

proper way."

"Indeed," said Mr. Quest, "I am very glad to hear it."

"Yes, yes," said the squire, "unfortunately, I am under some restraints in speaking about the matter at present, or I should like to ask your opinion, for which, as you know, I have a great respect. Really, though, I do not know why I should not consult my lawyer on a matter of business; I only consented not to trumpet the thing about."

"Lawyers are confidential agents," said Mr. Quest, quietly.

"Of course they are. Of course, and it is their business to hold their tongues. I may rely upon your discretion, may I not?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, the matter is this: Mr. Edward Cossey is engaged to Miss de la Mole. He has just been here to obtain my consent, which, of course, I have not withheld, as I know nothing against the young man—nothing at all. The only stipulation that he made is, I think, a reasonable one under the circumstances, namely, that the engagement is to be kept quiet for a little while on account of the condition of his father's health. He says that he is an unreasonable man, and that he might take a prejudice against it."

During the announcement Mr. Quest had remained perfectly quiet, his face showing no signs of excitement, only his eyes shone with a curious light.

"Indeed," he said, "this is very interesting news."

"Yes," said the squire. "That is what I meant by saying that there would be no necessity to make any arrangements for the future payment of interest, for Cossey has informed me that he proposes to put the mortgage bonds in the fire before his marriage."

"Indeed," said Mr. Quest, "well, he could hardly do less, could he? Altogether, I think you ought to be congratulated, Mr. de la Mole. It is not often that a man gets such a chance of clearing the incumbrances off a property. And now I am very sorry, but I must be getting home, as I promised my wife to be back for luncheon. As the thing is to be kept quiet, I suppose that it would be premature for me to offer my congratulations to Miss de la Mole."

"Yes, yes, don't say anything about it at present. Well, good-by."

CHAPTER XXV.

BELLE PAYS A VISIT.

Mr. Quest got into his dog cart and drove homeward, 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, and 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 £30,000 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 the Tiger 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 life 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 way, 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 Mole."

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 looked 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 forbore 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 never a 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 to you, 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 Mole 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, and 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 dare say 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 a 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 Mole? 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 & 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 Col. 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. That 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 to it, or a beginning of the end. As I have sworn, 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, coloring 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 Mole."

"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 colored again, 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-by," and she went on, leaving Edward Cossey to the enjoyment of a very peculiar set of sensations.



"Good-by," and she went on.

"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 reading.

Ida rose to greet her, not without warmth, for the two women, although they were at the opposite poles of character, had a friendly feeling for each other.

In a way they were both strong, and strength always recognizes and respects strength.

"Have you walked up?" asked Ida.

"Yes, I came on the chance of finding you. I wanted 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 kind of 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 shrunk a little and colored, 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, Ida, 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 know 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 little 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 afterward, but I would not hear of it, because I knew it would ruin him. He offered to once, and I refused, and within three hours of that I believe that 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 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 that condition 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 have to marry a man she hates, especially," she added, meaningly, "if she happens to love another man. 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 have had 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, get reckless."

"You must understand me very little, Mrs. Quest" (it had always been Belle before, and she winced at the change of 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.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. QUEST HAS HIS INNINGS.

All that afternoon and far into the evening Mr. Quest was employed in drafting, and with his own hand engrossing on parchment certain deeds, to the proper execution of which he seemed to find constant reference necessary to a tin box of papers labeled "Honham Castle Estates."

By 11 that night everything was finished, and, having carefully collected and docketed his papers, he put the tin box away and went home to bed.

Next morning, about 10 o'clock, Edward Cossey was sitting at breakfast in no happy frame of mind. He had gone up to the castle to dinner on the previous evening, but it cannot be said that he had enjoyed himself. Ida was there, looking very handsome in her evening dress, but she was cold as a stone and unapproachable as a statue. She scarcely spoke to him, indeed, except in answer to some direct remark, reserving all her conversation for her father, who seemed to have caught the contagion of restraint, and was, for him, unusually silent and depressed.

But once or twice he found her looking at him, and then there was upon her face a mingled expression of contempt and irrepressible aversion which chilled him to the marrow.

These qualities toward him were indeed so much more plainly developed than they had been before, that at last a conviction which he had at first rejected as incredible, forced itself into his mind. That conviction was, that Belle must have disbelieved his denial of the engagement, and in her eagerness for revenge have told Ida the whole story. The thought made him feel faint, but there was but one thing to be done, and that was to face it out. Once when the squire's back was turned he ventured to attempt some little tenderness in which the word "dear" occurred, but Ida did not seem to hear it, and looked straight over his head into space, and this he felt was trying. So trying did he find the whole entertainment indeed, that