

CHAPTER XXXI

IDA RECANTS

The two great doctors came, and the two great doctors pocketed their hundred guinea fees and went, but neither the one nor the other, nor eke the twain, would commit themselves to a fixed opinion as to Edward Cossey's chances of life or death. However, one of them picked out a number of shot from the wounded man, and a number more he left in because he could not pick them out. Then they both agreed that the treatment of their local brethren was all that could be desired, and so far as they were concerned there was an end of it.

A week had passed, and Edward Cossey, nursed night and day by Belle Quest, still hovered between life and death.

It was a Thursday, and Harold had walked up to the Castle to give the Squire the latest news of the wounded man. Whilst he was in the vestibule saying what he had to say to Mr. de la Molle and Ida, a man rung the bell, whom he recognised as one of Mr. Quest's clerks. He was shown in, and handed the Squire a fully-addressed brief envelope, which, he said, he had been told to deliver by Mr. Quest, and adding that there was no answer bowed himself out.

As soon as he had gone the envelope was opened by Mr. de la Molle, who took from it two legal-looking documents which he began to read.

Suddenly the first dropped from his hand, and with an exclamation he snatched at the second.

"What is it, father?" asked Ida.

"What is it? Why it's just this. Edward Cossey has transferred the mortgages over this property to Quest, the lawyer, and Quest has served a notice on me calling in the money," and he began to walk up and down the room in a state of great agitation.

"I don't quite understand," said Ida, her breast heaving, and a curious light shining in her eyes.

"Don't you?" said her father, "then perhaps you will read that," and he pushed the papers to her. As he did so another letter which he had not observed fell out of them.

At this point Harold rose to go.

"Don't go, Quaritch, don't go," said the Squire. "I shall be glad of your advice, and I am sure that what you hear will not go any further."

At the same time Ida motioned him to stay, and though somewhat unwillingly he did so.

"Dear Sir," began the Squire, reading the letter aloud,--

"Inclosed you will find the usual formal notices calling in the sum of thirty thousand pounds recently advanced upon the mortgage of the Honham Castle Estates by Edward Cossey, Esq. These mortgages have passed into my possession for value received, and it is now my desire to realise them. I most deeply regret being forced to press an old client, but my circumstances are such that I am obliged to do so. If I can in any way facilitate your efforts to raise the sum I shall be very glad. But in the event of the money not being forthcoming at the end of six months' notice the ordinary steps will be taken to realise by foreclosure.

"I am, dear sir, yours truly,

"W. Quest.

"James de la Molle, Esq., J.P., D.L."

"I see now," said Ida. "Mr. Cossey has no further hold on the mortgages or on the property."

"That's it," said the Squire; "he has transferred them to that rascally lawyer. And yet he told me--I can't understand it, I really can't."

At this point the Colonel insisted upon leaving, saying he would call in again that evening to see if he could be of any assistance. When he was gone Ida spoke in a cold, determined voice:

"Mr. Cossey told me that when we married he would put those mortgages in the fire. It now seems that the mortgages were not his to dispose of, or else that he has since transferred them to Mr. Quest without informing us."

"Yes, I suppose so," said the Squire.

"Very well," said Ida. "And now, father, I will tell you something. I engaged myself--or, to be more accurate, I promised to engage myself--to Edward Cossey on the condition that he would take up these mortgages when Cossey and Son were threatening to foreclose, or whatever it is called."

"Good heavens!" said her astonished father, "what an idea!"

"I did it," went on Ida, "and he took up the mortgages, and in due course he claimed my promise, and I became engaged to marry him, though that engagement was repugnant to me. You will see that having persuaded him to advance the money I could not refuse to carry out my share of the bargain."

"Well," said the Squire, "this is all new to me."

"Yes," she answered, "and I should never have told you of it had it not been for this sudden change in the position of affairs. What I did, I did to save our family from ruin. But now it seems that Mr. Cossey has played us false, and that we are to be ruined after all. Therefore, the condition upon which I promised to marry him has not been carried out, and my promise falls to the ground."

"You mean that supposing he lives, you will not marry Edward Cossey."

"Yes, I do mean it."

The Squire thought for a minute. "This is a very serious step, Ida," he said. "I don't mean that I think that the man has behaved well--but still he may have given up the mortgages to Quest under pressure of some sort and might be willing to find the money to meet them."

"I do not care if he finds the money ten times over," said Ida, "I will not marry him. He has not kept to the letter of his bond and I will not keep to mine."

"It is all very well, Ida," said the Squire, "and of course nobody can force you into a distasteful marriage, but I wish to point out one thing. You have your family to think of as well as yourself. I tell you frankly that I do not believe that as times are it will be

possible to raise thirty thousand pounds to pay off the charges unless it is by the help of Edward Cossey. So if he lives--and as he has lasted so long I expect that he will live--and you refuse to go on with your engagement to him we shall be sold up, that is all; for this man Quest, confound him, will show us no mercy."

"I know it, father," answered Ida, "but I cannot and will not marry him, and I do not think you can expect me to do so. I became engaged, or rather promised to become engaged to him, because I thought that one woman had no right to put her own happiness before the welfare of an old family like ours, and I would have carried out that engagement at any cost. But since then, to tell you the truth," and she blushed deeply, "not only have I learned to dislike him a great deal more, but I have come to care for some one else who also cares for me, and who therefore has a right to be considered. Think, father, what it means to a woman to sell herself into bodily and mental bondage--when she cares for another man."

"Well, well," said her father with some irritation, "I am no authority upon matters of sentiment; they are not in my line and I know that women have their prejudices. Still you can't expect me to look at the matter in quite the same light as you do. And who is the gentleman? Colonel Quaritch?"

She nodded her head.

"Oh," said the Squire, "I have nothing to say against Quaritch, indeed I like the man, but I suppose that if he has 600 pounds a year, it is every sixpence he can count on."

"I had rather marry him upon six hundred a year than Edward Cossey upon sixty thousand."

"Ah, yes, I have heard young women talk like that before, though perhaps they think differently afterwards. Of course I have no right to obtrude myself, but when you are comfortably married, what is going to become of Honham I should like to know, and incidentally of me?"

"I don't know, father, dear," she answered, her eyes filling with tears; "we must trust to Providence, I suppose. I know you think me very selfish," she went on, catching him by the arm, "but, oh, father! there are things that are worse than death to women, or, at least, to some women. I almost think that I would rather die than marry Edward Cossey, though I should have gone through with it if he had kept his word."

"No, no," said her father. "I can't wonder at it, and certainly I do not ask you to marry a man whom you dislike. But still it is hard upon me to have all this trouble at my age, and the old place coming to the hammer too. It is enough to make a man wish that his worries were over altogether. However, we must take things as we find them, and we find them pretty rough. Quaritch said he was coming back this evening,

didn't he? I suppose there will not be any public engagement at present, will there? And look here, Ida, I don't want him to come talking to me about it. I have got enough things of my own to think of without bothering my head with your love affairs. Pray let the matter be for the present. And now I am going out to see that fellow George, who hasn't been here since he came back from London, and a nice bit of news it will be that I shall have to tell him."

When her father had gone Ida did a thing she had not done for some time--she wept a little. All her fine intentions of self-denial had broken down, and she felt humiliated at the fact. She had intended to sacrifice herself upon the altar of her duty and to make herself the wedded wife of a man whom she disliked, and now on the first opportunity she had thrown up the contract on a quibble--a point of law as it were. Nature had been too strong for her, as it often is for people with deep feelings; she could not do it, no, not to save Honham from the hammer. When she had promised that she would engage herself to Edward Cossey she had not been in love with Colonel Quaritch; now she was, and the difference between the two states is considerable. Still the fall humiliated her pride, and what is more she felt that her father was disappointed in her. Of course she could not expect him at his age to enter into her private feelings, for when looked at through the mist of years sentiment appears more or less foolish. She knew very well that age often strips men of those finer sympathies and sensibilities which clothe them in youth, much as the winter frost and wind strip the delicate foliage from the trees. And to such the music

of the world is dead. Love has vanished with the summer dews, and in its place are cutting blasts and snows and sere memories rustling like fallen leaves about the feet. As we grow old we are too apt to grow away from beauty and what is high and pure, our hearts harden by contact with the hard world. We examine love and find, or believe we find, that it is nought but a variety of passion; friendship, and think it self-interest; religion, and name it superstition. The facts of life alone remain clear and desirable. We know that money means power, and we turn our face to Mammon, and if he smiles upon us we are content to let our finer visions go where our youth has gone.

"Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home."

So says the poet, but alas! the clouds soon melt into the grey air of the world, and some of us, before our course is finished, forget that they ever were. And yet which is the shadow of the truth--those dreams, and hopes, and aspirations of our younger life, or the corruption with which the world cakes our souls?

Ida knew that she could not expect her father to sympathise with her; she knew that to his judgment, circumstances being the same, and both suitors being equally sound in wind and limb, the choice of one of them should, to a large extent, be a matter to be decided by the

exterior considerations of wealth and general convenience.

However, she had made her choice, made it suddenly, but none the less had made it. It lay between her father's interest and the interest of the family at large and her own honour as a woman--for the mere empty ceremony of marriage which satisfies society cannot make dishonour an honourable thing. She had made her choice, and the readers of her history must judge if that choice was right or wrong.

After dinner Harold came again as he had promised. The Squire was not in the drawing-room when he was shown in.

Ida rose to greet him with a sweet and happy smile upon her face, for in the presence of her lover all her doubts and troubles vanished like a mist.

"I have a piece of news for you," said he, trying to look as though he was rejoiced to give it. "Edward Cossey has taken a wonderful turn for the better. They say that he will certainly recover."

"Oh," she answered, colouring a little, "and now I have a piece of news for you, Colonel Quaritch. My engagement with Mr. Edward Cossey is at an end. I shall not marry him."

"Are you sure?" said Harold with a gasp.

"Quite sure. I have made up my mind," and she held out her hand, as though to seal her words.

He took it and kissed it. "Thank heaven, Ida," he said.

"Yes," she answered, "thank heaven;" and at that moment the Squire came in, looking very miserable and depressed, and of course nothing more was said about the matter.