

# SWEET IS REVENGE.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.—A PAINFUL STORY.

The bright sunshine of a summer morning shone into the sitting room of a lodging house situated in a quiet square, not far removed from Hanover square. The apartment, though not wholly uncomfortable, showed little effort at adornment. More curtains, once crimson, but now faded to a tawny hue, hung from mahogany poles by wooden rings that rattled noisily when moved; the floor was covered by a carpet somewhat threadbare with the passage of feet, but retaining much of its primitive freshness where it had been mercifully sheltered by the center table. A large mirror in a gilt frame, from which the floral ornamentation had been broken, stood upon the chimney piece of cracked white marble, and reflected the large bouquet pattern of the wall paper, relieved here and there by lithographs after Sir Edwin Landseer's pictures encased in cumbersome frames.

It was just ten o'clock, and Mrs. Simmons was busily engaged in brushing the crumbs from the center table, at which someone had already breakfasted, routing an army of flies from the cut glass sugar bowl, and arranging a bunch of flowers which she placed beside a white and gold china breakfast cup. Her round, shining, good natured face wore an air of perplexity; her plump hands dallied with the plates, knives and spoons as if her mind was wholly preoccupied, and presently, when the door opened and Lady Fothergille entered, the landlady fairly started.

"Good morning, Miss Ethel—beg pardon, I mean my lady," she said, her eyes brightening.

"Dear old nurse, don't call me 'my lady'—let me forget, if I can, all that has happened within the last few months."

Mrs. Simmons smoothed out the white apron tied round her ample person, and regarded Lady Fothergille closely.

"You have been crying again this morning I can see—your eyes are quite red."

"I couldn't help it," Ethel replied, striving to keep back her tears even then.

"Well never mind, my dear. Sit down, I'll bring up your breakfast in a minute, and I hope you have some appetite after your long journey. I can tell you I was surprised to see you driving up to my door in the early morning."

Ethel seated herself on the springless horse-hair sofa, the faded chintz cover of which concealed a multitude of blemishes. Presently the odor of fried bacon rose from the lower regions and pervaded the house. It carried back her thoughts to her early days, when bacon and eggs were allowed the hard-working doctor and his growing family on Sunday mornings as a special privilege. Shabby as the old home was, well-worn and home-made as her clothes were, she was happy then—before the cares of life and the shadows of the future fretted her mind—happier perhaps than she had been since.

The entrance of Mrs. Simmons bearing a tempting breakfast on a tray, interrupted her thoughts and brought her back to the unhappy present.

"Now, my dearie, if you eat a good breakfast you will feel much better; and you needs be that, for your pretty face is pale, and your eyes are sunken in your head from crying. Sit down here and I'll wait on you myself, and grateful I am to whatever chance it was that brought you back to me once more."

"You are the kindest old nurse in the world," Lady Fothergille replied with a smile. "What would you say if I were to live with you for ever?"

"I should feel proud and glad, my dear—you were always my favorite child," Mrs. Simmons answered. "But you only say that in jest—I know you don't mean it, my lady."

"No! I am quite in earnest, I shall never go back to the abbey."

The perplexed look which had hovered over the landlady's florid countenance now deepened. She made no immediate reply, but watched Ethel closely, studying her looks, thinking over her words, and striving to arrive at some definite conclusion. When breakfast was finished she quietly said:

"Now, my dear, you told me nothing this morning, nor did I ask, seeing how pale and tired you were, but today you will tell your old nurse what has happened to bring you up to town alone and make you so unhappy. I have seen a good deal of the world, my dear, and my experience may help you."

"I know your kindly intentions, nurse, but I fear no one can help me," Ethel replied, rising from her chair and taking a seat on the sofa.

"Wait one moment," cried Mrs. Simmons, walking quietly to the door and opening it suddenly. "I'm afraid the maid listens," she explained. "I'll send her upstairs, and then we can be quite safe."

Having issued her orders she returned, shut the door, and sat down beside Lady Fothergille.

"Now tell me what is your trouble."

"Sir Danvers and I have parted," Ethel replied.

"Parted!" cried Mrs. Simmons in astonishment, as she looked shrewdly at Ethel.

"Yes. Lately his manner began to change towards me—I don't know why—and then yesterday he came into my room and declared I had betrayed him, that he had proofs of my disloyalty, and he hoped never to see my face or hear my voice again!"

"Did you give him any cause for jealousy?"

Ethel drew herself up and looked indignantly at her questioner.

"Don't be angry my dear, but I know young wives, without meaning any harm, are sometimes foolish."

"I gave him no cause."

"Then he must be a brute," said the landlady, sympathetically.

"Oh Alice, you don't know him or you would not say that. He is one of the kindest and noblest of men."

"Was there any one in the house, any pretty women that flattered him? I know how forward and brazen some of them can be, my dear."

"Certainly not," replied Ethel, indignantly.

"Then I can't understand it. What did you say when he made these charges, my dear," she asked.

"I told him they were false, but he wouldn't listen. He said he had proofs of my unfaithfulness and I was too indignant to ask him what they were. I could not bear that he should think me otherwise than I am, his loyal and devoted wife, and now I shall never forgive him, never," she added, bursting into tears.

"But why did you leave him; don't cry dear."

"I could not stay with him after such an accusation, and besides he said we must live apart in future, that he would leave the abbey in the morning and trusted I would have gone before his return. It was too cruel, I cannot bear to think he could say such things to me," she sobbed, tears running down her cheeks.

"And then you came away, poor child," said Mrs. Simmons soothingly, as she put her arm round Lady Fothergille's waist.

"You wrote to him, I suppose, denying the charge and told him where you were going."

"No, I didn't, how could I after such words. It he did not wish to hear me I was not going to plead my innocence. I left him as he desired, and I shall never go back."

"But your whole life will be spoilt."

"I cannot help that, the fault is not mine."

"There is some misunderstanding, but what it is I can't say. Have you any enemies; perhaps his daughter wished to part you."

"No, no, she is the dearest and sweetest of girls, but I'm sure I have an enemy, though I have no reason to think so, save that I instinctively dread her."

"Ah, now we are coming to the point. Who is this woman?"

"Mrs. Crayworth who has been staying at the abbey. Yet I cannot see what advantage she would gain from a quarrel between Sir Danvers and myself."

"No, it's hard to fathom such women, but I have no doubt she has made this trouble. Is she in love with Sir Danvers herself?"

"I can't say, she is a widow."

"They are always the worst, trust them for making mischief between man and wife."

"Even if she did scheme—my husband, should not have believed her word before mine. I shall never forgive him, nor do I ever wish to see him again," Lady Fothergille said between her sobs.

The words Sir Danvers had spoken yet rankled in her mind, filling her with indignation, wounding her pride anew.

Mrs. Simmons made no remark, being busily engaged in thinking how she could best awaken Sir Danvers to the wrong he had done his wife—the girl whom she had reared and still loyally loved, and by what means she could reunite them once more.

In the pause which ensued a light footstep and the sweep of a silk dress was heard descending the stairs and passing through the hall. A second later and the street door shut almost noiselessly.

"That is my queer lodger," said Mrs. Simmons, starting up and going towards the window. Sheltered behind one of the faded moreen curtains, she looked into the street and saw a tall figure closely veiled, and dressed in shabby black garments, stand upon the doorstep irresolutely, then turn swiftly to the right, and almost immediately retrace her steps and take the opposite direction.

"I can't make her out," continued the landlady, "and yet, I have no doubt, she's a gentlewoman born and bred," she added, anxious to detract Ethel from the remembrance of her grief.

"What is her name?" Lady Fothergille inquired.

"Freeman—Mrs. Freeman. She has been with me a couple of months, never gives any trouble, and is as quiet in the house as a mouse. She's hard up I know, but she has great hopes of plenty of money when her husband comes back, where he is, or who he is, she never says, and it seems to me there is something mysterious about her."

"Poor thing, perhaps, he is also in trouble," said Ethel.

"Many a wife is, my dear, and through no fault of her own. She thinks she owes me several weeks' rent, but she don't, though I mustn't tell her so."

"Why not. It might be a relief to her mind."

"Well, I'm not allowed. You see it happened in this way," explained Mrs. Simmons: "One evening, when she came back a young man came with her. When she had gone up to her own room he returned and made enquiries about her payments. She owed me two weeks at the time, and I was thinking of giving her notice. He then told me he was entrusted by her friends to ask about her and pay her rent, though she mustn't know that, as, owing to some family quarrel, she would not accept anything from them, and would rather suffer want than receive their help. So here she remains with me."

"Did he tell you who her family were?"

"No, that was another mystery. I hope, dear, you will not mind dining with her this evening; I have but one dining room, and you will find her quite a gentle woman."

"I should like to see her," Ethel replied, "you have interested me in her already."

"Ah, you always was that pleasant and agreeable you'd do anything for your old nurse," said Mrs. Simmons, smiling on her.

"And my old nurse would do anything for me."

"Now my dear, if you will take an old woman's advice, you will dry your pretty eyes and write a letter to Sir Danvers, telling him you are innocent of his charges, that he has been in the wrong, and letting him know you are safe with me."

"No, I cannot do that. If he believes me guilty, let him. If he wishes to know where I am, he will find out."

"Who would think, to look at you, that

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you were so positive," replied Mrs. Simmons. "But, if you don't do it today you will tomorrow—it's only a question of time, I'm sure."

"Never," cried Ethel. "Never. I cannot forgive him."

At seven o'clock that evening Lady Fothergille sat in Mrs. Simmons' drawing-room, an apartment pervaded by a musty odor, as if not frequently used. White lace curtains screened the tall windows, between which stood a small table, bearing a family bible surmounted by a tea caddy; bunches of flowers under glass shades ornamented the chimney-piece; chairs, with knitted antimacassars, stood at equal distances like sentinels along the walls; a chandelier suspended from the ceiling.

The room was empty on her entrance, but she had not long been seated when the rustling of a silk dress, such as she had heard in the morning, fell upon her ears. It suddenly ceased, and then looking at the door Ethel saw the handle turn. It was not, however, pushed open; whoever stood on the threshold hesitated to enter, the swish of the silk dress was heard retreating and once more drawing near, then the door swung back, when a second later Mrs. Freeman appeared, looked round her swiftly, and seeing Ethel, bowed nervously without speaking.

The long, pale, sensitive face lighted by dark eyes expressive by turn of restlessness, timidity, and pathos, and set in a frame of rich brown hair, heavily streaked with silver, at once struck Ethel's attention and appealed to her sympathy in a manner she could not explain. There was something pathetic, not only in the countenance, but in the tall spare figure, and in the highly nervous manner of the woman.

"How do you do," Lady Fothergille said, rising, scarcely knowing what to say.

"I am well, thank you. Mrs. Simmons told me I should find a new lodger here—Miss Fayne."

"Yes," replied Ethel who desired her name should remain unknown. "I came early this morning."

"I have been here some time," said Mrs. Freeman, advancing into the room and sitting down with her back to the waning light. I am waiting—always waiting."

"What for?"

The question startled her, she looked keenly at the speaker, and then seeming to gain confidence from the expression of her face, answered, "For my husband. He is away at present in France, but he will return sometime—sometime."

"He does not know you are waiting for him?"

"No, I wish to give him a surprise. He does not expect to see me, but he will be glad when we meet."

"But how are you to know when he returns?"

"His servant Barlyl will tell me."

"Barlyl," repeated Ethel. The name seemed familiar to her, but she could not just then remember where she had heard it, or to whom it belonged.

"Yes, he is very kind. He speaks to me about my husband, and he let me take and keep one of my husband's photographs."

Her hearer felt puzzled, there was something strange in the idea of a servant giving his master's portrait to his master's wife. The smell of roast beef and apple tart which had been growing stronger every minute, now reached its climax, when Mrs. Simmons flung open the door and announced that dinner was served.

All through the meal Mrs. Freeman was silent, she ate but little, drank no wine, seemed wrapped up in her own thoughts, and relieved when dinner ended.

"If you ladies will go back to the drawing-room I will bring you some tea in half-an-hour," Mrs. Simmons said, her face shining from the effect of her recent labors in the lower regions.

Those she addressed rose, and Ethel waited for Mrs. Freeman to pass before her, but the latter shrunk back, and after a friendly dispute Lady Fothergille preceded her. As she went up the narrow stairway she dropped her handkerchief. Mrs. Freeman picked it up, and was about to return it to its owner, when her eyes fell upon the name it bore and she gazed upon it in seeming wonder and consternation.

"Fothergille! Fothergille!" she repeated as she entered the drawing-room.

Ethel started at the name, and turning round, was surprised to see Mrs. Freeman's face flushed, her eyes sparkle, and her whole appearance excited.

"It is yours," she said, holding out the handkerchief in a hand that trembled from emotion. "I saw you let it fall—tell me do you know anyone of that name?"

Ethel drew back a step from the woman's strangely altered face, on which a hectic flush burned brightly, and for a second it flashed upon her that Mrs. Freeman had become insane. For economical reasons the landlady had turned down the gaslight of the chandelier, so that the room was half in shadow, but the lurid eager eyes of the questioner shone through the gloom.

"Speak," she said in an imploring voice. "It is my name," Ethel replied, hoping to calm her.

"Yours! I was told you were Miss Fayne."

"No I was before I married. My husband's name is Fothergille."

"Husband!" Mrs. Freeman repeated, putting her hand to her heart, a look of fear dawning in her eyes. "Where is he now?"

"In the country," answered Ethel, still intent upon calming her.

"Not in France, you are certain he is not in France," her questioner gasped, the expression of anxiety on her face becoming painful from intensity.

"I am quite sure. You seem anxious and excited, won't you sit down?"

"No," Mrs. Freeman answered, and then paused as if holding communication with herself. Suddenly she looked around, advanced quickly to the door, which stood partly ajar, closed it, and returned to where Ethel still stood lost in wonder at this woman's strange words and movements.

"I think I can trust you," she said in a calmer tone, looking searchingly into Ethel's face. "Your eyes are kind and you too have suffered, you have a heart."

The words touched her hearer because of the appealing tone in which they were spoken.

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"I have known sorrow," Ethel replied sadly.

"I knew it. There is something in the eyes of those who have grieved which tells it, even though the smiles upon their lips, and the words upon their tongues deny it, and once having known sorrow they feel for those in misery. You understand me?"

"Perfectly," Lady Fothergille answered. "And you will help me if you can," Mrs. Freeman pleaded.

"Certainly. I shall be glad to aid you if possible," said Ethel, who was filled with pity for the woman.

"I trust you, I trust you," she said, still looking into Ethel's eyes, and then suddenly adding after a pause, "My name is not Freeman."

"Then what is it?"

"Fothergille."

"Is Capt. Fothergille. Do you know him," she said eagerly.

"There may be many men bearing the same name in the army; what was his christian name?"

"John," she replied. "Tell me if you know him," she implored.

"I cannot say," Ethel replied, cautiously. "My husband's cousin is Capt. John Fothergille; but he is not married," she added, remembering his attentions to Meg.

"Then it cannot be the same, but wait, I will show you his photograph," said she who had been called Mrs. Freeman, as she took from her pocket a leather case in which was enclosed her husband's portrait.

Ethel held it under the gas; one glance sufficed to show her it was Sir Danvers' cousin.

"You know him," exclaimed the strange woman, reading her face.

"Yes. He is my husband's cousin."

"Then," she said, excitedly, "you can tell me when he will return from France."

"He is not in France, he is in England."

"He has come back, I did not know."

Ethel saw the poor woman had been misinformed, but refrained from pointing out the deception lest it might give her additional pain.

"He is at present staying at Fothergille abbey, Hayton, Devonshire," she replied.

"Then I must see him at once. I will go to him."

"Does he know you are here?"

"No, he thinks I am in Australia, but those who kept us apart had pity at last, and let me go, and I have come back to him," the unhappy woman said, her manner becoming excited, a wild light burning in her eyes.

"I don't understand," said Ethel. "Why should they have parted you?"

"Because they were wicked people, and—and—" she said, looking round her, "they said I was mad."

Her hearer started, the thoughts that for some time had been gaining ground in her mind were suddenly put into words.

"Don't be frightened," she said, seeing Lady Fothergille's movement. "It was only one of their wicked lies. I was ill, but I am quite well now, as I shall prove to my husband, and when he sees me he will believe it, and we shall be happy again."

"Where were you married," Ethel asked, thinking this might be an insane delusion.

"In Melbourne, I will show you the certificate, I always keep it with me," she answered, opening the upper part of her dress and taking out a little silk bag suspended from her neck by a string. Opening this she drew forth a paper certifying that Anne Lawson, spinster, was married to John Fothergille. "I have always kept it with me," she added, "even they let me wear it, they did not deny I was his wife, they could not."

Ethel handed it back in silence, a sense of depression fell upon her as she concluded this poor woman had been wronged, by whom she did not yet know, though she could not refrain from suspecting.

"Where did you meet the captain," she asked.

"I will tell you all, then you will perhaps be able to help me."

"I shall be glad if I can," she answered, raising her hand to turn on the gas and lighten the room, for sitting in this semi-light oppressed her.

"Stay," said Mrs. Fothergille, placing her hand on Ethel's arm. "If you please I would rather not have a strong light, I can talk best whilst it's like this—I am used to it and I like it," she explained.

"Very well," Ethel replied, anxious to humour her. "It was in Melbourne you met Captain Fothergille, I suppose," she added, desirous to lead her to speak of her past life.

"Yes. He had just come from the gold diggings when he was introduced to me, and from the first day I saw him I loved him. No man had ever spoken to me as he had; he told me of his love in words such as I had never heard before; and when he asked me to be his wife I answered my heart had been his from the first."

She paused a moment as if to linger over recollections which softened and beautified her face as with a glow of inward light.

"I should have been completely happy if it were not that my father opposed my marriage, and set his face against the man I had chosen as my husband. On this we disagreed for the first time in our lives, for I loved him well. I was the only child, and had never known my mother's face. He disliked the captain, whom he called an adventurer, but I pointed out that he had held a high position in the army; he said he was penniless, but, I answered, my fortune—which came to me from my mother—was sufficient for both. He knew it would break my heart if I did not marry Capt. Fothergille, and eventually he gave his consent to our union. We were therefore married, but soon a cloud came upon my new life, for my father died. It was the first great grief I had known, and it weighed upon me. I should not have been so selfish as to indulge in it, for I fear my husband found me dull, and my home not so cheerful as before. He remained absent from me for many hours every day, and sought pastime at the card table."

"Had you been long married at this time," Ethel asked.

"Only a few months. I strove to conceal

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my grief, and to appear resigned. I asked my husband to bring his friends to our house, which he frequently did, and after supper they naturally played—sometimes I fear for high stakes. Anything was better to me than his absence, for I loved him with all my heart, and was jealous of every hour he spent away from me. I therefore did not remonstrate with him for the losses, which I knew he met with, at play."

"He gambled!" Ethel remarked.

"He did. I could always tell by his manner when he won and when he lost, though I never ventured to ask—all I had was his to do with as he pleased."

"Did you not urge him to give up gambling?"

"Yes, but he would not heed me. We were about twelve months married, and I was expecting the birth of our child, when the darkness fell upon me that ruined my life," she said, a nervous spasm contracting her face, a wandering restless look coming into her eyes.

"Do not speak of what pains you," Ethel said, compassionately.

"You must hear all, I have told it to no one else, but I want you to understand me," she replied, and then continued more slowly. "I knew he had been losing for some time. One evening, Hawkins, the man who had won his money, came to supper with us, he was to start for Sydney next day, and my husband said he must have his revenge. I retired early, but I could not rest. I dosed and woke, again and again; then, I must have dreamt, for what I saw could not be real," she said, putting one hand to her forehead, as if to concentrate her thoughts. "I dreamt I heard a noise, and went softly downstairs, the sounds increased as I drew near—the sounds of a scuffle—I hurried onward and reached the room where I had left my husband, to find him standing with a knife in his hand over the prostrate body of Hawkins—the hand holding the knife was smeared with blood. I gave a scream, and immediately felt as if a blow had been dealt me by my husband."

She shuddered at the remembrance of the painful scene her words called up, and her face grew ghastly pale.

"I suppose I was delirious, for when I began to recover I found myself in a great house surrounded by insane people. My hair was cut, I wore a uniform, and doctors came and saw me continually. They told me I had been ill of brain fever, that my child was born dead, and I myself had made a hard struggle for recovery. I asked for my husband, being sure he would come and take me away, but they said he had returned to England. No doubt they assured him I was hopelessly mad, and would never recover, for he left no word for me, wrote me no letter—they may have told him I was dead. I would have left the place immediately, but they would not allow me; at times memory deserted me, the past was blotted out, a great cloud hung over me, and the remembrance of this terrible dream pursued me; but gradually I grew better, the dream became more faint in my mind, and I was pronounced well. When I was permitted to leave, an old friend and school-fellow took me to her home, who sheltered and protected me."

"Did you not write to your husband," asked Ethel.

"No, I determined to seek him, for if he knew I was coming he might forbid me, and I could not disobey him. He had taken my money, not thinking I should want it; no doubt he would have sent me some if I had asked