

CHAPTER XXV

THE SQUIRE GIVES HIS CONSENT

Edward Cossey did not come away from the scene of his engagement in a very happy or triumphant tone of mind. Ida's bitter words stung like whips, and he understood, and she clearly meant he should understand, that it was only in consideration of the money advanced that she had consented to become his wife. Now, however satisfactory it is to be rich enough to purchase your heart's desire in this fashion, it is not altogether soothing to the pride of a nineteenth-century man to be continually haunted by the thought that he is a buyer in the market and nothing but a buyer. Of course, he saw clearly enough that there was an object in all this--he saw that Ida, by making obvious her dislike, wished to disgust him with his bargain, and escape from an alliance of which the prospect was hateful to her. But he had no intention of being so easily discouraged. In the first place his passion for the woman was as a devouring flame, eating ever at his heart. In that at any rate he was sincere; he did love her so far as his nature was capable of love, or at any rate he had the keenest desire to make her his wife. A delicate-minded man would probably have shrunk from forcing himself upon a woman under parallel circumstances; but Edward Cossey did not happen to fall into that category. As a matter of fact such men are not as common as they might be.

Another thing which he took into account was that Ida would probably get over her dislike. He was a close observer of women, in a cynical and half contemptuous way, and he remarked, or thought that he remarked, a curious tendency among them to submit with comparative complacency to the inevitable whenever it happened to coincide with their material advantage. Women, he argued, have not, as a class, outgrown the traditions of their primitive condition when their partners for life were chosen for them by lot or the chance of battle. They still recognise the claims of the wealthiest or strongest, and their love of luxury and ease is so keen that if the nest they lie in is only soft enough, they will not grieve long over the fact that it was not of their own choosing. Arguing from these untrustworthy premises, he came to the conclusion that Ida would soon get over her repugnance to marrying him, when she found how many comforts and good things marriage with so rich a man would place at her disposal, and would, if for no other reason, learn to look on him with affection and gratitude as the author of her gilded ease. And so indeed she might have done had she been of another and more common stamp. But, unfortunately for his reasoning, there exist members of her sex who are by nature of an order of mind superior to these considerations, and who realise that they have but one life to live, and that the highest form of happiness is /not/ dependent upon money or money's worth, but rather upon the indulgence of mental aspirations and those affections which, when genuine, draw nearer to holiness than anything else about us. Such a woman, more especially if she is already possessed with an affection for another man, does not easily become

reconciled to a distasteful lot, however quietly she may endure it, and such a woman was Ida de la Molle.

Edward Cossey, when he reached Boisingham on the evening of his engagement, at once wrote and posted a note to the Squire, saying that he would call on the following morning about a matter of business. Accordingly, at half-past ten o'clock, he arrived and was shown into the vestibule, where he found the old gentleman standing with his back to the fire and plunged in reflection.

"Well, Mr. de la Molle," said Edward, rather nervously, so soon as he had shaken hands, "I do not know if Ida has spoken to you about what took place between us yesterday."

"Yes," he said, "yes, she told me something to the effect that she had accepted a proposal of marriage from you, subject to my consent, of course; but really the whole thing is so sudden that I have hardly had time to consider it."

"It is very simple," said Edward; "I am deeply attached to your daughter, and I have been so fortunate as to be accepted by her. Should you give your consent to the marriage, I may as well say at once that I wish to carry out the most liberal money arrangements in my power. I will make Ida a present of the mortgage that I hold over this property, and she may put it in the fire. Further, I will covenant on the death of my father, which cannot now be long delayed,

to settle two hundred thousand pounds upon her absolutely. Also, I am prepared to agree that if we have a son, and he should wish to do so, he shall take the name of de la Molle."

"I am sure," said the Squire, turning round to hide his natural gratification at these proposals, "your offers on the subject of settlements are of a most liberal order, and of course so far as I am concerned, Ida will have this place, which may one day be again more valuable than it is now."

"I am glad that they meet with your approval," said Edward; "and now there is one more thing I want to ask you, Mr. de la Molle, and which I hope, if you give your consent to the marriage, you will not raise any objection to. It is, that our engagement should not be announced at present. The fact is," he went on hurriedly, "my father is a very peculiar man, and has a great idea of my marrying somebody with a large fortune. Also his state of health is so uncertain that there is no possibility of knowing how he will take anything. Indeed he is dying; the doctors told me that he might go off any day, and that he cannot last for another three months. If the engagement is announced to him now, at the best I shall have a great deal of trouble, and at the worst he might make me suffer in his will, should he happen to take a fancy against it."

"Umph," said the Squire, "I don't quite like the idea of a projected marriage with my daughter, Miss de la Molle of Honham Castle, being

hushed up as though there were something discreditable about it, but still there may be peculiar circumstances in the case which would justify me in consenting to that course. You are both old enough to know your own minds, and the match would be as advantageous for you as it could be to us, for even now-a-days, family, and I may even say personal appearance, still go for something where matrimony is concerned. I have reason to know that your father is a peculiar man, very peculiar. Yes, on the whole, though I don't like hole and corner affairs, I shall have no objection to the engagement not being announced for the next month or two."

"Thank you for considering me so much," said Edward with a sigh of relief. "Then am I to understand that you give your consent to our engagement?"

The Squire reflected for a moment. Everything seemed quite straight, and yet he suspected crookedness. His latent distrust of the man, which had not been decreased by the scene of two nights before--for he never could bring himself to like Edward Cossey--arose in force and made him hesitate when there was no visible ground for hesitation. He possessed, as has been said, an instinctive insight into character that was almost feminine in its intensity, and it was lifting a warning finger before him now.

"I don't quite know what to say," he replied at length. "The whole affair is so sudden--and to tell you the truth, I thought that Ida had

bestowed her affections in another direction."

Edward's face darkened. "I thought so too," he answered, "until yesterday, when I was so happy as to be undeceived. I ought to tell you, by the way," he went on, running away from the covert falsehood in his last words as quickly as he could, "how much I regret I was the cause of that scene with Colonel Quaritch, more especially as I find that there is an explanation of the story against him. The fact is, I was foolish enough to be vexed because he beat me out shooting, and also because, well I--I was jealous of him."

"Ah, yes," said the Squire, rather coldly, "a most unfortunate affair. Of course, I don't know what the particulars of the matter were, and it is no business of mine, but speaking generally, I should say never bring an accusation of that sort against a man at all unless you are driven to it, and if you do bring it be quite certain of your ground. However, that is neither here nor there. Well, about this engagement. Ida is old enough to judge for herself, and seems to have made up her mind, so as I know no reason to the contrary, and as the business arrangements proposed are all that I could wish, I cannot see that I have any ground for withholding my consent. So all I can say, sir, is that I hope you will make my daughter a good husband, and that you will both be happy. Ida is a high-spirited woman; but in my opinion she is greatly above the average of her sex, as I have known it, and provided you have her affection, and don't attempt to drive her, she will go through thick and thin for you. But I dare say you would like

to see her. Oh, by the way, I forgot, she has got a headache this morning, and is stopping in bed. It isn't much in her line, but I daresay that she is a little upset. Perhaps you would like to come up to dinner to-night?"

This proposition Edward, knowing full well that Ida's headache was a device to rid herself of the necessity of seeing him, accepted with gratitude and went.

As soon as he had gone, Ida herself came down.

"Well, my dear," said the Squire cheerfully, "I have just had the pleasure of seeing Edward Cossey, and I have told him that, as you seemed to wish it----"

Here Ida made a movement of impatience, but remembered herself and said nothing.

"That as you seemed to wish that things should be so, I had no ground of objection to your engagement. I may as well tell you that the proposals which he makes as regards settlements are of the most liberal nature."

"Are they?" answered Ida indifferently. "Is Mr. Cossey coming here to dinner?"

"Yes, I asked him. I thought that you would like to see him."

"Well, then, I wish you had not," she answered with animation, "because there is nothing to eat except some cold beef. Really, father, it is very thoughtless of you;" and she stamped her foot and went off in a huff, leaving the Squire full of reflection.

"I wonder what it all means," he said to himself. "She can't care about the man much or she would not make that fuss about his being asked to dinner. Ida isn't the sort of woman to be caught by the money, I should think. Well, I know nothing about it; it is no affair of mine, and I can only take things as I find them."

And then he fell to reflecting that this marriage would be an extraordinary stroke of luck for the family. Here they were at the last gasp, mortgaged up the eyes, when suddenly fortune, in the shape of an, on the whole, perfectly unobjectionable young man, appears, takes up the mortgages, proposes settlements to the tune of hundreds of thousands, and even offers to perpetuate the old family name in the person of his son, should he have one. Such a state of affairs could not but be gratifying to any man, however unworldly, and the Squire was not altogether unworldly. That is, he had a keen sense of the dignity of his social position and his family, and it had all his life been his chief and laudable desire to be sufficiently provided with the goods of this world to raise the de la Molles to the position which they had occupied in former centuries. Hitherto, however, the

tendency of events had been all the other way--the house was a sinking one, and but the other day its ancient roof had nearly fallen about their ears. But now the prospect changed as though by magic. On Ida's marriage all the mortgages, those heavy accumulations of years of growing expenditure and narrowing means, would roll off the back of the estate, and the de la Molles of Honham Castle would once more take the place in the county to which they were undoubtedly entitled.

It is not wonderful that the prospect proved a pleasing one to him, or that his head was filled with visions of splendours to come.

As it chanced, on that very morning it was necessary for Mr. Quest to pay the old gentleman a visit in order to obtain his signature to a lease of a bakery in Boisingham, which, together with two or three other houses, belonged to the estate.

He arrived just as the Squire was in the full flow of his meditations, and it would not have needed a man of Mr. Quest's penetration and powers of observation to discover that he had something on his mind which he was longing for an opportunity to talk about.

The Squire signed the lease without paying the slightest attention to Mr. Quest's explanations, and then suddenly asked him when the first interest on the recently-effected mortgages came due.

The lawyer mentioned a certain date.

"Ah," said the Squire, "then it will have to be met; but it does not matter, it will be for the last time."

Mr. Quest pricked up his ears and looked at him.

"The fact is, Quest," he went on by way of explanation, "that there are--well--family arrangements pending which will put an end to these embarrassments in a natural and a proper way."

"Indeed," said Mr. Quest, "I am very glad to hear it."

"Yes, yes," said the Squire, "unfortunately I am under some restraints in speaking about the matter at present, or I should like to ask your opinion, for which as you know I have a great respect. Really, though, I do not know why I should not consult my lawyer on a matter of business; I only consented not to trumpet the thing about."

"Lawyers are confidential agents," said Mr. Quest quietly.

"Of course they are. Of course, and it is their business to hold their tongues. I may rely upon your discretion, may I not?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, the matter is this: Mr. Edward Cossey is engaged to Miss de la

Molle. He has just been here to obtain my consent, which, of course, I have not withheld, as I know nothing against the young man--nothing at all. The only stipulation that he made is, as I think, a reasonable one under the circumstances, namely, that the engagement is to be kept quiet for a little while on account of the condition of his father's health. He says that he is an unreasonable man, and that he might take a prejudice against it."

During this announcement Mr. Quest had remained perfectly quiet, his face showing no signs of excitement, only his eyes shone with a curious light.

"Indeed," he said, "this is very interesting news."

"Yes," said the Squire. "That is what I meant by saying that there would be no necessity to make any arrangements as to the future payment of interest, for Cossey has informed me that he proposes to put the mortgage bonds in the fire before his marriage."

"Indeed," said Mr. Quest; "well, he could hardly do less, could he? Altogether, I think you ought to be congratulated, Mr. de la Molle. It is not often that a man gets such a chance of clearing the encumbrances off a property. And now I am very sorry, but I must be getting home, as I promised my wife to be back for luncheon. As the thing is to be kept quiet, I suppose that it would be premature for me to offer my good wishes to Miss de la Molle."

"Yes, yes, don't say anything about it at present. Well, good-bye."