

## CHAPTER XX

"GOOD-BYE TO YOU, EDWARD"

It was on the day following the one upon which Harold proposed to Ida, that Edward Cossey returned to Boisingham. His father had so far recovered from his attack as to be at last prevailed upon to allow his departure, being chiefly moved thereto by the supposition that Cossey and Son's branch establishments were suffering from his son's absence.

"Well," he said, in his high, piercing voice, "business is business, and must be attended to, so perhaps you had better go. They talk about the fleeting character of things, but there is one thing that never changes, and that is money. Money is immortal; men may come and men may go, but money goes on for ever. Hee! hee! money is the honey-pot, and men are the flies; and some get their fill and some stick their wings, but the honey is always there, so never mind the flies. No, never mind me either; you go and look after the honey, Edward. Money--honey, honey--money, they rhyme, don't they? And look here, by the way, if you get a chance--and the world is full of chances to men who have plenty of money--mind you don't forget to pay out that half-pay Colonel--what's his name?--Quaritch. He played our family a dirty trick, and there's your poor Aunt Julia in a lunatic asylum to this moment and a constant source of expense to us."

And so Edward bade his estimable parent farewell and departed. Nor in

truth did he require any admonition from Mr. Cossey, Senior, to make him anxious to do Colonel Quaritch an ill-turn if the opportunity should serve. Mrs. Quest, in her numerous affectionate letters, had more than once, possibly for reasons of her own, given him a full and vivid /resume/ of the local gossip about the Colonel and Ida, who were, she said, according to common report, engaged to be married. Now, absence had not by any means cooled Edward's devotion to Miss de la Molle, which was a sincere one enough in its own way. On the contrary, the longer he was away from her the more his passion grew, and with it a vigorous undergrowth of jealousy. He had, it is true, Ida's implied promise that she would marry him if he chose to ask her, but on this he put no great reliance. Hence his hurry to return to Boisingham.

Leaving London by an afternoon train, he reached Boisingham about half-past six, and in pursuance of an arrangement already made, went to dine with the Quests. When he reached the house he found Belle alone in the drawing-room, for her husband, having come in late, was still dressing, but somewhat to his relief he had no opportunity of private conversation with her, for a servant was in the room, attending to the fire, which would not burn. The dinner passed off quietly enough, though there was an ominous look about the lady's face which, being familiar with these signs of the feminine weather, he did not altogether like. After dinner, however, Mr. Quest excused himself, saying that he had promised to attend a local concert in aid of the funds for the restoration of the damaged pinnacle of the parish

church, and he was left alone with the lady.

Then it was that all her pent-up passion broke out. She overwhelmed him with her affection, she told him that her life had been a blank while he was away, she reproached him with the scarcity and coldness of his letters, and generally went on in a way with which he was but too well accustomed, and, if the truth must be told, heartily tired. His mood was an irritable one, and to-night the whole thing wearied him beyond bearing.

"Come, Belle," he said at last, "for goodness' sake be a little more rational. You are getting too old for this sort of tomfoolery, you know."

She sprang up and faced him, her eyes flashing and her breast heaving with jealous anger. "What do you mean?" she said. "Are you tired of me?"

"I did not say that," he answered, "but as you have started the subject I must tell you that I think all this has gone far enough. Unless it is stopped I believe we shall both be ruined. I am sure that your husband is becoming suspicious, and as I have told you again and again, if once the business gets to my father's ears he will disinherit me."

Belle stood quite still till he had finished. She had assumed her

favourite attitude and crossed her arms behind her back, and her sweet childish face was calm and very white.

"What is the good of making excuses and telling me what is not true, Edward?" she said. "One never hears a man who loves a woman talk like that; prudence comes with weariness, and men grow circumspect when there is nothing more to gain. You /are/ tired of me. I have seen it a long time, but like a blind fool I have tried not to believe it. It is not a great reward to a woman who has given her whole life to a man, but perhaps it is as much as she can expect, for I do not want to be unjust to you. I am the most to blame, because we need never take a false step except of our own free will."

"Well, well," he said impatiently, "what of it?"

"Only this, Edward. I have still a little pride left, and as you are tired of me, why--/go/."

He tried hard to prevent it, but do what he would, a look of relief struggled into his face. She saw it, and it stung her almost to madness.

"You need not look so happy, Edward; it is scarcely decent; and, besides, you have not heard all that I have to say. I know what this arises from. You are in love with Ida de la Molle. Now /there/ I draw the line. You may leave me if you like, but you shall not marry Ida

while I am alive to prevent it. That is more than I can bear. Besides, like a wise woman, she wishes to marry Colonel Quaritch, who is worth two of you, Edward Cossey."

"I do not believe it," he answered; "and what right have you to say that I am in love with Miss de la Molle? And if I am in love with her, how can you prevent me from marrying her if I choose?"

"Try and you will see," she answered, with a little laugh. "And now, as the curtain has dropped, and it is all over between us, why the best thing that we can do is to put out the lights and go to bed," and she laughed again and courtesied with much assumed playfulness. "Good-night, Mr. Cossey; good-night, and good-bye."

He held out his hand. "Come, Belle," he said, "don't let us part like this."

She shook her head and once more put her arms behind her. "No," she answered, "I will not take your hand. Of my own free will I shall never touch it again, for to me it is like the hand of the dead. Good-bye, once more; good-bye to you, Edward, and to all the happiness that I ever had. I built up my life upon my love for you, and you have shattered it like glass. I do not reproach you; you have followed after your nature and I must follow after mine, and in time all things will come right--in the grave. I shall not trouble you any more, provided that you do not try to marry Ida, for that I will not bear.

And now go, for I am very tired," and turning, she rang the bell for the servant to show him out.

In another minute he was gone. She listened till she heard the front door close behind him, and then gave way to her grief. Flinging herself upon the sofa, she covered her face with her hands and moaned bitterly, weeping for the past, and weeping, too, for the long desolate years that were to come. Poor woman! whatever was the measure of her sin it had assuredly found her out, as our sins always do find us out in the end. She had loved this man with a love which has no parallel in the hearts of well-ordered and well-brought-up women. She never really lived till this fatal passion took possession of her, and now that its object had deserted her, her heart felt as though it was dead within her. In that short half-hour she suffered more than many women do in their whole lives. But the paroxysm passed, and she rose pale and trembling, with set teeth and blazing eyes.

"He had better be careful," she said to herself; "he may go, but if he tries to marry Ida I will keep my word--yes, for her sake as well as his."

When Edward Cossey came to consider the position, which he did seriously, on the following morning, he did not find it very satisfactory. To begin with, he was not altogether a heartless man, and such a scene as that which he had passed through on the previous evening was in itself quite enough to upset his nerves. At one time,

at any rate, he had been much attached to Mrs. Quest; he had never borne her any violent affection; that had all been on her side, but still he had been fond of her, and if he could have done so, would probably have married her. Even now he was attached to her, and would have been glad to remain her friend if she would have allowed it. But then came the time when her heroics began to weary him, and he on his side began to fall in love with Ida de la Molle, and as he drew back so she came forward, till at length he was worn out, and things culminated as has been described. He was sorry for her too, knowing how deeply she was attached to him, though it is probable that he did not in the least realise the extent to which she suffered, for neither men nor women who have intentionally or otherwise been the cause of intense mental anguish to one of the opposite sex ever do quite realise this. They, not unnaturally, measure the trouble by the depth of their own, and are therefore very apt to come to erroneous conclusions. Of course this is said of cases where all the real passion is on one side, and indifference or comparative indifference on the other; for where it is mutual, the grief will in natures of equal depth be mutual also.

At any rate, Edward Cossey was quite sensitive enough to acutely feel parting with Mrs. Quest, and perhaps he felt the manner of it even more than the fact of the separation. Then came another consideration. He was, it is true, free from his entanglement, in itself an enormous relief, but the freedom was of a conditional nature. Belle had threatened trouble in the most decisive tones should he attempt to

carry out his secret purpose of marrying Ida, which she had not been slow to divine. For some occult reason, at least to him it seemed occult, the idea of this alliance was peculiarly distasteful to her, though no doubt the true explanation was that she believed, and not inaccurately, that in order to bring it about he was bent upon deserting her. The question with him was, would she or would she not attempt to put her threat into execution? It certainly seemed to him difficult to imagine what steps she could take to that end, seeing that any such steps would necessarily involve her own exposure, and that too when there was nothing to gain, and when all hopes of thereby securing him for herself had passed away. Nor did he seriously believe that she would attempt anything of the sort. It is one thing for a woman to make such threats in the acute agony of her jealousy, and quite another for her to carry them out in cold blood. Looking at the matter from a man's point of view, it seemed to him extremely improbable that when the occasion came she would attempt such a move. He forgot how much more violently, when once it has taken possession of his being, the storm of passion sweeps through such a woman's heart than through a man's, and how utterly reckless to all consequence the former sometimes becomes. For there are women with whom all things melt in that white heat of anguished jealousy--honour, duty, conscience, and the restraint of religion--and of these Belle Quest was one.

But of this he was not aware, and though he recognised a risk, he saw in it no sufficient reason to make him stay his hand. For day by day



the strong desire to make Ida his wife had grown upon him, till at last it possessed him body and soul. For a long while the intent had been smouldering in his breast, and the tale that he now heard, to the effect that Colonel Quaritch had been beforehand with him, had blown it into a flame. Ida was ever present in his thoughts; even at night he could not be rid of her, for when he slept her vision, dark-eyed and beautiful, came stealing down his dreams. She was his heaven, and if by any ladder known to man he might climb thereto, thither he would climb. And so he set his teeth and vowed that, Mrs. Quest or no Mrs. Quest, he would stake his fortune upon the hazard of the die, aye, and win, even if he loaded the dice.

While he was still thinking thus, standing at his window and gazing out on to the market place of the quiet little town, he suddenly saw Ida herself driving in her pony-carriage. It was a wet and windy day, the rain was on her cheek, and the wind tossed a little lock of her brown hair. The cob was pulling, and her proud face was set, as she concentrated her energies upon holding him. Never to Edward Cossey had she looked more beautiful. His heart beat fast at the sight of her, and whatever doubts might have lingered in his mind, vanished. Yes, he would claim her promise and marry her.

Presently the pony carriage pulled up at his door, and the boy who was sitting behind got down and rang the bell. He stepped back from the window, wondering what it could be.

"Will you please give that note to Mr. Cossey," said Ida, as the door opened, "and ask him to send an answer?" and she was gone.

The note was from the Squire, sealed with his big seal (the Squire always sealed his letters in the old-fashioned way), and contained an invitation to himself to shoot on the morrow. "George wants me to do a little partridge driving," it ended, "and to brush through one or two of the small coverts. There will only be Colonel Quaritch besides yourself and George, but I hope that you will have a fair rough day. If I don't hear from you I shall suppose that you are coming, so don't trouble to write."

"Oh yes, I will go," said Edward. "Confound that Quaritch. At any rate I can show him how to shoot, and what is more I will have it out with him about my aunt."