

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN PAWN

At last she spoke, apparently with a great effort.

"It is stifling in here," she said, "let us go out." She rose, took up a shawl that lay beside her on a chair, and stepped through the French window into the garden. It was a lovely autumn night, and the air was still as death, with just a touch of frost in it.

Ida threw the shawl over her shoulders and followed by Harold walked on through the garden till she came to the edge of the moat, where there was a seat. Here she sat down and fixed her eyes upon the hoary battlements of the gateway, now clad in a solemn robe of moonlight.

Harold looked at her and felt that if he had anything to say the time had come for him to say it, and that she had brought him here in order that she might be able to listen undisturbed. So he began again, and told her that he loved her dearly.

"I am some seventeen years older than you," he went on, "and I suppose that the most active part of my life lies in the past; and I don't know if, putting other things aside, you could care to marry so old a man, especially as I am not rich. Indeed, I feel it presumptuous on my part, seeing what you are and what I am not, to ask you to do so. And

yet, Ida, I believe if you could care for me that, with heaven's blessing, we should be very happy together. I have led a lonely life, and have had little to do with women--once, many years ago, I was engaged, and the matter ended painfully, and that is all. But ever since I first saw your face in the drift five years and more ago, it has haunted me and been with me. Then I came to live here and I have learnt to love you, heaven only knows how much, and I should be ashamed to try to put it into words, for they would sound foolish. All my life is wrapped up in you, and I feel as though, should you see me no more, I could never be a happy man again," and he paused and looked anxiously at her face, which was set and drawn as though with pain.

"I cannot say 'yes,' Colonel Quaritch," she answered at length, in a tone that puzzled him, it was so tender and so unfitted to the words.

"I suppose," he stammered, "I suppose that you do not care for me? Of course, I have no right to expect that you would."

"As I have said that I cannot say 'yes,' Colonel Quaritch, do you not think that I had better leave that question unanswered?" she replied in the same soft notes which seemed to draw the heart out of him.

"I do not understand," he went on. "Why?"

"Why?" she broke in with a bitter little laugh, "shall I tell you why? Because I am /in pawn!/ Look," she went on, pointing to the stately

towers and the broad lands beyond. "You see this place. /I/ am security for it, I /myself/ in my own person. Had it not been for me it would have been sold over our heads after having descended in our family for all these centuries, put upon the market and sold for what it would fetch, and my old father would have been turned out to die, for it would have killed him. So you see I did what unfortunate women have often been driven to do, I sold myself body and soul; and I got a good price too--thirty thousand pounds!" and suddenly she burst into a flood of tears, and began to sob as though her heart would break.

For a moment Harold Quaritch looked on bewildered, not in the least understanding what Ida meant, and then he followed the impulse common to mankind in similar circumstances and took her in his arms. She did not resent the movement, indeed she scarcely seemed to notice it, though to tell the truth, for a moment or two, which to the Colonel seemed the happiest of his life, her head rested on his shoulder.

Almost instantly, however, she raised it, freed herself from his embrace and ceased weeping.

"As I have told you so much," she said, "I suppose that I had better tell you everything. I know that whatever the temptation," and she laid great stress upon the words, "under any conceivable circumstances --indeed, even if you believed that you were serving me in so doing--I can rely upon you never to reveal to anybody, and above all to my father, what I now tell you," and she paused and looked up at him with

eyes in which the tears still swam.

"Of course, you can rely on me," he said.

"Very well. I am sure that I shall never have to reproach you with the words. I will tell you. I have virtually promised to marry Mr. Edward Cossey, should he at any time be in a position to claim fulfilment of the promise, on condition of his taking up the mortgages on Honham, which he has done."

Harold Quaritch took a step back and looked at her in horrified astonishment.

"/What?/" he asked.

"Yes, yes," she answered hastily, putting up her hand as though to shield herself from a blow. "I know what you mean; but do not think too hardly of me if you can help it. It was not for myself. I would rather work for my living with my hands than take a price, for there is no other word for it. It was for my father, and my family too. I could not bear to think of the old place going to the hammer, and I did it all in a minute without consideration; but," and she set her face, "even as things are, I believe I should do it again, because I think that no one woman has a right to destroy her family in order to please herself. If one of the two must go, let it be the woman. But don't think hardly of me for it," she added almost pleadingly, "that

is if you can help it."

"I am not thinking of you," he answered grimly; "by heaven I honour you for what you have done, for however much I may disagree with the act, it is a noble one. I am thinking of the man who could drive such a bargain with any woman. You say that you have promised to marry him should he ever be in a position to claim it. What do you mean by that? As you have told me so much you may as well tell me the rest."

He spoke clearly and with a voice full of authority, but his bearing did not seem to jar upon Ida.

"I meant," she answered humbly, "that I believe--of course I do not know if I am right--I believe that Mr. Cossey is in some way entangled with a lady, in short with Mrs. Quest, and that the question of whether or no he comes forward again depends upon her."

"Upon my word," said the Colonel, "upon my word the thing gets worse and worse. I never heard anything like it; and for money too! The thing is beyond me."

"At any rate," she answered, "there it is. And now, Colonel Quaritch, one word before I go in. It is difficult for me to speak without saying too much or too little, but I do want you to understand how honoured and how grateful I feel for what you have told me to-night--I am so little worthy of all you have given me, and to be honest, I

cannot feel as pained about it as I ought to feel. It is feminine vanity, you know, nothing else. I am sure that you will not press me to say more."

"No," he answered, "no. I think that I understand the position. But, Ida, there is one thing that I must ask--you will forgive me if I am wrong in doing so, but all this is very sad for me. If in the end circumstances should alter, as I pray heaven that they may, or if Mr. Cossey's previous entanglement should prove too much for him, will you marry me, Ida?"

She thought for a moment, and then rising from the seat, gave him her hand and said simply:

"Yes, I /will/ marry you."

He made no answer, but lifting her hand touched it gently with his lips.

"Meanwhile," she went on, "I have your promise, and I am sure that you will not betray it, come what may."

"No," he said, "I will not betray it."

And they went in.

In the drawing-room they found the Squire puzzling over a sheet of paper, on which were scrawled some of George's accounts, in figures which at first sight bore about as much resemblance to Egyptian hieroglyphics as they did to those in use to-day.

"Hullo!" he said, "there you are. Where on earth have you been?"

"We have been looking at the Castle in the moonlight," answered Ida coolly. "It is beautiful."

"Um--ah," said the Squire, dryly, "I have no doubt that it is beautiful, but isn't the grass rather damp? Well, look here," and he held up the sheet of hieroglyphics, "perhaps you can add this up, Ida, for it is more than I can. George has bought stock and all sorts of things at the sale to-day and here is his account; three hundred and seventy-two pounds he makes it, but I make it four hundred and twenty, and hang me if I can find out which is right. It is most important that these accounts should be kept straight. Most important, and I cannot get this stupid fellow to do it."

Ida took the sheet of paper and added it up, with the result that she discovered both totals to be wrong. Harold, watching her, wondered at the nerve of a woman who, after going through such a scene as that which had just occurred, could deliberately add up long rows of badly-written figures.

And this money which her father was expending so cheerfully was part of the price for which she had bound herself.

With a sigh he rose, said good-night, and went home with feelings almost too mixed to admit of accurate description. He had taken a great step in his life, and to a certain extent that step had succeeded. He had not altogether built his hopes upon sand, for from what Ida had said, and still more from what she had tacitly admitted, it was necessarily clear to him that she did more or less regard him as a man would wish to be regarded by a woman whom he dearly loved. This was a great deal, more indeed than he had dared to believe, but then, as is usually the case in this imperfect world, where things but too often seem to be carefully arranged at sixes and sevens, came the other side of the shield. Of what use to him was it to have won this sweet woman's love, of what use to have put this pure water of happiness to his lips in the desert of his lonely life, only to see the cup that held it shattered at a blow? To him the story of the money loan--in consideration of which, as it were, Ida had put herself in pawn, as the Egyptians used to put the mummies of their fathers in pawn--was almost incredible. To a person of his simple and honourable nature, it seemed a preposterous and unheard of thing that any man calling himself a gentleman should find it possible to sink so low as to take such advantage of a woman's dire necessity and honourable desire to save her father from misery and her race from ruin, and to extract from her a promise of marriage in consideration of value received. Putting aside his overwhelming personal interest in the



matter, it made his blood boil to think that such a thing could be. And yet it was, and what was more, he believed he knew Ida well enough to be convinced that she would not shirk the bargain. If Edward Cossey came forward to claim his bond it would be paid down to the last farthing. It was a question of thirty thousand pounds; the happiness of his life and of Ida's depended upon a sum of money. If the money were forthcoming, Cossey could not claim his flesh and blood. But where was it to come from? He himself was worth perhaps ten thousand pounds, or with the commutation value of his pension, possibly twelve, and he had not the means of raising a farthing more. He thought the position over till he was tired of thinking, and then with a heavy heart and yet with a strange glow of happiness shining through his grief, like sunlight through a grey sky, at last he went to sleep and dreamed that Ida had gone from him, and that he was once more utterly alone in the world.

But if he had cause for trouble, how much more was it so with Ida? Poor woman! under her somewhat cold and stately exterior lay a deep and at times a passionate nature. For some weeks she had been growing strangely attracted to Harold Quaritch, and now she knew that she loved him, so that there was no one thing that she desired more in this wide world than to become his wife. And yet she was bound, bound by a sense of honour and a sense too of money received, to stay at the beck and call of a man she detested, and if at any time it pleased him to throw down the handkerchief, to be there to pick it up and hold it to her breast. It was bad enough to have had this hanging over her

head when she was herself more or less in a passive condition, and therefore to a certain extent reckless as to her future; but now that her heart was alight with the holy flame of a good woman's love, now that her whole nature rebelled and cried out aloud against the sacrilege involved, it was both revolting and terrible.

And yet so far as she could see there was no great probability of escape. A shrewd and observant woman, she could gauge Mr. Cossey's condition of mind towards herself with more or less accuracy. Also she did not think it in the least likely that having spent thirty thousand pounds to advance his object, he would be content to let his advantage drop. Such a course would be repellent to his trading instincts. She knew in her heart that the hour was not far off when he would claim his own, and that unless some accident occurred to prevent it, it was practically certain that she would be called upon to fulfil her pledge, and whilst loving another man to become the wife of Edward Cossey.