

## CHAPTER V

### THE SQUIRE EXPLAINS THE POSITION

"I don't know what is coming to this country, I really don't; and that's a fact," said the Squire to his companion, after they had walked some paces in silence. "Here is the farm, the Moat Farm. It fetched twenty-five shillings an acre when I was a young man, and eight years ago it used to fetch thirty-five. Now I have reduced it and reduced it to fifteen, just in order to keep the tenant. And what is the end of it? Janter--he's the tenant--gave notice last Michaelmas; but that stupid owl, George, said it was all nothing, and that he would continue at fifteen shillings when the time came. And now to-night he comes to me with a face as long as a yard-arm, and says that Janter won't keep it at any price, and that he does not know where he is to find another tenant, not he. It's quite heartbreaking, that's what it is. Three hundred acres of good, sound, food-producing land, and no tenant for it at fifteen shillings an acre. What am I to do?"

"Can't you take it in hand and farm it yourself?" asked Harold.

"How can I take it in hand? I have one farm of a hundred and fifty acres in hand as it is. Do you know what it would cost to take over that farm?" and he stopped in his walk and struck his stick into the ground. "Ten pounds an acre, every farthing of it--and say a thousand

for the covenants--about four thousand pounds in all. Now where am I to get four thousand pounds to speculate with in that way, for it is a speculation, and one which I am too old to look after myself, even if I had the knowledge. Well, there you are, and now I'll say good-night, sir. It's getting chilly, and I have felt my chest for the last year or two. By-the-way, I suppose I shall see you to-morrow at this tennis party of Ida's. It's all very well for Ida to go in for her tennis parties, but how can I think of such things with all this worry on my hands? Well, good-night, Colonel Quaritch, good-night," and he turned and walked away through the moonlight.

Harold Quaritch watched him go and then stalked off home, reflecting, not without sadness, upon the drama which was opening up before him, that most common of dramas in these days of depression,--the break up of an ancient family through causes beyond control. It required far less acumen and knowledge of the world than he possessed to make it clear to him that the old race of de la Molle was doomed. This story of farms thrown up and money not forthcoming pointed its own moral, and a sad one it was. Even Ida's almost childish excitement about the legend of the buried treasure showed him how present to her mind must be the necessity of money; and he fell to thinking how pleasant it would be to be able to play the part of the Fairy Prince and step in with untold wealth between her and the ruin which threatened her family. How well that grand-looking open-minded Squire would become a great station, fitted as he was by nature, descent, and tradition, to play the solid part of an English country gentleman of the good old-

fashioned kind. It was pitiful to think of a man of his stamp forced by the vile exigencies of a narrow purse to scheme and fight against the advancing tide of destitution. And Ida, too,--Ida, who was equipped with every attribute that can make wealth and power what they should be--a frame to show off her worth and state. Well, it was the way of the world, and he could not mend it; but it was with a bitter sense of the unfitness of things that with some little difficulty--for he was not yet fully accustomed to its twists and turns--he found his way past the swelling heap of Dead Man's Mount and round the house to his own front door.

He entered the house, and having told Mrs. Jobson that she could go to bed, sat down to smoke and think. Harold Quaritch, like many solitary men, was a great smoker, and never did he feel the need for the consolation of tobacco more than on this night. A few months ago, when he had retired from the army, he found himself in a great dilemma. There he was, a hale, active man of three-and-forty, of busy habits, and regular mind, suddenly thrown upon the world without occupation. What was he to do with himself? While he was asking this question and waiting blankly for an answer which did not come, his aunt, old Mrs. Massey, departed this life, leaving him heir to what she possessed, which might be three hundred a year in all. This, added to his pension and the little that he owned independently, put him beyond the necessity of seeking further employment. So he had made up his mind to come to reside at Molehill, and live the quiet, somewhat aimless, life of a small country gentleman. His reading, for he was a great reader,

especially of scientific works, would, he thought, keep him employed. Moreover, he was a thorough sportsman, and an ardent, though owing to the smallness of his means, necessarily not a very extensive, collector of curiosities, and more particularly of coins.

At first, after he had come to his decision, a feeling of infinite rest and satisfaction had taken possession of him. The struggle of life was over for him. No longer would he be obliged to think, and contrive, and toil; henceforth his days would slope gently down towards the inevitable end. Trouble lay in the past, now rest and rest alone awaited him, rest that would gradually grow deeper and deeper as the swift years rolled by, till it was swallowed up in that almighty Peace to which, being a simple and religious man, he had looked forward from childhood as the end and object of his life.

Foolish man and vain imagining! Here, while we draw breath, there is no rest. We must go on continually, on from strength to strength, or weakness to weakness; we must always be troubled about this or that, and must ever have this desire or that to regret. It is an inevitable law within whose attraction all must fall; yes, even the purest souls, cradled in their hope of heaven; and the most swinish, wallowing in the mud of their gratified desires.

And so our hero had already begun to find out. Here, before he had been forty-eight hours in Honham, a fresh cause of troubles had arisen. He had seen Ida de la Molle again, and after an interval of

between five and six years had found her face yet more charming than it was before. In short he had fallen in love with it, and being a sensible man he did not conceal this fact from himself. Indeed the truth was that he had been in love with her for all these years, though he had never looked at the matter in that light. At the least the pile had been gathered and laid, and did but require a touch of the match to burn up merrily enough. And now this was supplied, and at the first glance of Ida's eyes the magic flame began to hiss and crackle, and he knew that nothing short of a convulsion or a deluge would put it out.

Men of the stamp of Harold Quaritch generally pass through three stages with reference to the other sex. They begin in their youth by making a goddess of one of them, and finding out their mistake. Then for many years they look upon woman as the essence and incarnation of evil and a thing no more to be trusted than a jaguar. Ultimately, however, this folly wears itself out, probably in proportion as the old affection fades and dies away, and is replaced by contempt and regret that so much should have been wasted on that which was of so little worth. Then it is that the danger comes, for then a man puts forth his second venture, puts it forth with fear and trembling, and with no great hope of seeing a golden Argosy sailing into port. And if it sinks or is driven back by adverse winds and frowning skies, there is an end of his legitimate dealings with such frail merchandise.

And now he, Harold Quaritch, was about to put forth this second

venture, not of his own desire or free will indeed, but because his reason and judgment were over-mastered. In short, he had fallen in love with Ida de la Molle when he first saw her five years ago, and was now in the process of discovering the fact. There he sat in his chair in the old half-furnished room, which he proposed to turn into his dining-room, and groaned in spirit over this portentous discovery. What had become of his fair prospect of quiet years sloping gently downwards, and warm with the sweet drowsy light of afternoon? How was it that he had not known those things that belonged to his peace? And probably it would end in nothing. Was it likely that such a splendid young woman as Ida would care for a superannuated army officer, with nothing to recommend him beyond five or six hundred a year and a Victoria Cross, which he never wore. Probably if she married at all she would try to marry someone who would assist to retrieve the fallen fortunes of her family, which it was absolutely beyond his power to do. Altogether the outlook did not please him, as he sat there far into the watches of the night, and pulled at his empty pipe. So little did it please him, indeed, that when at last he rose to find his way to bed up the old oak staircase, the only imposing thing in Molehill, he had almost made up his mind to give up the idea of living at Honham at all. He would sell the place and emigrate to Vancouver's Island or New Zealand, and thus place an impassable barrier between himself and that sweet, strong face, which seemed to have acquired a touch of sternness since last he looked upon it five years ago.

Ah, wise resolutions of the quiet night, whither do you go in the

garish light of day? To heaven, perhaps, with the mist wreaths and the dew drops.

When the Squire got back to the castle, he found his daughter still sitting in the drawing room.

"What, not gone to bed, Ida?" he said.

"No, father, I was going, and then I thought that I would wait to hear what all this is about Janter and the Moat Farm. It is best to get it over."

"Yes, yes, my dear--yes, but there is not much to tell you. Janter has thrown up the farm after all, and George says that there is not another tenant to be had for love or money. He tried one man, who said that he would not have it at five shillings an acre, as prices are."

"That is bad enough in all conscience," said Ida, pushing at the fireirons with her foot. "What is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" answered her father irritably. "How can I tell you what is to be done? I suppose I must take the place in hand, that is all."

"Yes, but that costs money, does it not?"

"Of course it does, it costs about four thousand pounds."

"Well," said Ida, looking up, "and where is all that sum to come from? We have not got four thousand pounds in the world."

"Come from? Why I suppose that I must borrow it on the security of the land."

"Would it not be better to let the place go out of cultivation, rather than risk so much money?" she answered.

"Go out of cultivation! Nonsense, Ida, how can you talk like that? Why that strong land would be ruined for a generation to come."

"Perhaps it would, but surely it would be better that the land should be ruined than that we should be. Father, dear," she said appealingly, laying one hand upon his shoulder, "do be frank with me, and tell me what our position really is. I see you wearing yourself out about business from day to day, and I know that there is never any money for anything, scarcely enough to keep the house going; and yet you will not tell me what we really owe--and I think I have a right to know."

The Squire turned impatiently. "Girls have no head for these things," he said, "so what is the use of talking about it?"



"But I am not a girl; I am a woman of six-and-twenty; and putting other things aside, I am almost as much interested in your affairs as you are yourself," she said with determination. "I cannot bear this sort of thing any longer. I see that abominable man, Mr. Quest, continually hovering about here like a bird of ill-omen, and I cannot bear it; and I tell you what it is, father, if you don't tell me the whole truth at once I shall cry," and she looked as though she meant it.

Now the old Squire was no more impervious to a woman's tears than any other man, and of all Ida's moods, and they were many, he most greatly feared that rare one which took the form of tears. Besides, he loved his only daughter more dearly than anything in the world except one thing, Honham Castle, and could not bear to give her pain.

"Very well," he said, "of course if you wish to know about these things you have a right to. I have desired to spare you trouble, that is all; but as you are so very imperious, the best thing that I can do is to let you have your own way. Still, as it is rather late, if you have no objection I think that I had better put it off till to-morrow."

"No, no, father. By to-morrow you will have changed your mind. Let us have it now. I want to know how much we really owe, and what we have got to live on."

The old gentleman hummed and hawed a little, and after various indications of impatience at last began:

"Well, as you know, our family has for some generations depended upon the land. Your dear mother brought a small fortune with her, five or six thousand pounds, but that, with the sanction of her trustees, was expended upon improvements to the farms and in paying off a small mortgage. Well, for many years the land brought in about two thousand a year, but somehow we always found it difficult to keep within that income. For instance, it was necessary to repair the gateway, and you have no idea of the expense in which those repairs landed me. Then your poor brother James cost a lot of money, and always would have the shooting kept up in such an extravagant way. Then he went into the army, and heaven only knows what he spent there. Your brother was very extravagant, my dear, and well, perhaps I was foolish; I never could say him no. And that was not all of it, for when the poor boy died he left fifteen hundred pounds of debt behind him, and I had to find the money, if it was only for the honour of the family. Of course you know that we cut the entail when he came of age. Well, and then these dreadful times have come upon the top of it all, and upon my word, at the present moment I don't know which way to turn," and he paused and drummed his fingers uneasily upon a book.

"Yes, father, but you have not told me yet what it is that we owe."

"Well, it is difficult to answer that all in a minute. Perhaps twenty-five thousand on mortgage, and a few floating debts."

"And what is the place worth?"

"It used to be worth between fifty and sixty thousand pounds. It is impossible to say what it would fetch now. Land is practically a drug in the market. But things will come round, my dear. It is only a question of holding on."

"Then if you borrow a fresh sum in order to take up this farm, you will owe about thirty thousand pounds, and if you give five per cent., as I suppose you do, you will have to pay fifteen hundred a year in interest. Now, father, you said that in the good times the land brought in two thousand a year, so, of course, it can't bring in so much now. Therefore, by the time that you have paid the interest, there will be nothing, or less than nothing, left for us to live on."

Her father winced at this cruel and convincing logic.

"No, no," he said, "it is not so bad as that. You jump to conclusions, but really, if you do not mind, I am very tired, and should like to go to bed."

"Father, what is the use of trying to shirk the thing just because it

is disagreeable?" she asked earnestly. "Do you suppose that it is more pleasant to me to talk about it than it is for you? I know that you are not to blame about it. I know that dear James was very thoughtless and extravagant, and that the times are crushing. But to go on like this is only to go to ruin. It would be better for us to live in a cottage on a couple of hundred a year than to try to keep our heads above water here, which we cannot do. Sooner or later these people, Quest, or whoever they are, will want their money back, and then, if they cannot have it, they will sell the place over our heads. I believe that man Quest wants to get it himself--that is what I believe --and set up as a country gentleman. Father, I know it is a dreadful thing to say, but we ought to leave Honham."

"Leave Honham!" said the old gentleman, jumping up in his agitation; "what nonsense you talk, Ida. How can I leave Honham? It would kill me at my age. How can I do it? And, besides, who is to look after the farms and all the business? No, no, we must hang on and trust to Providence. Things may come round, something may happen, one can never tell in this world."

"If we do not leave Honham, then Honham will leave us," answered his daughter, with conviction. "I do not believe in chances. Chances always go the wrong way--against those who are looking for them. We shall be absolutely ruined, that is all."

"Well, perhaps you are right, perhaps you are right, my dear," said

the old Squire wearily. "I only hope that my time may come first. I have lived here all my life, seventy years and more, and I know that I could not live anywhere else. But God's will be done. And now, my dear, go to bed."

She leant down and kissed him, and as she did so saw that his eyes were filled with tears. Not trusting herself to speak, for she felt for him too deeply to do so, she turned away and went, leaving the old man sitting there with his grey head bowed upon his breast.