coward!" said Belle to herself. "He does not even dare to tell me the truth."

Nearly an hour later she arrived at the Castle, and, asking for Ida, was shown into the drawing-room, where she found her sitting with a book in her hand.

Ida rose to greet her in friendly fashion, for the two women, although they were at the opposite poles of character, had a liking for each other. In a way they were both strong, and strength always recognises and respects strength.

"Have you walked up?" asked Ida.

"Yes, I came on the chance of finding you. I want to speak to you."

"Yes," said Ida, "what is it?"

"This. Forgive me, but are you engaged to be married to Edward Cossey?"

Ida looked at her in a slow, stately way, which seemed to ask by what

right she came to question her. At least, so Belle read it.

"I know that I have no right to ask such a question," she said, with humility, "and, of course, you need not answer it, but I have a reason for asking."

"Well," said Ida, "I was requested by Mr. Cossey to keep the matter secret, but he appears to have divulged it. Yes, I am engaged to be married to him."

Belle's beautiful face turned a shade paler, if that was possible, and her eyes hardened.

"Do you wonder why I ask you this?" she said. "I will tell you, though probably when I have done so you will never speak to me again. I am Edward Cossey's discarded mistress," and she laughed bitterly enough.

Ida shrank a little and coloured, as a pure and high-minded woman naturally does when she is for the first time suddenly brought into actual contact with impurity and passion.

"I know," went on Belle, "that I must seem a shameful thing to you; but, Miss de la Molle, good and cold and stately as you are, pray God that you may never be thrown into temptation; pray God that you may never be married almost by force to a man whom you hate, and then suddenly learn what a thing it is to fall in love, and for the first



time feel your life awake."

"Hush," said Ida gently, "what right have I to judge you?"

"I loved him," went on Belle, "I loved him passionately, and for a while it was as though heaven had opened its gates, for he used to care for me a little, and I think he would have taken me away and married me afterwards, but I would not hear of it, because I knew that it would ruin him. He offered to, once, and I refused, and within three hours of that I believe he was bargaining for you. Well, and then it was the old story, he fell more and more in love with you and of course I had no hold upon him."

"Yes," said Ida, moving impatiently, "but why do you tell me all this? It is very painful and I had rather not hear it."

"Why do I tell you? I tell you because I do not wish you to marry Edward Cossey. I tell you because I wish /him/ to feel a little of what /I/ have to feel, and because I have said that he should /not/ marry you."

"I wish that you could prevent it," said Ida, with a sudden outburst.

"I am sure you are quite welcome to Mr. Cossey so far as I am concerned, for I detest him, and I cannot imagine how any woman could ever have done otherwise."

"Thank you," said Belle; "but I have done with Mr. Cossey, and I think I hate him too. I know that I did hate him when I met him in the street just now and he told me that he was not engaged to you. You say that you detest him, why then do you marry him--you are a free woman?"

"Do you want to know?" said Ida, wheeling round and looking her visitor full in the face. "I am going to marry him for the same reason that you say caused you to marry--because I /must/. I am going to marry him because he lent us money on condition that I promised to marry him, and as I have taken the money, I must give him his price, even if it breaks my heart. You think that you are wretched; how do you know that I am not fifty times as wretched? Your lot is to lose your lover, mine is to have one forced upon me and endure him all my life. The worst of your pain is over, all mine is to come."

"Why? why?" broke in Belle. "What is such a promise as that? He cannot force you to marry him, and it is better for a woman to die than to marry a man she hates, especially," she added meaningly, "if she happens to care for somebody else. Be advised by me, I know what it is."

"Yes," said Ida, "perhaps it is better to die, but death is not so easy. As for the promise, you do not seem to understand that no gentleman or lady can break a promise in consideration of which money has been received. Whatever he has done, and whatever he is, I /must/ marry Mr. Cossey, so I do not think that we need discuss the subject

any more."

Belle sat silent for a minute or more, and then rising said that she must go. "I have warned you," she added, "although to warn you I am forced to put myself at your mercy. You can tell the story and destroy me if you like. I do not much care if you do. Women such as I grow reckless."

"You must understand me very little, Mrs. Quest" (it had always been Belle before, and she winced at the changed name), "if you think me capable of such conduct. You have nothing to fear from me."

She held out her hand, but in her humility and shame, Belle went without taking it, and through the angry sunset light walked slowly back to Boisingham. And as she walked there was a look upon her face that Edward Cossey would scarcely have cared to see.