

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLOW FALLS

On the following morning, about ten o'clock, while Edward Cossey was still at breakfast, a dog-cart drew up at his door and out of it stepped Colonel Quaritch.

"Now for the row," said he to himself. "I hope that the governor was right in his tale, that's all. Perhaps it would have been wiser to say nothing till I had made sure," and he poured out some more tea a little nervously, for in the Colonel he had, he felt, an adversary not to be despised.

Presently the door opened, and "Colonel Quaritch" was announced. He rose and bowed a salutation, which the Colonel whose face bore a particularly grim expression, did not return.

"Will you take a chair?" he said, as soon as the servant had left, and without speaking Harold took one--and presently began the conversation.

"Last night, Mr. Cossey," he said, "you thought proper to publicly bring a charge against me, which if it were true would go a long way towards showing that I was not a fit person to associate with those before whom it was brought."

"Yes," said Edward coolly.

"Before making any remarks on your conduct in bringing such a charge, which I give you credit for believing to be true, I purpose to show to you that it is a false charge," went on the Colonel quietly. "The story is a very simple one, and so sad that nothing short of necessity would force me to tell it. I was, when quite young, engaged to your aunt, Miss Heston, to whom I was much attached, and who was then twenty years of age. Though I had little besides my profession, she had money, and we were going to be married. The circumstances under which the marriage was broken off were as follow:--Three days before the wedding was to take place I went unexpectedly to the house, and was told by the servant that Miss Heston was upstairs in her sitting-room. I went upstairs to the room, which I knew well, knocked and got no answer. Then I walked into the room, and this is what I saw. Your aunt was lying on the sofa in her wedding dress (that is, in half of it, for she had only the skirt on), as I first thought, asleep. I went up to her, and saw that by her side was a brandy bottle, half empty. In her hand also was a glass containing raw brandy. While I was wondering what it could mean, she woke up, got off the sofa, and I saw that she was intoxicated."

"It's a lie!" said Edward excitedly.

"Be careful what you say, sir," answered the Colonel, "and wait to say

it till I have done."

"As soon as I realised what was the matter, I left the room again, and going down to your grandfather's study, where he was engaged in writing a sermon, I asked him to come upstairs, as I feared that his daughter was not well. He came and saw, and the sight threw him off his balance, for he broke out into a torrent of explanations and excuses, from which in time I extracted the following facts:--It appeared that ever since she was a child, Miss Heston had been addicted to drinking fits, and that it was on account of this constitutional weakness, which was of course concealed from me, that she had been allowed to engage herself to a penniless subaltern. It appeared, too, that the habit was hereditary, for her mother had died from the effects of drink, and one of her aunts had become mad from it.

"I went away and thought the matter over, and came to the conclusion that under these circumstances it would be impossible for me, much as I was attached to your aunt, to marry her, because even if I were willing to do so, I had no right to run the risk of bringing children into the world who might inherit the curse. Having come to this determination, which it cost me much to do, I wrote and communicated it to your grandfather, and the marriage was broken off."

"I do not believe it, I do not believe a word of it," said Edward, jumping up. "You jilted her and drove her mad, and now you are trying

to shelter yourself behind a tissue of falsehood."

"Are you acquainted with your grandfather's handwriting?" asked the Colonel quietly.

"Yes."

"Is that it?" he went on, producing a yellow-looking letter and showing it to him.

"I believe so--at least it looks like it."

"Then read the letter."

Edward obeyed. It was one written in answer to that of Harold Quaritch to his betrothed's father, and admitted in the clearest terms the justice of the step that he had taken. Further, it begged him for the sake of Julia and the family at large, never to mention the cause of his defection to any one outside the family.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Cossey? I have other letters, if you wish to see them."

Edward made no reply, and the Colonel went on:--"I gave the promise your grandfather asked for, and in spite of the remarks that were freely made upon my behaviour, I kept it, as it was my duty to do.

You, Mr. Cossey, are the first person to whom the story has been told. And now that you have thought fit to make accusations against me, which are without foundation, I must ask you to retract them as fully as you made them. I have prepared a letter which you will be so good as to sign," and he handed him a note addressed to the Squire. It ran:

"Dear Mr. de la Molle,--

"I beg in the fullest and most ample manner possible to retract the charges which I made yesterday evening against Colonel Quaritch, in the presence of yourself and Miss de la Molle. I find that those charges were unfounded, and I hereby apologise to Colonel Quaritch for having made them."

"And supposing that I refuse to sign," said Edward sulkily.

"I do not think," answered the Colonel, "that you will refuse."

Edward looked at Colonel Quaritch, and the Colonel looked at Edward.

"Well," said the Colonel, "please understand I mean that you should sign this letter, and, indeed, seeing how absolutely you are in the wrong, I do not think that you can hesitate to do so."

Then very slowly and unwillingly, Edward Cossey took up a pen, affixed his signature to the letter, blotted it, and pushed it from him.

The Colonel folded it up, placed it in an envelope which he had ready, and put it in his pocket.

"Now, Mr. Cossey," he said, "I will wish you good-morning. Another time I should recommend you to be more careful, both of your facts and the manner of your accusations," and with a slight bow he left the room.

"Curse the fellow," thought Edward to himself as the front door closed, "he had me there--I was forced to sign. Well, I will be even with him about Ida, at any rate. I will propose to her this very day, Belle or no Belle, and if she won't have me I will call the money in and smash the whole thing up"--and his handsome face bore a very evil look, as he thought of it.

That very afternoon he started in pursuance of this design, to pay a visit to the Castle. The Squire was out, but Miss de la Molle was at home. He was ushered into the drawing-room, where Ida was working, for it was a wet and windy afternoon.

She rose to greet him coldly enough, and he sat down, and then came a pause which she did not seem inclined to break.

At last he spoke. "Did the Squire get my letter, Miss de la Molle?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, rather icily. "Colonel Quaritch sent it up."

"I am very sorry," he added confusedly, "that I should have put myself in such a false position. I hope that you will give me credit for having believed my accusation when I made it."

"Such accusations should not be lightly made, Mr. Cossey," was her answer, and, as though to turn the subject, she rose and rang the bell for tea.

It came, and the bustle connected with it prevented any further conversation for a while. At length, however, it subsided, and once more Edward found himself alone with Ida. He looked at her and felt afraid. The woman was of a different clay to himself, and he knew it--he loved her, but he did not understand her in the least. However, if the thing was to be done at all it must be done now, so, with a desperate effort, he brought himself to the point.

"Miss de la Molle," he said, and Ida, knowing full surely what was coming, felt her heart jump within her bosom and then stand still.

"Miss de la Molle," he repeated, "perhaps you will remember a conversation that passed between us some weeks ago in the

conservatory?"

"Yes," she said, "I remember--about the money."

"About the money and other things," he said, gathering courage. "I hinted to you then that I hoped in certain contingencies to be allowed to make my addresses to you, and I think that you understood me."

"I understood you perfectly," answered Ida, her pale face set like ice, "and I gave you to understand that in the event of your lending my father the money, I should hold myself bound to--to listen to what you had to say."

"Oh, never mind the money," broke in Edward. "It is not a question of money with me, Ida, it is not, indeed. I love you with all my heart. I have loved you ever since I saw you. It was because I was jealous of him that I made a fool of myself last night with Colonel Quaritch. I should have asked you to marry me long ago only there were obstacles in the way. I love you, Ida; there never was a woman like you--never."

She listened with the same set face. Obviously he was in earnest, but his earnestness did not move her; it scarcely even flattered her pride. She disliked the man intensely, and nothing that he could say or do would lessen that dislike by one jot--probably, indeed, it would only intensify it.

Presently he stopped, his breast heaving and his face broken with emotion, and tried to take her hand.

She withdrew it sharply.

"I do not think that there is any need for all this," she said coldly.

"I gave a conditional promise. You have fulfilled your share of the bargain, and I am prepared to fulfil mine in due course."

So far as her words went, Edward could find no fault with their meaning, and yet he felt more like a man who has been abruptly and finally refused than one declared chosen. He stood still and looked at her.

"I think it right to tell you, however," she went on in the same measured tones, "that if I marry you it will be from motives of duty, and not from motives of affection. I have no love to give you and I do not wish for yours. I do not know if you will be satisfied with this. If you are not, you had better give up the idea," and for the first time she looked up at him with more anxiety in her face than she would have cared to show.

But if she hoped that her coldness would repel him, she was destined to be disappointed. On the contrary, like water thrown on burning oil, it only inflamed him the more.

"The love will come, Ida," he said, and once more he tried to take her hand.

"No, Mr. Cossey," she said, in a voice that checked him. "I am sorry to have to speak so plainly, but till I marry I am my own mistress. Pray understand me."

"As you like," he said, drawing back from her sulkily. "I am so fond of you that I will marry you on any terms, and that is the truth. I have, however, one thing to ask of you, Ida, and it is that you will keep our engagement secret for the present, and get your father (I suppose I must speak to him) to do the same. I have reasons," he went on by way of explanation, "for not wishing it to become known."

"I do not see why I should keep it secret," she said; "but it does not matter to me."

"The fact is," he explained, "my father is a very curious man, and I doubt if he would like my engagement, because he thinks I ought to marry a great deal of money."

"Oh, indeed," answered Ida. She had believed, as was indeed the case, that there were other reasons not unconnected with Mrs. Quest, on account of which he was anxious to keep the engagement secret. "By the way," she went on, "I am sorry to have to talk of business, but this is a business matter, is it not? I suppose it is understood that, in

the event of our marriage, the mortgage you hold over this place will not be enforced against my father."

"Of course not," he answered. "Look here, Ida, I will give you those mortgage bonds as a wedding present, and you can put them in the fire; and I will make a good settlement on you."

"Thank you," she said, "but I do not require any settlement on myself; I had rather none was made; but I consent to the engagement only on the express condition that the mortgages shall be cancelled before marriage, and as the property will ultimately come to me, this is not much to ask. And now one more thing, Mr. Cossey; I should like to know when you would wish this marriage to take place; not yet, I presume?"

"I could wish it to take place to-morrow," he said with an attempt at a laugh; "but I suppose that between one thing and another it can't come off at once. Shall we say this time six months, that will be in May?"

"Very good," said Ida; "this day six months I shall be prepared to become your wife, Mr. Cossey. I believe," she added with a flash of bitter sarcasm, "it is the time usually allowed for the redemption of a mortgage."

"You say very hard things," he answered, wincing.

"Do I? I daresay. I am hard by nature. I wonder that you can wish to marry me."

"I wish it beyond everything in the world," he answered earnestly.

"You can never know how much. By the way, I know I was foolish about Colonel Quaritch; but, Ida, I cannot bear to see that man near you. I hope that you will now drop his acquaintance as much as possible."

Once more Ida's face set like a flint. "I am not your wife yet, Mr. Cossey," she said; "when I am you will have a right to dictate to me as to whom I shall associate with. At present you have no such right, and if it pleases me to associate with Colonel Quaritch, I shall do so. If you disapprove of my conduct, the remedy is simple--you can break off the engagement."

He rose absolutely crushed, for Ida was by far the stronger of the two, and besides, his passion gave her an unfair advantage over him. Without attempting a reply he held out his hand and said good-night, for he was afraid to venture on any demonstration of affection, adding that he would come to see her father in the morning.

She touched his outstretched hand with her fingers, and then fearing lest he should change his mind, promptly rang the bell.

In another minute the door had closed behind him and she was left alone.