

CHAPTER XXIV

"GOOD-BYE, MY DEAR, GOOD-BYE!"

When Edward Cossey had gone, Ida rose and put her hands to her head. So the blow had fallen, the deed was done, and she was engaged to be married to Edward Cossey. And Harold Quaritch! Well, there must be an end to that. It was hard, too--only a woman could know how hard. Ida was not a person with a long record of love affairs. Once, when she was twenty, she had received a proposal which she had refused, and that was all. So it happened that when she became attached to Colonel Quaritch she had found her heart for the first time, and for a woman, somewhat late in life. Consequently her feelings were all the more profound, and so indeed was her grief at being forced not only to put them away, but to give herself to another man who was not agreeable to her. She was not a violent or ill-regulated woman like Mrs. Quest. She looked facts in the face, recognised their meaning and bowed before their inexorable logic. It seemed to her almost impossible that she could hope to avoid this marriage, and if that proved to be so, she might be relied upon to make the best of it. Scandal would, under any circumstances, never find a word to say against Ida, for she was not a person who could attempt to console herself for an unhappy marriage. But it was bitter, bitter as gall, to be thus forced to turn aside from her happiness--for she well knew that with Harold Quaritch her life would be very happy--and fit her shoulders to this heavy yoke. Well, she had saved the place to her father, and also to her

descendants, if she had any, and that was all that could be said.

She thought and thought, wishing in the bitterness of her heart that she had never been born to come to such a heavy day, till at last she could think no more. The air of the room seemed to stifle her, though it was by no means overheated. She went to the window and looked out. It was a wild wet evening, and the wind drove the rain before it in sheets. In the west the lurid rays of the sinking sun stained the clouds blood red, and broke in arrows of ominous light upon the driving storm.

But bad as was the weather, it attracted Ida. When the heart is heavy and torn by conflicting passions, it seems to answer to the calling of the storm, and to long to lose its petty troubling in the turmoil of the rushing world. Nature has many moods of which our own are but the echo and reflection, and she can be companionable when all human sympathy must fail. For she is our mother from whom we come, to whom we go, and her arms are ever open to clasp the children who can hear her voices. Drawn thereto by an impulse which she could not have analysed, Ida went upstairs, put on a thick pair of boots, a macintosh and an old hat. Then she sallied out into the wind and wet. It was blowing big guns, and as the rain whirled down the drops struck upon her face like spray. She crossed the moat bridge, and went out into the parkland beyond. The air was full of dead leaves, and the grass rustled with them as though it were alive, for this was the first wind since the frost. The great boughs of the oaks rattled and groaned

above her, and high overhead, among the sullen clouds, a flight of rooks were being blown this way and that.

Ida bent her tall form against the rain and gale, and fought her way through them. At first she had no clear idea as to where she was going, but presently, perhaps from custom, she took the path that ran across the fields to Honham Church. It was a beautiful old church, particularly as regards the tower, one of the finest in the county, which had been partially blown down and rebuilt about the time of Charles I. The church itself had originally been founded by the Boisse family, and considerably enlarged by the widow of a de la Molle, whose husband had fallen at Agincourt, "as a memorial for ever." There, upon the porch, were carved the "hawks" of the de la Molles, wreathed round with palms of victory; and there, too, within the chancel, hung the warrior's helmet and his dented shield.

Nor was he alone, for all around lay the dust of his kindred, come after the toil and struggle of their stormy lives to rest within the walls of that old church. Some of them had monuments of alabaster, whereon they lay in effigy, their heads pillowed upon that of a conquered Saracen; some had monuments of oak and brass, and some had no monuments at all, for the Puritans had ruthlessly destroyed them. But they were nearly all there, nearly twenty generations of the bearers of an ancient name, for even those of them who perished on the scaffold had been borne here for burial. The place was eloquent of the dead and of the mournful lesson of mortality. From century to century

the bearers of that name had walked in these fields, and lived in yonder Castle, and looked upon the familiar swell of yonder ground and the silver flash of yonder river, and now their ashes were gathered here and all the forgotten turmoil of their lives was lost in the silence of those narrow tombs.

Ida loved the spot, hallowed to her not only by the altar of her faith, but also by the human associations that clung around and clothed it as the ivy clothed its walls. Here she had been christened, and here among her ancestors she hoped to be buried also. Here as a girl, when the full moon was up, she had crept in awed silence with her brother James to look through the window at the white and solemn figures stretched within. Here, too, she had sat on Sunday after Sunday for more than twenty years, and stared at the quaint Latin inscriptions cut on marble slabs, recording the almost superhuman virtues of departed de la Molles of the eighteenth century, her own immediate ancestors. The place was familiar to her whole life; she had scarcely a recollection with which it was not in some way connected. It was not wonderful, therefore, that she loved it, and that in the trouble of her mind her feet shaped their course towards it.

Presently she was in the churchyard. Taking her stand under the shelter of a line of Scotch firs, through which the gale sobbed and sang, she leant against a side gate and looked. The scene was desolate enough. Rain dropped from the roof on to the sodden graves beneath, and ran in thin sheets down the flint facing of the tower; the dead

leaves whirled and rattled about the empty porch, and over all shot one red and angry arrow from the sinking sun. She stood in the storm and rain, gazing at the old church that had seen the end of so many sorrows more bitter than her own, and the wreck of so many summers, till the darkness began to close round her like a pall, while the wind sung the requiem of her hopes. Ida was not of a desponding or pessimistic character, but in that bitter hour she found it in her heart, as most people have at one time or another in their lives, to wish the tragedy over and the curtain down, and that she lay beneath those dripping sods without sight or hearing, without hope or dread. It seemed to her that the Hereafter must indeed be terrible if it outweighs the sorrows of the Here.

And then, poor woman, she thought of the long years between her and rest, and leaning her head against the gate-post, began to cry bitterly in the gloom.

Presently she ceased crying and with a start looked up, feeling that she was no longer alone. Her instincts had not deceived her, for in the shadow of the fir trees, not more than two paces from her, was the figure of a man. Just then he took a step to the left, which brought his outline against the sky, and Ida's heart stood still, for now she knew him. It was Harold Quaritch, the man over whose loss she had been weeping.

"It's very odd," she heard him say, for she was to leeward of him,

"but I could have sworn that I heard somebody sobbing; I suppose it was the wind."

Ida's first idea was flight, and she made a movement for that purpose, but in doing so tripped over a stick and nearly fell.

In a minute he was by her side. She was caught, and perhaps she was not altogether sorry, especially as she had tried to get away.

"Who is it? what's the matter?" said the Colonel, lighting a fusee under her eyes. It was one of those flaming fusees, and burnt with a blue light, showing Ida's tall figure and beautiful face, all stained with grief and tears, showing her wet macintosh, and the gate-post against which she had been leaning--showing everything.

"Why, Ida," he said in amaze, "what are you doing here, crying too?"

"I'm not crying," she said, with a sob; "it's the rain that has made my face wet."

Just then the light burnt out and he dropped it.

"What is it, dear, what is it?" he said in great distress, for the sight of her alone in the wet and dark, and in tears, moved him beyond himself. Indeed he would have been no man if it had not.

She tried to answer, but she could not, and in another minute, to tell the honest truth, she had exchanged the gate-post for Harold's broad shoulder, and was finishing her "cry" there.

Now to see a young and pretty woman weeping (more especially if she happens to be weeping on your shoulder) is a very trying thing. It is trying even if you do not happen to be in love with her at all. But if you are in love with her, however little, it is dreadful; whereas, if, as in the present case, you happen to worship her, more, perhaps, than it is good to worship any fallible human creature, then the sight is positively overpowering. And so, indeed, it proved in the present instance. The Colonel could not bear it, but lifting her head from his shoulder, he kissed her sweet face again and again.

"What is it, darling?" he said, "what is the matter?"

"Leave go of me and I will tell you," she answered.

He obeyed, though with some unwillingness.

She hunted for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, and then at last she spoke:

"I am engaged to be married," she said in a low voice, "I am engaged to Mr. Cossey."

Then, for about the first time in his life, Harold Quaritch swore violently in the presence of a lady.

"Oh, damn it all!" he said.

She took no notice of the strength of the language, perhaps indeed she re-echoed it in some feminine equivalent.

"It is true," she said with a sigh. "I knew that it would come, those dreadful things always do--and it was not my fault--I am sure you will always remember that. I had to do it--he advanced the money on the express condition, and even if I could pay back the money, I suppose that I should be bound to carry out the bargain. It is not the money which he wants but his bond."

"Curse him for a Shylock," said Harold again, and groaned in his bitterness and jealousy.

"Is there nothing to be done?" he asked presently in a harsh voice, for he was very hard hit.

"Nothing," she answered sadly. "I do not see what can help us, unless the man died," she said; "and that is not likely. Harold," she went on, addressing him for the first time in her life by his Christian name, for she felt that after crying upon a man's shoulder it is ridiculous to scruple about calling him by his name; "Harold, there is

no help for it. I did it myself, remember, because, as I told you, I do not think that any one woman has a right to place her individual happiness before the welfare of her family. And I am only sorry," she added, her voice breaking a little, "that what I have done should bring suffering upon you."

He groaned again, but said nothing.

"We must try to forget," she went on wildly. "Oh no! no! I feel it is not possible that we should forget. You won't forget me, Harold, will you? And though it must be all over between us, and we must never speak like this again--never--you will always know I have not forgotten you, will you not, but that I think of you always?"

"There is no fear of my forgetting," he said, "and I am selfish enough to hope that you will think of me at times, Ida."

"Yes, indeed I will. We all have our burdens to bear. It is a hard world, and we must bear them. And it will all be the same in the end, in just a few years. I daresay these dead people here have felt as we feel, and how quiet they are! And perhaps there may be something beyond, where things are not so. Who can say? You won't go away from this place, Harold, will you? Not until I am married at any rate; perhaps you had better go then. Say that you won't go till then, and you will let me see you sometimes; it is a comfort to see you."

"I should have gone, certainly," he said; "to New Zealand probably, but if you wish it I will stop for the present."

"Thank you; and now good-bye, my dear, good-bye! No, don't come with me, I can find my own way home. And--why do you wait? Good-bye, good-bye for ever in this way. Yes, kiss me once and swear that you will never forget me. Marry if you wish to; but don't forget me, Harold. Forgive me for speaking so plainly, but I speak as one about to die to you, and I wish things to be clear."

"I shall never marry and I shall never forget you," he answered.

"Good-bye, my love, good-bye!"

In another minute she had vanished into the storm and rain, out of his sight and out of his life, but not out of his heart.

He, too, turned and went his way into the wild and lonely night.

An hour afterwards Ida came down into the drawing-room dressed for dinner, looking rather pale but otherwise quite herself. Presently the Squire arrived. He had been at a magistrate's meeting, and had only just got home.

"Why, Ida," he said, "I could not find you anywhere. I met George as I

was driving from Boisingham, and he told me that he saw you walking through the park."

"Did he?" she answered indifferently. "Yes, I have been out. It was so stuffy indoors. Father," she went on, with a change of tone, "I have something to tell you. I am engaged to be married."

He looked at her curiously, and then said quietly--the Squire was always quiet in any matter of real emergency--"Indeed, my dear! That is a serious matter. However, speaking off-hand, I think that notwithstanding the disparity of age, Quaritch----"

"No, no," she said, wincing visibly, "I am not engaged to Colonel Quaritch, I am engaged to Mr. Cossey."

"Oh," he said, "oh, indeed! I thought from what I saw, that--that----"

At this moment the servant announced dinner.

"Well, never mind about it now, father," she said; "I am tired and want my dinner. Mr. Cossey is coming to see you to-morrow, and we can talk about it afterwards."

And though the Squire thought a good deal, he made no further allusion to the subject that night.