

CHAPTER XXXVII

SISTER AGNES

Ten days had passed. The tragedy had echoed through all the land. Numberless articles and paragraphs had been written in numberless papers, and numberless theories had been built upon them. But the echoes were already beginning to die away. Both actors in the dim event were dead, and there was no pending trial to keep the public interest alive.

The two corpses, still linked in that fierce dying grip, had been picked up on a mudbank. An inquest had been held, at which an open verdict was returned, and they were buried. Other events had occurred, the papers were filled with the reports of new tragedies, and the affair of the country lawyer who committed bigamy and together with his lawful wife came to a tragic and mysterious end began to be forgotten.

In Boisingham and its neighbourhood much sympathy was shown with Belle, whom people still called Mrs. Quest, though she had no title to that name. But she received it coldly and kept herself secluded.

As soon as her supposed husband's death was beyond a doubt Belle had opened his safe (for he had left the keys on his dressing-table), and found therein his will and other papers, including the mortgage deeds,

to which, as Mr. Quest's memorandum advised her, she had no claim. Nor, indeed, had her right to them been good in law, would she have retained them, seeing that they were a price wrung from her late lover under threat of an action that could not be brought.

So she made them into a parcel and sent them to Edward Cossey, together with a formal note of explanation, greatly wondering in her heart what course he would take with reference to them. She was not left long in doubt. The receipt of the deeds was acknowledged, and three days afterwards she heard that a notice calling in the borrowed money had been served upon Mr. de la Molle on behalf of Edward Cossey.

So he had evidently made up his mind not to forego this new advantage which chance threw in his way. Pressure and pressure alone could enable him to attain his end, and he was applying it unmercifully. Well, she had done with him now, it did not matter to her; but she could not help faintly wondering at the extraordinary tenacity and hardness of purpose which his action showed. Then she turned her mind to the consideration of another matter, in connection with which her plans were approaching maturity.

It was some days after this, exactly a fortnight from the date of Mr. Quest's death, that Edward Cossey was sitting one afternoon brooding over the fire in his rooms. He had much business awaiting his attention in London, but he would not go to London. He could not tear himself away from Boisingham, and such of the matters as could be

attended to there were left without attention. He was still as determined as ever to marry Ida, more determined if possible, for from constant brooding on the matter he had arrived at a condition approaching monomania. He had been quick to see the advantage resulting to him from Mr. Quest's tragic death and the return of the deeds, and though he knew that Ida would hate him the more for doing it, he instructed his lawyers to call in the money and make use of every possible legal means to harass and put pressure upon Mr. de la Molle. At the same time he had written privately to the Squire, calling his attention to the fact that matters were now once more as they had been at the beginning, but that he was as before willing to carry out the arrangements which he had already specified, provided that Ida could be persuaded to consent to marry him. To this Mr. de la Molle had answered courteously enough, notwithstanding his grief and irritation at the course his would-be son-in-law had taken about the mortgages on the death of Mr. Quest, and the suspicion (it was nothing more) that he now had as to the original cause of their transfer to the lawyer. He said what he had said before, that he could not force his daughter into a marriage with him, but that if she chose to agree to it he should offer no objection. And there the matter stood. Once or twice Edward had met Ida walking or driving. She bowed to him coldly and that was all. Indeed he had only one crumb of comfort in his daily bread of disappointment, and the hope deferred which, where a lady is concerned, makes the heart more than normally sick, and it was that he knew his hated rival, Colonel Quaritch, had been forbidden the Castle, and that intercourse between him and Ida was practically

at an end.

But he was a dogged and persevering man; he knew the power of money and the shifts to which people can be driven who are made desperate by the want of it. He knew, too, that it is no rare thing for women who are attached to one man to sell themselves to another of their own free will, realising that love may pass, but wealth (if the settlements are properly drawn) does not. Therefore he still hoped that with so many circumstances bringing an ever-increasing pressure upon her, Ida's spirit would in time be broken, her resistance would collapse, and he would have his will. Nor, as the sequel will show, was that hope a baseless one.

As for his infatuation there was literally no limit to it. It broke out in all sorts of ways, and for miles round was a matter of public notoriety and gossip. Over the mantelpiece in his sitting-room was a fresh example of it. By one means and another he had obtained several photographs of Ida, notably one of her in a court dress which she had worn two or three years before, when her brother James had insisted upon her being presented. These photographs he caused to be enlarged and then, at the cost of 500 pounds, commissioned a well-known artist to paint from them a full-length life-size portrait of Ida in her court dress. This order had been executed, and the portrait, which although the colouring was not entirely satisfactory was still an effective likeness and a fine piece of work, now hung in a splendid frame over his mantelpiece.

There, on the afternoon in question, he sat before the fire, his eyes fixed upon the portrait, of which the outline was beginning to grow dim in the waning December light, when the servant girl came in and announced that a lady wished to speak to him. He asked what her name was, and the girl said that she did not know, because she had her veil down and was wrapped up in a big cloak.

In due course the lady was shown up. He had relapsed into his reverie, for nothing seemed to interest him much now unless it had to do with Ida--and he knew that the lady could not be Ida, because the girl said that she was short. As it happened, he sat with his right ear, in which he was deaf, towards the door, so that between his infirmity and his dreams he never heard Belle--for it was she--enter the room.

For a minute or more she stood looking at him as he sat with his eyes fixed upon the picture, and while she looked an expression of pity stole across her sweet pale face.

"I wonder what curse there is laid upon us that we should be always doomed to seek what we cannot find?" she said aloud.

He heard her now, and looking up saw her standing in the glow and flicker of the firelight, which played upon her white face and black-draped form. He started violently; as he did so she loosed the heavy cloak and hood that she wore and it fell behind her. But where was the

lovely rounded form, and where the clustering golden curls? Gone, and in their place a coarse robe of blue serge, on which hung a crucifix, and the white hood of the nun.

He sprang from his chair with an exclamation, not knowing if he dreamed or if he really saw the woman who stood there like a ghost in the firelight.

"Forgive me, Edward," she said presently, in her sweet low voice. "I daresay that this all looks theatrical enough--but I have put on this dress for two reasons: firstly, because I must leave this town in an hour's time and wish to do so unknown; and secondly, to show that you need not fear that I have come to be troublesome. Will you light the candles?"

He did so mechanically, and then pulled down the blinds. Meanwhile Belle had seated herself near the table, her face buried in her hands.

"What is the meaning of all this, Belle?" he said.

"Sister Agnes,' you must call me now," she said, taking her hands from her face. "The meaning of it is that I have left the world and entered a sisterhood which works among the poor in London, and I have come to bid you farewell, a last farewell."

He stared at her in amazement. He did not find it easy to connect the

idea of this beautiful, human, loving creature with the cold sanctuary of a sisterhood. He did not know that natures like this, whose very intensity is often the cause of their destruction, are most capable of these strange developments. The man or woman who can really love and endure--and they are rare--can also, when their passion has utterly broken them, turn to climb the stony paths that lead to love's antipodes.

"Edward," she went on, speaking very slowly, "you know in what relation we have stood to each other, and what that relationship means to woman. You know this--I have loved you with all my heart, and all my strength, and all my soul----" Here she trembled and broke down.

"You know, too," she continued presently, "what has been the end of all this, the shameful end. I am not come to blame you. I do not blame you, for the fault was mine, and if I have anything to forgive I forgive it freely. Whatever memories may still live in my heart I swear I put away all bitterness, and that my most earnest wish is that you may be happy, as happiness is to you. The sin was mine; that is it would have been mine were we free agents, which perhaps we are not. I should have loved my husband, or rather the man whom I thought my husband, for with all his faults he was of a different clay to you, Edward."

He looked up, but said nothing.

"I know," she went on, pointing to the picture over the mantelpiece, "that your mind is still set upon her, and I am nothing, and less than nothing, to you. When I am gone you will scarcely give me a thought. I cannot tell you if you will succeed in your end, and I think the methods you are adopting wicked and shameful. But whether you succeed or not, your fate also will be what my fate is--to love a person who is not only indifferent to you but who positively dislikes you, and reserves all her secret heart for another man, and I know no greater penalty than is to be found in that daily misery."

"You are very consoling," he said sulkily.

"I only tell you the truth," she answered. "What sort of life do you suppose mine has been when I am so utterly broken, so entirely robbed of hope, that I have determined to leave the world and hide myself and my shame in a sisterhood? And now, Edward," she went on, after a pause, "I have something to tell you, for I will not go away, if indeed you allow me to go away at all after you have heard it, until I have confessed." And she leant forward and looked him full in the face, whispering--"/I shot you on purpose, Edward!/"

"What!" he said, springing from his chair; "you tried to murder me?"

"Yes, yes; but don't think too hardly of me. I am only flesh and blood, and you drove me wild with jealousy--you taunted me with having been your mistress and said that I was not fit to associate with the

lady whom you were going to marry. It made me mad, and the opportunity offered--the gun was there, and I shot you. God forgive me, I think that I have suffered more than you did. Oh! when day after day I saw you lying there and did not know if you would live or die, I thought that I should have gone mad with remorse and agony!"

He listened so far, and then suddenly walked across the room towards the bell. She placed herself between him and it.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"Going to do? I am going to send for a policeman and give you into custody for attempted murder, that is all."

She caught his arm and looked him in the face. In another second she had loosed it.

"Of course," she said, "you have a right to do that. Ring and send for the policeman, only remember that nothing is known now, but the whole truth will come out at the trial."

This checked him, and he stood thinking.

"Well," she said, "why don't you ring?"

"I do not ring," he answered, "because on the whole I think I had

better let you go. I do not wish to be mixed up with you any more. You have done me mischief enough; you have finished by attempting to murder me. Go; I think that a convent is the best place for you; you are too bad and too dangerous to be left at large."

"/Oh!/" she said, like one in pain. "/Oh!/" and you are the man for whom I have come to this! Oh, God! it is a cruel world." And she pressed her hands to her heart and stumbled rather than walked to the door.

Reaching it she turned, and her hands still pressing the coarse blue gown against her heart, she leaned against the door.

"Edward," she said, in a strained whisper, for her breath came thick, "Edward--I am going for ever--have you /no/ kind word--to say to me?"

He looked at her, a scowl upon his handsome face. Then by way of answer he turned upon his heel.

And so, still holding her hands against her poor broken heart, she went out of the house, out of Boisingham and of touch and knowledge of the world. In after years these two were fated to meet once again, and under circumstances sufficiently tragic; but the story of that meeting does not lie within the scope of this history. To the world Belle is

dead, but there is another world of sickness, and sordid unchanging misery and shame, where the lovely face of Sister Agnes moves to and fro like a ray of heaven's own light. There those who would know her must go to seek her.

Poor Belle! Poor shamed, deserted woman! She was an evil-doer, and the fatality of love and the unbalanced vigour of her mind, which might, had she been more happily placed, have led her to all things that are pure, and true, and of good report, combined to drag her into shame and wretchedness. But the evil that she did was paid back to her in full measure, pressed down and running over. Few of us need to wait for a place of punishment to get the due of our follies and our sins.

/Here/ we expiate them. They are with us day and night, about our path and about our bed, scourging us with the whips of memory, mocking us with empty longing and the hopelessness of despair. Who can escape the consequence of sin, or even of the misfortune which led to sin?

Certainly Belle did not, nor Mr. Quest, nor even that fierce-hearted harpy who hunted him to his grave.

And so good-bye to Belle. May she find peace in its season!