

CHAPTER XI

IDA'S BARGAIN

When Ida saw the Colonel coming, she put on her sweetest smile and took his outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Colonel Quaritch?" she said. "It is very good of you to come, especially as you don't play tennis much--by the way, I hope you have been studying that cypher, for I am sure it is a cypher."

"I studied it for half-an-hour before I went to bed last night, Miss de la Molle, and for the life of me I could not make anything out of it, and what's more, I don't think that there is anything to make out."

"Ah," she answered with a sigh, "I wish there was."

"Well, I'll have another try at it. What will you give me if I find it out?" he said with a smile which lighted up his rugged face most pleasantly.

"Anything you like to ask and that I can give," she answered in a tone of earnestness which struck him as peculiar, for of course he did not know the news that she had just heard from Mr. Quest.

Then for the first time for many years, Harold Quaritch delivered himself of a speech that might have been capable of a tender and hidden meaning.

"I am afraid," he said, bowing, "that if I came to claim the reward, I should ask for more even that you would be inclined to give."

Ida blushed a little. "We can consider that when you do come, Colonel Quaritch--excuse me, but here are Mrs. Quest and Mr. Cossey, and I must go and say how do you do."

Harold Quaritch looked round, feeling unreasonably irritated at this interruption to his little advances, and for the first time saw Edward Cossey. He was coming along in the wake of Mrs. Quest, looking very handsome and rather languid, when their eyes met, and to speak the truth, the Colonel's first impression was not a complimentary one.

Edward Cossey was in some ways not a bad fellow, but like a great many young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths, he had many airs and graces, one of which was the affectation of treating older and better men with an assumption of off-handedness and even of superiority that was rather obnoxious. Thus while Ida was greeting Mr. Quest, he was engaged in taking in the Colonel in a way which irritated that gentleman considerably.

Presently Ida turned and introduced Colonel Quaritch, first to Mrs. Quest and then to Mr. Cossey. Harold bowed to each, and then strolled

off to meet the Squire, whom he noted advancing with his usual array of protective towels hanging out of his hat, and for a while saw neither of them any more.

Meanwhile Mr. Quest had emerged from the shelter of his arbutus, and going from one person to another, said some pleasant and appropriate word to each, till at last he reached the spot where his wife and Edward Cossey were standing. Nodding affectionately at the former, he asked her if she was not going to play tennis, and then drew Cossey aside.

"Well, Quest," said the latter, "have you told the old man?"

"Yes, I told him."

"How did he take it?"

"Oh, talked it off and said that of course other arrangements must be made. I spoke to Miss de la Molle too."

"Indeed," said Edward, in a changed tone, "and how did she take it?"

"Well," answered the lawyer, putting on an air of deep concern (and as a matter of fact he really did feel sorry for her), "I think it was the most painful professional experience that I ever had. The poor woman was utterly crushed. She said that it would kill her father."

"Poor girl!" said Mr. Cossey, in a voice that showed his sympathy to be of a very active order, "and how pluckily she is carrying it off too--look at her," and he pointed to where Ida was standing, a lawn tennis bat in her hand and laughingly arranging a "set" of married /versus/ single.

"Yes, she is a spirited girl," answered Mr. Quest, "and what a splendid woman she looks, doesn't she? I never saw anybody who was so perfect a lady--there is nobody to touch her round here, unless," he added meditatively, "perhaps it is Belle."

"There are different types of beauty," answered Edward Cossey, flinching.

"Yes, but equally striking in their separate ways. Well, it can't be helped, but I feel sorry for that poor woman, and the old gentleman too--ah, there he is."

As he was speaking the Squire, who was walking past with Colonel Quaritch, with the object of showing him the view from the end of the moat, suddenly came face to face with Edward Cossey. He at once stepped forward to greet him, but to his surprise was met by a cold and most stately bow from Mr. de la Molle, who passed on without vouchsafing a single word.

"Old idiot!" ejaculated Mr. Quest to himself, "he will put Cossey's back up and spoil the game."

"Well," said Edward aloud and colouring almost to his eyes. "That old gentleman knows how to be insolent."

"You must not mind him, Mr. Cossey," answered Quest hastily. "The poor old boy has a very good idea of himself--he is dreadfully injured because Cossey and Son are calling in the mortgages after the family has dealt with them for so many generations; and he thinks that you have something to do with it."

"Well if he does he might as well be civil. It does not particularly incline a fellow to go aside to pull him out of the ditch, just to be cut in that fashion--I have half a mind to order my trap and go."

"No, no, don't do that--you must make allowances, you must indeed--look, here is Miss de la Molle coming to ask you to play tennis."

At this moment Ida arrived and took off Edward Cossey with her, not a little to the relief of Mr. Quest, who began to fear that the whole scheme was spoiled by the Squire's unfortunate magnificence of manner.

Edward played his game, having Ida herself as his partner. It cannot be said that the set was a pleasant one for the latter, who, poor woman, was doing her utmost to bring up her courage to the point

necessary to the carrying out of the appeal /ad misericordiam/, which she had decided to make as soon as the game was over. However, chance put an opportunity in her way, for Edward Cossey, who had a curious weakness for flowers, asked her if she would show him her chrysanthemums, of which she was very proud. She consented readily enough. They crossed the lawn, and passing through some shrubbery reached the greenhouse, which was placed at the end of the Castle itself. Here for some minutes they looked at the flowers, just now bursting into bloom. Ida, who felt exceedingly nervous, was all the while wondering how on earth she could broach so delicate a subject, when fortunately Mr. Cossey himself gave her the necessary opening.

"I can't imagine, Miss de la Molle," he said, "what I have done to offend your father--he almost cut me just now."

"Are you sure that he saw you, Mr. Cossey; he is very absent-minded sometimes?"

"Oh yes, he saw me, but when I offered to shake hands with him he only bowed in rather a crushing way and passed on."

Ida broke off a Scarlet Turk from its stem, and nervously began to pick the bloom to pieces.

"The fact is, Mr. Cossey--the fact is, my father, and indeed I also, are in great trouble just now, about money matters you know, and my

father is very apt to be prejudiced,--in short, I rather believe that he thinks you may have something to do with his difficulties--but perhaps you know all about it."

"I know something, Miss de la Molle," said he gravely, "and I hope and trust you do not believe that I have anything to do with the action which Cossey and Son have thought fit to take."

"No, no," she said hastily. "I never thought anything of the sort--but I know that you have influence--and, well, to be plain, Mr. Cossey, I implore of you to use it. Perhaps you will understand that this is very humiliating for me to be obliged to ask this, though you can never guess /how/ humiliating. Believe me, Mr. Cossey, I would never ask it for myself, but it is for my father--he loves this place better than his life; it would be much better he should die than that he should be obliged to leave it; and if this money is called in, that is what must happen, because the place will be sold over us. I believe he would go mad, I do indeed," and she stopped speaking and stood before him, the fragment of the flower in her hand, her breast heaving with emotion.

"What do you suggest should be done, Miss de la Molle?" said Edward Cossey gently.

"I suggest that--that--if you will be so kind, you should persuade Cossey and Son to forego their intention of calling in the money."

"It is quite impossible," he answered. "My father ordered the step himself, and he is a hard man. It is impossible to turn him if he thinks he will lose money by turning. You see he is a banker, and has been handling money all his life, till it has become a sort of god to him. Really I do believe that he would rather beggar every friend he has than lose five thousand pounds."

"Then there is no more to be said. The place must go, that's all," replied Ida, turning away her head and affecting to busy herself in removing some dried leaves from a chrysanthemum plant. Edward, watching her however, saw her shoulders shake and a big tear fall like a raindrop on the pavement, and the sight, strongly attracted as he was and had for some time been towards the young lady, was altogether too much for him. In an instant, moved by an overwhelming impulse, and something not unlike a gust of passion, he came to one of those determinations which so often change the whole course and tenour of men's lives.

"Miss de la Molle," he said rapidly, "there may be a way found out of it."

She looked up enquiringly, and there were the tear stains on her face.

"Somebody might take up the mortgages and pay off Cossey and Son."

"Can you find anyone who will?" she asked eagerly.

"No, not as an investment. I understand that thirty thousand pounds are required, and I tell you frankly that as times are I do not for one moment believe the place to be worth that amount. It is all very well for your father to talk about land recovering itself, but at present, at any rate, nobody can see the faintest chance of anything of the sort. The probabilities are, on the contrary, that as the American competition increases, land will gradually sink to something like a prairie value."

"Then how can money be got if nobody will advance it?"

"I did not say that nobody will advance it; I said that nobody would advance it as an investment--a friend might advance it."

"And where is such a friend to be found? He must be a very disinterested friend who would advance thirty thousand pounds."

"Nobody in this world is quite disinterested, Miss de la Molle; or at any rate very few are. What would you give to such a friend?"

"I would give anything and everything over which I have control in this world, to save my father from seeing Honham sold over his head," she answered simply.

Edward Cossey laughed a little. "That is a large order," he said.

"Miss de la Molle, /I/ am disposed to try and find the money to take up these mortgages. I have not got it, and I shall have to borrow it, and what is more, I shall have to keep the fact that I have borrowed it a secret from my father."

"It is very good of you," said Ida faintly, "I don't know what to say."

For a moment he made no reply, and looking at him, Ida saw that his hand was trembling.

"Miss de la Molle," he said, "there is another matter of which I wish to speak to you. Men are sometimes put into strange positions, partly through their own fault, partly by force of circumstances, and when in those positions, are forced down paths that they would not follow. Supposing, Miss de la Molle, that mine were some such position, and supposing that owing to that position I could not say to you words which I should wish to say----"

Ida began to understand now and once more turned aside.

"Supposing, however, that at some future time the difficulties of that position of which I have spoken were to fade away, and I were then to speak those words, can you, supposing all this--tell me how they would be received?"

Ida paused, and thought. She was a strong-natured and clear-headed woman, and she fully understood the position. On her answer would depend whether or no the thirty thousand pounds were forthcoming, and therefore, whether or no Honham Castle would pass from her father and her race.

"I said just now, Mr. Cossey," she answered coldly, "that I would give anything and everything over which I have control in the world, to save my father from seeing Honham sold over his head. I do not wish to retract those words, and I think that in them you will find an answer to your question."

He coloured. "You put the matter in a very business-like way," he said.

"It is best put so, Mr. Cossey," she answered with a faint shade of bitterness in her tone; "it preserves me from feeling under an obligation--will you see my father about these mortgages?"

"Yes, to-morrow. And now I will say good-bye to you," and he took her hand, and with some little hesitation kissed it. She made no resistance and showed no emotion.

"Yes," she answered, "we have been here some time; Mrs. Quest will wonder what has become of you."

It was a random arrow, but it went straight home, and for the third time that day Edward Cossey reddened to the roots of his hair. Without answering a word he bowed and went.

When Ida saw this, she was sorry she had made the remark, for she had no wish to appear to Mr. Cossey (the conquest of whom gave her neither pride nor pleasure) in the light of a spiteful, or worst still, of a jealous woman. She had indeed heard some talk about him and Mrs. Quest, but not being of a scandal-loving disposition it had not interested her, and she had almost forgotten it. Now however she learned that there was something in it.

"So that is the difficult position of which he talks," she said to herself; "he wants to marry me as soon as he can get Mrs. Quest off his hands. And I have consented to that, always provided that Mrs. Quest can be disposed of, in consideration of the receipt of a sum of thirty thousand pounds. And I do not like the man. It was not nice of him to make that bargain, though I brought it on myself. I wonder if my father will ever know what I have done for him, and if he will appreciate it when he does. Well, it is not a bad price--thirty thousand pounds--a good figure for any woman in the present state of the market." And with a hard and bitter laugh, and a prescience of sorrow to come lying at the heart, she threw down the remains of the Scarlet Turk and turned away.