

SWEET IS REVENGE.

By J. Fitzgerald Molloy.

Author of "How Came He Dead?" "That Villain Romeo." "A Modern Magician," &c.

[NOW FIRST PUBLISHED. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

CHAPTER I.—SO FAIR A FACE.

For upwards of twenty years Sir Danvers Fothergill had remained a widower. His wife whom he loved with all the ardour of his youth, died after a brief twelve months of married life on giving birth to a daughter, leaving her young husband a desolate and broken-hearted man. Placing the infant in charge of relatives he shut up Fothergill abbey and remained abroad many years.

On his return the county prepared to welcome him, and having his interests at heart decided he must marry forthwith. Sir Danvers received his neighbours' greetings cordially, but declined the matrimonial arrangements made by many manoeuvring mothers. In vain, young ladies fresh from school blushed in their most becoming manner when he addressed them, entirely agreed with the opinions he expressed, completely conformed to such tastes as he was supposed to possess. In vain did their more advanced sisters confide in him their interests in village schools, parochial charities, the suffering poor. His purse was ever open to their demands but his heart remained closed to their charms. Widows more experienced in the management of mankind wooed him with tender looks, gentle smiles, and caressing words, and to them as to all their sex he was gallant, courteous, and attentive; but the words they longed to hear never fell from his lips.

Sir Danvers had the reputation of being one of the handsomest men in the county. His clean-shaven face was fresh in colour, his features strongly yet delicately moulded; the nose slightly aquiline, the mouth firm, the head well set on the rounded throat; whilst in figure he was tall, broad-shouldered, and erect, bearing the weight of his six and forty years lightly. Save for the grey tufts in his rich brown hair just above the temples, and a certain grave look dwelling in his dark blue eyes, one might have thought life had passed lightly as a summer day for the baronet.

Amongst the few neighbours with whom he associated was the Rev. Charles Harrow, an old and intimate college friend, to whom he had presented a snug living. The rectory, with its high-pitched roof, jutting windows, and quaint gables, was situated within the park; its old-fashioned garden being merely divided by thick hedges of laurel and arbutus from the wide-spreading, well-timbered space beyond. Unconsciously in his ways, it was Sir Danvers' custom to look in at the rectory whenever he found himself in his neighbourhood, chat with the rector, drink tea with plump and pretty Mrs. Harrow, and listen to the children's prattle.

Leisurely and thoughtlessly, as a man who goes unconsciously to his fate, the baronet strolled through the park, one afternoon in early May, with the intention of visiting the Harrows. Spring had donned her brightest robe, and sunshine filled the world with joy. Here and there the fallow deer lay in placid contentment enjoying the shade of oak and elm, flowering chestnut and wide branching sycamores. Green glades, bordered by beech and maple, stretched to right and left: the glassy surface of a lake reflected the azure sky; whilst away in the distance stretched the dusty high road leading towards the old world village of Hayton.

As Sir Danvers continued his walk the music of laughter fell on his ears, and looking up he saw the rectory children, who on catching a glimpse of him set forward on a race of which he was the goal: a girl of ten with flying yellow hair and round rosy cheeks leading, a boy of nine in a sailor suit following, a lad of seven summers bringing up the rear. The girl flung herself into the baronet's open arms, the boy stood panting in front of him, the juvenile slipped and tumbled within a yard of him.

"Oh, Sir Danvers," cried the girl, when she had recovered sufficed breath to speak, "our new governess has come, and she's not a bit cross and we like her, me and Freddy are to learn Latin, you know; we began today, but I don't know much yet."

"And she taught me the globes," said Freddy, "cause I'm going to be a sailor, and go to China and no end of places; but May must stay at home 'cause she's not a boy."

"I don't want to be. Oh, do you know, Harold cut the head off the juggler you gave him last week, but Miss Fayne stuck it on again; you see she's very clever; and ma said we might take her through the park to see the abbey: the outside you know; we weren't to go in; and there she is," continued May, pointing in front of her.

Sir Danvers' eyes followed the direction indicated by a couple of fingers thrust through the rents in a cotton glove and saw a tall, slight figure advancing under the lines. He was struck by the round outline and delicate curves of her figure, and the ease and grace with which she moved. Advancing towards her he raised his hat and bowed.

"This is Sir Danvers that I told you all about, I'm sure you'll like him," May said, linking her arm within one of her governess's.

"It appears I have been introduced already," he remarked.

"Yes," responded Freddy, sagely. "Her name is Ethel, I know 'cause she told me; but ma says we're to call her Miss Fayne, but when I grow up like you, Sir Danvers, I'll call her Ethel then."

"I trust, Sir Danvers, we are not intruding," the governess said. "They were the first words he heard her speak, and the sweetness of her voice struck him."

"Not at all. I hope you will come here whenever you please," he answered.

"We do," said May, proud of the privilege which made her free of the park at all times, "but we never go near the Abbey, mother says we mustn't; but today, Sir Danvers, we thought you were not at home, and mother said we might show it to Miss Fayne."

"If Miss Fayne will allow me I shall be happy to show it to her," he replied.

"You are most kind, but I couldn't think of troubling you," she answered, and once more her voice fell as music on his

"It will be no trouble," he said, moving forward; "and my time is quite at your disposal," he added, with the inbred courtesy he ever paid to women.

"I have heard a great deal of the abbey since I came to the rectory; it's very old, I suppose?"

"One of the most ancient in England. It was given by Henry VIII. to an ancestor of mine who held the adjoining property, and we have lived and died in the abbey ever since."

At that instant the bough of a tree under which they passed caught her hat and held it suspended in mid-air as she moved forward. The children shouted with laughter, and Freddy jumped up to catch it. As the baronet handed it to her his eyes rested on her face, noting the soft masses of chestnut hair, rippling in waves from the full, square forehead, the eyes so dark a grey as to seem violet under the shade of their long lashes, the straight nose, with its delicately curved nostrils, the small, full mouth, and clear, pale complexion.

Suddenly he was roused by the children who, having run forward, now stood where the path swerved to the right. "Come on, Miss Fayne, and you'll see the abbey from here," they called.

The wide sweep of turf in front was almost clear of timber, and the massive old building, approached by broad terraces and backed by pine woods, rose before them in stately and impressive grandeur.

"So that is the abbey, and this is its master beside me," the governess thought; aloud she added, "It is a grand old place."

"Monks always knew how and where to build," Sir Danvers replied; "but won't you come and see the interior?"

"Oh do, Miss Fayne," cried May, "and you will see the tankard out of which Queen Elizabeth drank ale when she breakfasted at the abbey, and the gloves Charles I. wore at his execution, and lots of things that will help you to remember history."

"You can't resist such an appeal," said the baronet, and without remonstrance on her part they moved forward.

"Surely that was the chapel," she remarked, as they approached a wing having a rose window half filled with colored glass.

"Yes," he replied, "but it was made into a ball-room; and his thoughts went back to the last time he had seen it, brilliant with lights and flowers, jubilant with music and roses, and thronged with happy faces, one of which was ever turned to his. It seemed but yesterday, and yet more than twenty years had passed since then, during which love had never overcome his loyalty to the dead. "It has not been opened for many a year," he said, and his hearer's quick ear noted a change in his tones.

He led them into the great hall, oak panelled and hung with armour and antique weapons, showed them the vast dining-room, once the refectory of the monks; escorted them through the picture gallery, hung with family portraits; and the famous tapestry suite which Queen Bess had occupied. Miss Fayne looked with interest at the stately apartments and the wealth of historical mementoes they contained, thinking how proud might be the mistress of the abbey, how happily some women might dwell in this peaceful home, shut in from the world and its cruel ways, from life and its manifold cares, its bitter heartaches, its sad deceptions.

The children impressed by their surroundings behaved as if in church, holding each other by the hand, exchanging opinions in subdued whispers, walking softly on the polished floors and rich carpets whilst the governess and Sir Danvers followed, learning something of each other from a conversation that touched on their tastes in literature and painting, their favorite pursuits, their opinions on topics of the day.

When he had conducted them through the principal apartments, passing the closed ball-room and that one suite of rooms which he had not entered for over twenty years, he led them into the garden and through the park, expressing his regrets to Miss Fayne as they parted, that his daughter was not at home to receive her.

The next evening he was to dine informally at the rectory, and he wondered as he approached the house if he should meet Miss Fayne at dinner. Former governesses, he remembered, did not dine with the rector and his wife, but a different rule might be made in favor of the new-comer. On entering the drawing-room he cast a hurried glance around, but she was not visible. His hostess, plump, florid, and kindly, advanced to meet him, followed by her husband, a robust, thick-limbed, jovial man with a round face and a pleasant voice, whose knowledge of theology was scant, but whose love of life was strong.

The only individual who sat down to dinner with Sir Danvers and his hosts was Mr. Sympington, a tall, thin young curate, with straw-colored hair and a Roman collar, upon whose pallid face there ever hovered a melancholy smirk, described by his admirers as a saintly smile. The dinner was excellent, for the rector had a capital cook, and was a special judge of wine; but to the baronet the meal seemed tedious, and his hostess's prattle concerning her neighbors' affairs unusually tiresome. It was a relief when she withdrew, but his patience had still to undergo an ordeal.

"These last cigars you sent me are splendid," the rector said to Sir Danvers. "You must have one. I know you don't smoke, Sympington," he added, addressing the curate.

"Thanks, no; it's a habit I have never acquired."

"Indeed; then help yourself to some port and pass the decanter this way."

The curate obeyed. A little self-indulgence was occasionally allowable, he argued; and it was not every day one tasted such wine.

"You are not afraid to drink port after champagne, Fothergill?"

"Not in the least."

"That's right, may you ever remain so; ours are constitutions which defy dyspepsia; right British constitutions, I say."

"None like them."

"I shall miss you dreadfully whilst you are abroad. I hope you don't intend remaining long away."

"I'm not quite certain that I'll go: fact is, I haven't yet decided," replied the baronet, somewhat uneasily.

"Oh, I thought it was quite fixed. I shall be delighted if you remain at home, Fothergill; the continent has no novelty for you."

"No; it was for Meg's sake I intended going. But I suppose I'm fonder of the old place than I believed; at all events, I don't like leaving it even for a short time," he remarked, unwilling to admit, even to himself, that it was a woman's face which had altered his plans.

"I'm right glad to hear it," replied the rector; "for where can a man be more comfortable than in his own home. We're always searching for comfort from the cradle to the grave, and when a man has found it he should show his gratitude by sticking to it, say I; and that's the moral of my discourse."

"Excellent in its way," remarked the curate, mildly.

"By the way, have you seen the horse Curtin bought the other day," the rector asked, and the conversation dwelt on horseflesh until a servant announced that coffee was served in the drawing-room, upon which hint they rose. As Sir Danvers entered he looked round eagerly, and this time was not disappointed, for there was Miss Fayne sitting beside the rector's wife.

"You have already met," said the latter, sweeping aside her skirts to make room for him on the sofa, after Sir Danvers had shaken hands with the governess. "The dear children told me you were good enough to take them over the abbey."

"The children," he replied, as if forgetful of their existence, "ah, yes, of course."

"I know you are fond of music, Sir Danvers, and I'm sure Miss Fayne will oblige us presently; she sings and plays charmingly."

"I should much like to hear her," he replied, turning round to see the governess talking to Mr. Sympington, who seemed flattered and delighted, whilst the rector sat in a comfortable arm chair, indulging, as was his custom after dinner, in a nap.

"Miss Fayne, will you sing us one of your delightful songs?" Mrs. Harrow asked, heedless of interrupting the curate in the midst of a sentence descriptive of a ritualistic service he had recently witnessed in the church of St. Barebones, Kensington.

"With pleasure," she answered, rising, and going to the piano. Selecting a song from the pile of music Mr. Sympington offered her, she played the opening bars apparently heedless of the rector's heavy breathing, which momentarily threatened to develop into a snore.

Sir Danvers watched her movements closely, noticed the red undertints of her chestnut hair as the candle light fell upon it, the delicate curve of her neck, the graceful slope of her shoulders, listening meanwhile to her contralto voice, flexible, cultured, full of tenderness and sweet as the nightingale's own.

"As rain that falls upon the earth, My heart has sorrow known."

She sang, and so fervid was her expression, so plaintive her voice, that he wondered were it possible her young life had really known shadow or pain.

The rectory drawing-room with its mellow shaded lamps, its pictures, bronzes, and objects of art, its flowers making bright spots of color on tables and brackets, its French windows opening on the garden admitting its perfumes of narcissus and magnolia, and giving a glimpse of an azure sky with its throbbing stars, all seemed a picture of which Ethel Fayne was the central figure. Never for long years to come did the baronet enshrine the odor of the star-let and narcissus, or gaze at the star-let sky, without remembering this first evening he spent in her company, without hearing the thrilling tones of her voice.

As she rose from the piano, he went forward and thanked her, and some look in her eyes, half wistful, half sad, puzzled him, and set him speculating regarding her inner life: that other existence unknown to the world, unsuspected by our nearest and dearest, in which we dwell.

"Thank you, Miss Fayne, yours is a great gift," he said gallantly.

"You are fond of music, Sir Danvers?"

"Extremely," he replied sitting down beside her, but here one seldom has an opportunity of hearing it with pleasure."

"It requires study," she remarked.

"More than that, it needs feeling—such as you have thrown into your words just now."

"Have I?" she asked, as if startled; "it was quite unconsciously, I assure you," she added, hastily.

"But the expression was there all the same, and one must feel before one can express," he said.

The governess looked down, but not before he noted the trouble in her eyes and saw the color quickly mount to her cheeks.

"I suppose so," she answered. "All of us have our burdens to bear."

Her last words, uttered in a low tone, touched the baronet; all the chivalry of his nature was stirred, and a fierce longing to defend this girl from pain, to shield her from misery, rose up in his heart.

"Miss Fayne, if it is not too much trouble, will you play us something from Beethoven?" said Mrs. Harrow, casting a threatening glance at the sleeping rector.

Beethoven's tender strains seemed to the baronet like the voice of the player; they filled his heart and moved it to its depths. When the music ceased he rose, for after this he could not endure a prosy discourse with Mrs. Harrow on the talents of her children or the scandals of her neighbors; nor could he bear to hear further details of the rector's quarrel with farmer Oldridge, or prophecies regarding the upland hay.

"Going so soon, Sir Danvers?" cried the hostess, making a rush towards the sleeping figure of her spouse and shaking him with all her force. "I declare it's shameful," she said, in a tone of suppressed anger; "you grow worse and worse every day."

"What is it, my dear?—don't pinch so hard—oh, Fothergill is going," the rector muttered as he rose, pulled down his waistcoat, and settled his cravat. "Don't leave yet, and we'll have a game of cribbage in the study—no—well come and have a cigar in my den?"

"Not to-night," replied Sir Danvers.

"I have had a delightful evening, Mrs. Harrow; thank you for your music, Miss Fayne; good night, Sympington."

The rector saw him to the door and shook him heartily by the hand. "Good night, Fothergill, and I'm decidedly glad you're not going away," he said.

Sir Danvers passed through the little garden and into the park, relieved at being alone with his thoughts, which had slipped from their usual groove tonight, and rushed forward into strange channels. The solemn, starlight above, the wide parklands around, silent save for the light tread of a deer, or the rustle of some restless bird soothed him.

Slowly and meditatively he wandered onwards, until he came in view of the abbey, a black mass against a blurred background. To him it was a tomb which held a memory. Tonight new feelings stirred him. "Surely," he thought, "without disloyalty to the dead a man may love the living; one who has known regret for twenty years may seek consolation. Twenty years, it is almost too late now to think of love; if I were younger by a score, Sympington's age, for instance, who knows what might happen?"

CHAPTER II.—LOVE YOU I MUST.

After a sleepless night, Sir Danvers rose fully determined to put away such thoughts as had disturbed the even tenor of his mind the previous evening, and to absent himself from the rectory until he had recovered his usual composure. For three days he busied himself going over accounts with his steward, visiting out farms with his agent, planning improvements in the village cottages, sitting on the magisterial bench in the county town; all the while being unable to banish thoughts of Ethel Fayne from his mind, and hoping some accident might bring them in contact once more.

On the evening of the fourth day he reproached himself for not having called on his friends since he dined with them, and he set out for the rectory, wondering what the charm was which the governess had exercised over him. For more than twenty years no woman had the power to attract or interest him until he met this girl, a stranger, of whose past he was wholly ignorant. As these thoughts rushed through his mind, a soft, rustling sound fell upon his ears, and turning to the right he caught sight of her who filled his mind. She did not see him, and for a moment he hesitated as to whether he should join her or pursue his course. It was only for a second; a few rapid strides brought him to her side. She looked round as he approached, and, seeing him, started.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you, Miss Fayne," he said.

"Not in the least. This delightful evening tempted me out of doors. How lovely the park looks."

"Our country is picturesque, as perhaps you are aware."

"Not at all. I know very little of English scenery, for, though I was born and bred in England, most of my life has been spent abroad."

"You are fond of travelling," Sir Danvers suggested.

"Yes; but I have travelled very little. I was educated at a French school, and when capable began to teach in return for my lodgement, eventually becoming one of the regular governesses. I remained there until two years ago, when—when—I returned to England."

"You are fond of teaching?" he said, not noticing her hesitation.

"It's drudgery, but I am content. I suppose few people have their lives shaped as they desire," she answered. "You see my father is a doctor with a large family and a limited practice, so there is a certain satisfaction in knowing I am not an encumbrance to him."

"Poor girl," Sir Danvers said to himself, as they walked side by side under the great trees where the thrushes sang farewell to day. It made him wretched to think her life must be spent in the drudgery of a schoolroom, passed under the roofs of strangers who regarded her as a dependent. But then how brave and noble she was to accept such a life rather than be a burden on her father. "I am glad fate has made us neighbors," he said aloud.

"You are very kind, Sir Danvers."

"And I hope you don't regret having come amongst us?"

"On the contrary, I consider myself fortunate in having found such a haven of rest," she replied.

Her last words, pronounced with unconscious emphasis, and followed by a half-smothered sigh, grated on his ears. A woman who had struggled and been worsted by the world, one who had experienced some bitter wrong, or been pursued by a haunting sorrow might use such a phrase; but surely this girl, fresh he might say from the school-room, had no need of a haven of rest.

"You will find us dull," said the baronet after a pause, which she made no effort to break.

"I don't desire gaiety," she answered, almost sadly.

"Then we shall not disappoint you. We vegetate here rather than live."

"But you like the country, Sir Danvers?"

"I could live happily here if—that is—"

"I fear I must return," she said, interrupting him. "Pray don't think of coming with me. Mrs. Harrow said I should be quite safe in the park at all hours." And without leaving him time to reply she shook hands and hurried away.

He watched her lithe, graceful figure pass under the trees until it disappeared in the shadows beyond. His intention of having a chat with the rector was set aside; he had no room in his mind for aught save Ethel Fayne, and as he returned home it occurred to him his was a solitary life, and that she was one of the sweetest girls he had ever met.

Weeks lengthened into months, and the fascination she exercised over him gradually strengthened. He was now quite resolved on remaining at home instead of accompanying his daughter to Switzerland, and that young lady had in his stead pressed into her service as companion a poor relation to whom the Alps was as a vision of paradise. So much pleased was Miss Fothergill with her stay abroad that she decided on prolonging it some months with the permission of her father, which was readily granted her.

Spring deepened to summer, the lime and oak trees in the park were in full leafage, cornfields ripened in the sun; and with every day that passed the baronet's love for Ethel Fayne increased. As spring

waking from winter, his nature, long in a state of torpor, cried out for sympathy, affection, companionship. A fierce hunger for his affection possessed him, leaving him no peace by day, no rest by night. Though he knew little or nothing concerning her past, he, with the noble, simple chivalry of his nature, was content to place his happiness and his honor in her keeping.

Many an evening he had gone down to that spot where they had met alone for the first time, in hopes of finding her there, but was disappointed. He feared she avoided him, but her manner when they encountered—always in the presence of Mrs. Harrow's children—was sweet and gentle. At last the day, long postponed for want of opportunity, arrived, when the baronet sought to seal his fate. Having been to the village that she might post some letters she was unwilling to entrust to a servant, the governess was returning by a short cut through the park when she unexpectedly met Sir Danvers.

"What a glorious afternoon," he said, holding her hand in his, "you are going to the rectory, I suppose. May I come with you?" he asked in a hurried manner that betrayed his agitation.

"Certainly, Sir Danvers," she replied, and then came a pause.

"I'm glad to have this chance of speaking to you," he began.

She looked at him with a frightened expression whilst a deep colour flushed her cheeks.

"On a subject," continued the baronet, "which will not, I hope, be wholly unexpected, for I have striven to show that I love you."

"Love me," she gasped, speaking as it to herself, no gladness in her eyes, no joy in her face.

"Yes, with all my heart, may I not hope to gain your affection in return. From the first day we met I began to love you, and I shall never cease so long as I live."

"Oh, Sir Danvers," she cried out, and then remained silent and abstracted, as if his words had frozen her life current and speech had deserted her.

"Won't you give me the right to love—won't you become my wife?" he asked, seizing her right hand and raising it to his lips.

"Your wife?" she muttered, her eyes staring into space, as if beholding some troubled vision. The prospect of gaining this man as her husband, of sharing a title centuries old, of becoming mistress of that lordly home yonder, with its wide lands stretching to the right and left for many a mile, seemed to bring her neither pride nor pleasure.

"I know," he said, the difference between our years are great; but—"

"No, no; it is not that," she said, hastily.

"Then you will be my wife? Only say yes, and I shall be the happiest man living," he pleaded, now grasping both her hands which trembled in his own.

"Sir Danvers," she answered in an agitated voice, "this is so sudden, so unexpected, that I scarcely know what to say, except to offer you my sincerest gratitude."

"It's not gratitude but affection I want," he replied, fixing his eyes on her face now pale as death.

"But you have seen so little of me; you know nothing of me," she said hurriedly.

"All I know is that I love you, that I trust you, that I want to bind your life to mine as the woman of my heart, the companion of my days until death parts us."

The honest ring of his voice, full of tenderness and passion touched her, and her eyes softened as they glanced at him.

"Believe me, I never suspected I was so fortunate as to win your affection, of which the best and noblest woman in the world might feel proud; but—but—I," she continued, struggling with herself, "think your words have come upon me so suddenly that I am unprepared. What if in the future I disappointed you; if you mistook your feelings towards me; if—"

"You don't love me, or you would not mention such doubts," he said despairingly.

"I admire and esteem you—but I must have time to consider. Don't think me ungrateful or unkind; but in justice to you I must wait a little before I can reply," she said, her lips trembling, a bright light burning in her eyes.

"Then," he burst out, "there is some hope for me. When may I expect your answer?"

"Give me a month," she said.

"A month!" he exclaimed. "You don't know the torture I must endure meanwhile; you have never known the agony of suspense."

"I have," she replied quietly and gravely.

"Then be merciful to me and give me your answer sooner."

"You shall have it in a fortnight," she murmured.

"You will meet me here and at this hour?"

"Here and at this hour," she repeated; then rousing herself, added, "No matter what answer I may think wisest to give, Sir Danvers, believe me no woman can feel more grateful for the friendship of an honest man, for the love you have offered me." Her eyes filled with tears and her head drooped.

In a second he flung his arms around her, kissed her lips, and then before she recovered her surprise turned away. Left alone she hurried to the rectory, sought her room, and locking the door flung herself downwards on her bed and burst into tears.

A fortnight from the day on which this scene had taken place, Sir Danvers stood on the same spot, vainly striving to overcome his impatience, as he waited for Ethel Fayne. At last catching sight of her coming down a glade he went forward to meet her, his heart throbbing fiercely. He took her hands, gazed anxiously and questioningly into her eyes, and said, "Do you bring me happiness or despair?"

She remained silent, her eyes fixed on space, her face pale and calm.

"Can you not be mine?" he pleaded, hope and fear struggling for expression.

"Before I answer your question, Sir Danvers, you must hear what I have to say," she replied.

"Go on," he said, in a hoarse voice, now fearing the worst.

"I once loved with all my strength," she began, then paused as if struggling with pain.

"You love him still," said the baronet, and the tones of his voice told her how much he suffered.

"No," she answered promptly, "that was seven years ago when I was but eighteen."

"Where is he now?" Sir Danvers asked, his chest heaving.

"He is dead," she gasped, her lips becoming livid, her eyes burning in a face as white as the dead.

The baronet would have given half his possessions to be the first man who gained her love, yet he would be satisfied if even now she gave him her heart