

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. QUEST HAS HIS INNINGS

All that afternoon and far into the evening Mr. Quest was employed in drafting, and with his own hand engrossing on parchment certain deeds, for the proper execution of which he seemed to find constant reference necessary to a tin box of papers labelled "Honham Castle Estates."

By eleven that night everything was finished, and having carefully collected and docketed his papers, he put the tin box away and went home to bed.

Next morning, about ten o'clock, Edward Cossey was sitting at breakfast in no happy frame of mind. He had gone up to the Castle to dinner on the previous evening, but it cannot be said that he had enjoyed himself. Ida was there, looking very handsome in her evening dress, but she was cold as a stone and unapproachable as a statue. She scarcely spoke to him, indeed, except in answer to some direct remark, reserving all her conversation for her father, who seemed to have caught the contagion of restraint, and was, for him, unusually silent and depressed.

But once or twice he found her looking at him, and then there was upon her face a mingled expression of contempt and irresistible aversion which chilled him to the marrow.

These qualities were indeed so much more plainly developed towards himself than they had been before, that at last a conviction which he at first rejected as incredible forced itself into his mind. This conviction was, that Belle had disbelieved his denial of the engagement, and in her eagerness for revenge, must have told Ida the whole story. The thought made him feel faint. Well, there was but one thing to be done--face it out.

Once when the Squire's back was turned he had ventured to attempt some little verbal tenderness in which the word "dear" occurred, but Ida did not seem to hear it and looked straight over his head into space. This he felt was trying. So trying did he find the whole entertainment indeed that about half-past nine he rose and came away, saying that he had received some bank papers which must be attended to that night.

Now most men would in all human probability have been dismayed by this state of affairs into relinquishing an attempt at matrimony which it was evident could only be carried through in the face of the quiet but none the less vigorous dislike and contempt of the other contracting party. But this was not so with Edward Cossey. Ida's coldness excited upon his tenacious and obstinate mind much the same effect that may be supposed to be produced upon the benighted seeker for the North Pole by the sight of a frozen ocean of icebergs. Like the explorer he was convinced that if once he could get over those cold heights he would find a smiling sunny land beyond and perchance many other delights,

and like the explorer again, he was, metaphorically, ready to die in the effort. For he loved her more every day, till now his passion dominated his physical being and his mental judgment, so that whatever loss was entailed, and whatever obstacles arose, he was determined to endure and overcome them if by so doing he might gain his end.

He was reflecting upon all this on the morning in question when Mr. Quest, looking very cool, composed and gentlemanlike, was shown into his room, much as Colonel Quaritch had been shown in two mornings before.

"How do you do, Quest?" he said, in a from high to low tone, which he was in the habit of adopting towards his official subordinates. "Sit down. What is it?"

"It is some business, Mr. Cossey," the lawyer answered in his usual quiet tones.

"Honham Castle mortgages again, I suppose," he growled. "I only hope you don't want any more money on that account at present, that's all; because I can't raise another cent while my father lives. They don't entail cash and bank shares, you know, and though my credit's pretty good I am not far from the bottom of it."

"Well," said Mr. Quest, with a faint smile, "it has to do with the Honham Castle mortgages; but as I have a good deal to say, perhaps we

had better wait till the things are cleared."

"All right. Just ring the bell, will you, and take a cigarette?"

Mr. Quest smiled again and rang the bell, but did not take the cigarette. When the breakfast things had been removed he took a chair, and placing it on the further side of the table in such a position that the light, which was to his back, struck full upon Edward Cossey's face, began to deliberately untie and sort his bundle of papers. Presently he came to the one he wanted--a letter. It was not an original letter, but a copy. "Will you kindly read this, Mr. Cossey?" he said quietly, as he pushed the letter towards him across the table.

Edward finished lighting his cigarette, then took the letter up and glanced at it carelessly. At sight of the first line his expression changed to one of absolute horror, his face blanched, the perspiration sprang out upon his forehead, and the cigarette dropped from his fingers to the carpet, where it lay smouldering. Nor was this wonderful, for the letter was a copy of one of Belle's most passionate epistles to himself. He had never been able to restrain her from writing these compromising letters. Indeed, this one was the very same that some little time before Mr. Quest had abstracted from the pocket of Mr. Cossey's lounging coat in the room in London.

He read on for a little way and then put the letter down upon the

table. There was no need for him to go further, it was all in the same strain.

"You will observe, Mr. Cossey, that this is a copy," said Mr. Quest, "but if you like you can inspect the original document."

He made no answer.

"Now," went on Mr. Quest, handing him a second paper, "here is the copy of another letter, of which the original is in your handwriting."

Edward looked at it. It was an intercepted letter of his own, dated about a year before, and its contents, though not of so passionate a nature as the other, were of a sufficiently incriminating character.

He put it down upon the table by the side of the first and waited for Mr. Quest to go on.

"I have other evidence," said his visitor presently, "but you are probably sufficiently versed in such matters to know that these letters alone are almost enough for my purpose. That purpose is to commence a suit for divorce against my wife, in which you will, of course, in accordance with the provisions of the Act, be joined as co-respondent. Indeed, I have already drawn up a letter of instruction to my London agents directing them to take the preliminary steps," and he pushed a third paper towards him.

Edward Cossey turned his back to his tormentor and resting his head upon his hand tried to think.

"Mr. Quest," he said presently in a hoarse voice, "without admitting anything, there are reasons which would make it ruinous to me if such an action were commenced at present."

"Yes," he answered, "there are. In the first place there is no knowing in what light your father would look on the matter and how his view of it would affect your future interests. In the second your engagement to Miss de la Molle, upon which you are strongly set, would certainly be broken off."

"How do you know that I am engaged?" asked Edward in surprise.

"It does not matter how I know it," said the lawyer, "I do know it, so it will be useless for you to deny it. As you remark, this suit will probably be your ruin in every way, and therefore it is, as you will easily understand, a good moment for a man who wants his revenge to choose to bring it."

"Without admitting anything," answered Edward Cossey, "I wish to ask you a question. Is there no way out of this? Supposing that I have done you a wrong, wrong admits of compensation."

"Yes, it does, Mr. Cossey, and I have thought of that. Everybody has his price in this world and I have mine; but the compensation for such a wrong must be a heavy one."

"At what price will you agree to stay the action for ever?" he asked.

"The price that I will take to stay the action is the transfer into my name of the mortgages you hold over the Honham Castle Estates," answered Mr. Quest quietly.

"Great heavens!" said Edward, "why that is a matter of thirty thousand pounds."

"I know it is, and I know also that it is worth your while to pay thirty thousand pounds to save yourself from the scandal, the chance of disinheritance, and the certainty of the loss of the woman whom you want to marry. So well do I know it that I have prepared the necessary deeds for your signature, and here they are. Listen, sir," he went on sternly; "refuse to accept my terms and by to-night's post I shall send this letter of instructions. Also I shall send to Mr. Cossey, Senior, and to Mr. de la Molle copies of these two precious epistles," and he pointed to the incriminating documents, "together with a copy of the letter to my agents; and where will you be then? Consent, and I will bind myself not to proceed in any way or form. Now, make your choice."

"But I cannot; even if I will, I cannot," said he, almost wringing his hands in his perplexity. "It was on condition of my taking up those mortgages that Ida consented to become engaged to me, and I have promised that I will cancel them on our wedding. Will you not take money instead?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Quest, "I would take money. A little time ago I would not have taken it because I wanted that property; now I have changed my ideas. But as you yourself said, your credit is strained to the utmost, and while your father is alive you will not find it possible to raise another thirty thousand pounds. Besides, if this matter is to be settled at all it must be settled at once. I will not wait while you make attempts to raise the money."

"But about the mortgages? I promised to keep them. What shall I say to Ida?"

"Say? Say nothing. You can meet them if you choose after your father's death. Refuse if you like, but if you refuse you will be mad. Thirty thousand pounds will be nothing to you, but exposure will be ruin. Have you made up your mind? You must take my offer or leave it. Sign the documents and I will put the originals of those two letters into your hands; refuse and I will take my steps."

Edward Cossey thought for a moment and then said, "I will sign. Let me see the papers."

Mr. Quest turned aside to hide the expression of triumph which flitted across his face and then handed him the deeds. They were elaborately drawn, for he was a skilful legal draughtsman, quite as skilful as many a leading Chancery conveyancer, but the substance of them was that the mortgages were transferred to him by the said Edward Cossey in and for the consideration that he, the said William M. Quest, consented to abandon for ever a pending action for divorce against his wife, Belle Quest, whereto the said Edward Cossey was to be joined as co-respondent.

"You will observe," said Mr. Quest, "that if you attempt to contest the validity of this assignment, which you probably could not do with any prospect of success, the attempt must recoil upon your own head, because the whole scandal will then transpire. We shall require some witnesses, so with your permission I will ring the bell and ask the landlady and your servant to step up. They need know nothing of the contents of the papers," and he did so.

"Stop," said Edward presently. "Where are the original letters?"

"Here," answered Mr. Quest, producing them from an inner pocket, and showing them to him at a distance. "When the landlady comes up I will give them to her to hold in this envelope, directing her to hand them to you when the deeds are signed and witnessed. She will think that it is part of the ceremony."

Presently the man-servant and the landlady arrived, and Mr. Quest, in his most matter-of-fact way, explained to them that they were required to witness some documents. At the same time he handed the letters to the woman, saying that she was to give them to Mr. Cossey when they had all done signing.

Then Edward Cossey signed, and placing his thumb on the familiar wafer delivered the various documents as his act and deed. The witnesses with much preparation and effort affixed their awkward signatures in the places pointed out to them, and in a few minutes the thing was done, leaving Mr. Quest a richer man by thirty thousand pounds than when he had got up that morning.

"Now give Mr. Cossey the packet, Mrs. Jeffries," he said, as he blotted the signatures, "and you can go." She did so and went.

When the witnesses had gone Edward looked at the letters, and then with a savage oath flung them into the fire and watched them burn.

"Good-morning, Mr. Cossey," said Mr. Quest as he prepared to part with the deeds. "You have now bought your experience and had to pay dearly for it; but, upon my word, when I think of all you owe me, I wonder at myself for letting you off at so small a price."

As soon as he had gone, Edward Cossey gave way to his feelings in

language forcible rather than polite. For now, in addition to all the money which he had lost, and the painful exposure to which he had been subjected, he was face to face with a new difficulty. Either he must make a clean breast of it to Ida about the mortgages being no longer in his hands or he must pretend that he still had them. In the first alternative, the consideration upon which she had agreed to marry him came to nothing. Moreover, Ida was thereby released from her promise, and he was well aware that under these circumstances she would probably break off the engagement. In the second, he would be acting a lie, and the lie would sooner or later be discovered, and what then? Well, if it was after marriage, what would it matter? To a woman of gentle birth there is only one thing more irretrievable than marriage, and that is death. Anyhow, he had suffered so much for the sake of this woman that he did not mean to give her up now. He must meet the mortgages after marriage, that was all.

/Facilis est descensus Averni/. When a man of the character of Edward Cossey, or indeed of any character, allows his passions to lead him into a course of deceit, he does not find it easy to check his wild career. From dishonour to dishonour shall he go till at length, in due season, he reaps as he has sown.