

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SQUIRE SPEAKS HIS MIND

For a minute or more her father fidgeted about, moving his papers backwards and forwards but saying nothing.

At last he spoke. "You have taken a most serious and painful step, Ida," he said. "Of course you have a right to do as you please, you are of full age, and I cannot expect that you will consider me or your family in your matrimonial engagements, but at the same time I think it is my duty to point out to you what it is that you are doing. You are refusing one of the finest matches in England in order to marry a broken-down, middle-aged, half-pay colonel, a man who can hardly support you, whose part in life is played, or who is apparently too idle to seek another."

Here Ida's eyes flashed ominously, but she made no comment, being apparently afraid to trust herself to speak.

"You are doing this," went on her father, working himself up as he spoke, "in the face of my wishes, and with a knowledge that your action will bring your family, to say nothing of your father, to utter and irretrievable ruin."

"Surely, father, surely," broke in Ida, almost in a cry, "you would

not have me marry one man when I love another. When I made the promise I had not become attached to Colonel Quaritch."

"Love! pshaw!" said her father. "Don't talk to me in that sentimental and school-girl way--you are too old for it. I am a plain man, and I believe in family affection and in /duty/, Ida. /Love/, as you call it, is only too often another word for self-will and selfishness and other things that we are better without."

"I can understand, father," answered Ida, struggling to keep her temper under this jobation, "that my refusal to marry Mr. Cossey is disagreeable to you for obvious reasons, though it is not so very long since you detested him yourself. But I do not see why an honest woman's affection for another man should be talked of as though there was something shameful about it. It is all very well to sneer at 'love,' but, after all a woman is flesh and blood; she is not a chattel or a slave girl, and marriage is not like anything else--it means many things to a woman. There is no magic about marriage to make that which is unrighteous righteous."

"There," said her father, "it is no good your lecturing to me on marriage, Ida. If you do not want to marry Cossey, I can't force you to. If you want to ruin me, your family and yourself, you must do so. But there is one thing. While it is over me, which I suppose will not be for much longer, my house is my own, and I will not have that Colonel of yours hanging about it, and I shall write to him to say so."

You are your own mistress, and if you choose to walk over to church and marry him you can do so, but it will be done without my consent, which of course, however, is an unnecessary formality. Do you hear me, Ida?"

"If you have quite done, father," she answered coldly, "I should like to go before I say something which I might be sorry for. Of course you can write what you like to Colonel Quaritch, and I shall write to him, too."

Her father made no answer beyond sitting down at his table and grabbing viciously at a pen. So she left the room, indignant, indeed, but with as heavy a heart as any woman could carry in her breast.

"Dear Sir," wrote the not unnaturally indignant Squire, "I have been informed by my daughter Ida of her entanglement with you. It is one which, for reasons that I need not enter into, is distasteful to me, as well as, I am sorry to say, ruinous to Ida herself and to her family. Ida is of full age, and must, of course, do as she pleases with herself. But I cannot consent to become a party to what I disapprove of so strongly, and this being the case, I must beg you to cease your visits to my house.

"I am, sir, your obedient servant,

"James de la Molle.

"Colonel Quaritch, V.C."

Ida as soon as she had sufficiently recovered herself also wrote to the Colonel. She told him the whole story, keeping nothing back, and ended her letter thus:

"Never, dear Harold, was a woman in a greater difficulty and never have I more needed help and advice. You know and have good reason to know how hateful this marriage would be to me, loving you as I do entirely and alone, and having no higher desire than to become your wife. But of course I see the painfulness of the position. I am not so selfish as my father believes or says that he believes. I quite understand how great would be the material advantage to my father if I could bring myself to marry Mr. Cossey. You may remember I told you once that I thought no woman has a right to prefer her own happiness to the prosperity of her whole family. But, Harold, it is easy to speak thus, and very, very hard to act up to it. What am I to do? What am I to do? And yet how can I in common fairness ask you to answer that question? God help us both, Harold! Is there /no/ way out of it?"

These letters were both duly received by Harold Quaritch on the following morning and threw him into a fever of anxiety and doubt. He was a just and reasonable man, and, knowing something of human nature, under the circumstances did not altogether wonder at the Squire's

violence and irritation. The financial position of the de la Molle family was little, if anything, short of desperate. He could easily understand how maddening it must be to a man like Mr. de la Molle, who loved Honham, which had for centuries been the home of his race, better than he loved anything on earth, to suddenly realise that it must pass away from him and his for ever, merely because a woman happened to prefer one man to another, and that man, to his view, the less eligible of the two. So keenly did he realise this, indeed, that he greatly doubted whether or no he was justified in continuing his advances to Ida. Finally, after much thought, he wrote to the Squire as follows:

"I have received your letter, and also one from Ida, and I hope you will believe me when I say that I quite understand and sympathise with the motives which evidently led you to write it. I am unfortunately--although I never regretted it till now--a poor man, whereas my rival suitor is a rich one. I shall, of course, strictly obey your injunctions; and, moreover, I can assure you that, whatever my own feelings may be in the matter, I shall do nothing, either directly or indirectly, to influence Ida's ultimate decision. She must decide for herself."

To Ida herself he also wrote at length:

"Dearest Ida," he ended, "I can say nothing more; you must judge for yourself; and I shall accept your decision loyally whatever it may be.

It is unnecessary for me to tell you how inextricably my happiness in life is interwoven with that decision, but at the same time I do not wish to influence it. It certainly to my mind does not seem right that a woman should be driven into sacrificing her whole life to secure any monetary advantage either for herself or for others, but then the world is full of things that are not right. I can give you no advice, for I do not know what advice I ought to give. I try to put myself out of the question and to consider you, and you only; but even then I fear that my judgment is not impartial. At any rate, the less we see of each other at present the better, for I do not wish to appear to be taking any undue advantage. If we are destined to pass our lives together, this temporary estrangement will not matter, and if on the other hand we are doomed to a life-long separation the sooner we begin the better. It is a hard world, and sometimes (as it does now) my heart sinks within me as from year to year I struggle on towards a happiness that ever vanishes when I stretch out my hand to clasp it; but, if I feel thus, what must you feel who have so much more to bear? My dearest love, what can I say? I can only say with you, God help us!"

This letter did not tend to raise Ida's spirits. Evidently her lover saw that there was another side to the question--the side of duty, and was too honest to hide it from her. She had said that she would have nothing to do with Edward Cossey, but she was well aware that the matter was still an open one. What should she do, what ought she to do? Abandon her love, desecrate herself and save her father and her

house, or cling to her love and leave the rest to chance? It was a cruel position, nor did the lapse of time tend to make it less cruel. Her father went about the place pale and melancholy--all his jovial manner had vanished beneath the pressure of impending ruin. He treated her with studious and old-fashioned courtesy, but she could see that he was bitterly aggrieved by her conduct and that the anxiety of his position was telling on his health. If this was the case now, what, she wondered, would happen in the Spring, when steps were actually taken to sell the place?

One bright cold morning she was walking with her father through the fields down on the foot-path that led to the church, and it would have been hard to say which of the two looked the paler or the more miserable. On the previous day the Squire had seen Mr. Quest and made as much of an appeal /ad misericordiam/ to him as his pride would allow, only to find the lawyer very courteous, very regretful, but hard as adamant. Also that very morning a letter had reached him from London announcing that the last hope of raising money to meet the mortgages had failed.

The path ran along towards the road past a line of oaks. Half-way down this line they came across George, who, with his marking instrument in his hand, was contemplating some of the trees which it was proposed to take down.

"What are you doing there?" said the Squire, in a melancholy voice.

"Marking, Squire."

"Then you may as well save yourself the trouble, for the place will belong to somebody else before the sap is up in those oaks."

"Now, Squire, don't you begin to talk like that, for I don't believe it. That ain't a-going to happen."

"Ain't a-going to happen, you stupid fellow, ain't a-going to happen," answered the Squire with a dreary laugh. "Why, look there," and he pointed to a dog-cart which had drawn up on the road in such a position that they could see it without its occupants seeing them; "they are taking notes already."

George looked and so did Ida. Mr. Quest was the driver of the dog-cart, which he had pulled up in such a position as to command a view of the Castle, and his companion--in whom George recognised a well-known London auctioneer who sometimes did business in these parts--was standing up, an open notebook in his hand, alternately looking at the noble towers of the gateway and jotting down memoranda.

"Damn 'em, and so they be," said George, utterly forgetting his manners.

Ida looked up and saw her father's eyes fixed firmly upon her with an

expression that seemed to say, "See, you wilful woman, see the ruin that you have brought upon us!"

She turned away; she could not bear it, and that very night she came to a determination, which in due course was communicated to Harold, and him alone. That determination was to let things be for the present, upon the chance of something happening by means of which the dilemma might be solved. But if nothing happened--and indeed it did not seem probable to her that anything would happen--then she would sacrifice herself at the last moment. She believed, indeed she knew, that she could always call Edward Cossey back to her if she liked. It was a compromise, and like all compromises had an element of weakness; but it gave time, and time to her was like breath to the dying.

"Sir," said George presently, "it's Boisingham Quarter Sessions the day after to-morrow, ain't it?" (Mr. de la Molle was chairman of Quarter Sessions.)

"Yes, of course, it is."

George thought for a minute.

"I'm a-thinking, Squire, that if I arn't wanting that day I want to go up to Lunnon about a bit of business."

"Go up to London!" said the Squire; "why what are you going to do

there? You were in London the other day."

"Well, Squire," he answered, looking inexpressibly sly, "that ain't no matter of nobody's. It's a bit of private affairs."

"Oh, all right," said the Squire, his interest dying out. "You are always full of twopenny-halfpenny mysteries," and he continued his walk.

But George shook his fist in the direction of the road down which the dog-cart had driven.

"Ah! you laryer devil," he said, alluding to Mr. Quest. "If I don't make Boisingham, yes, and all England, too hot to hold you, my mother never christened me and my name ain't George. I'll give you what for, my cuckoo, that I will!"