

CHAPTER XXXVIII

COLONEL QUARITCH EXPRESSES HIS VIEWS

Meanwhile things had been going very ill at the Castle. Edward Cossey's lawyers were carrying out their client's instructions to the letter with a perseverance and ingenuity worthy of a County Court solicitor. Day by day they found a new point upon which to harass the wretched Squire. Some share of the first expenses connected with the mortgages had, they said, been improperly thrown upon their client, and they again and again demanded, in language which was almost insolent, the immediate payment of the amount. Then there was three months' interest overdue, and this also they pressed and clamoured for, till the old gentleman was nearly driven out of his senses, and as a consequence drove everybody about the place out of theirs.

At last this state of affairs began to tell upon his constitution, which, strong as he was, could not at his age withstand such constant worry. He grew to look years older, his shoulders acquired a stoop, and his memory began to fail him, especially on matters connected with the mortgages and farm accounts. Ida, too, became pale and ill; she caught a heavy cold, which she could not throw off, and her face acquired a permanently pained and yet listless look.

One day, it was on the 15th of December, things reached a climax. When Ida came down to breakfast she found her father busy poring over some

more letters from the lawyers.

"What is it now, father?" she said.

"What is it now?" he answered irritably. "What, it's another claim for two hundred, that's what it is. I keep telling them to write to my lawyers, but they won't, at least they write to me too. There, I can't make head or tail of it. Look here," and he showed her two sides of a big sheet of paper covered with statements of accounts. "Anyhow, I have not got two hundred, that's clear. I don't even know where we are going to find the money to pay the three months' interest. I'm worn out, Ida, I'm worn out! There is only one thing left for me to do, and that is to die, and that's the long and short of it. I get so confused with these figures. I'm an old man now, and all these troubles are too much for me."

"You must not talk like that, father," she answered, not knowing what to say, for affairs were indeed desperate.

"Yes, yes, it's all very well to talk so, but facts are stubborn. Our family is ruined, and we must accept it."

"Cannot the money be got anyhow? Is there /nothing/ to be done?" she said in despair.

"What is the good of asking me that? There is only one thing that can

save us, and you know what it is as well as I do. But you are your own mistress. I have no right to put pressure on you. I don't wish to put pressure on you. You must please yourself. Meanwhile I think we had better leave this place at once, and go and live in a cottage somewhere, if we can get enough to support us; if not we must starve, I suppose. I cannot keep up appearances any longer."

Ida rose, and with a strange sad light of resolution shining in her eyes, came to where her father was sitting, and putting her hands upon his shoulders, looked him in the face.

"Father," she said, "do you wish me to marry that man?"

"Wish you to marry him? What do you mean?" he said, not without irritation, and avoiding her gaze. "It is no affair of mine. I don't like the man, if that's what you mean. He is acting like--well, like the cur that he is, in putting on the screw as he is doing; but, of course, that is the way out of it, and the only way, and there you are."

"Father," she said again, "will you give me ten days, that is, until Christmas Day? If nothing happens between this and then I will marry Mr. Edward Cossey."

A sudden light of hope shone in his eyes. She saw it, though he tried to hide it by turning his head away.

"Oh, yes," he answered, "as you wish; settle it one way or the other on Christmas Day, and then we can go out with the new year. You see your brother James is dead, I have no one left to advise me now, and I suppose that I am getting old. At any rate, things seem to be too much for me. Settle it as you like; settle it as you like," and he got up, leaving his breakfast half swallowed, and went off to moon aimlessly about the park.

So she made up her mind at last. This was the end of her struggling. She could not let her old father be turned out of house and home to starve, for practically they would starve. She knew her hateful lover well enough to be aware that he would show no mercy. It was a question of the woman or the money, and she was the woman. Either she must let him take her or they must be destroyed; there was no middle course. And in these circumstances there was no room for hesitation. Once more her duty became clear to her. She must give up her life, she must give up her love, she must give up herself. Well, so be it. She was weary of the long endeavour against fortune, now she would yield and let the tide of utter misery sweep over her like a sea--to bear her away till at last it brought her to that oblivion in which perchance all things come right or are as though they had never been.

She had scarcely spoken to her lover, Harold Quaritch, for some weeks. She had as she understood it entered into a kind of unspoken agreement with her father not to do so, and that agreement Harold had realised

and respected. Since their last letters to each other they had met once or twice casually or at church, interchanged a few indifferent words, though their eyes spoke another story, touched each other's hands and parted. That was absolutely all. But now that Ida had come to this momentous decision she felt he had a right to learn it, and so once more she wrote to him. She might have gone to see him or told him to meet her, but she would not. For one thing she did not dare to trust herself on such an errand in his dear company, for another she was too proud, thinking if her father came to hear of it he might consider that it had a clandestine and underhand appearance.

And so she wrote. With all she said we need not concern ourselves. The letter was loving, even passionate, more passionate perhaps than one would have expected from a woman of Ida's calm and stately sort. But a mountain may have a heart of fire although it is clad in snows, and so it sometimes is with women who seem cold and unemotional as marble. Besides, it was her last chance--she could write him no more letters and she had much to say.

"And so I have decided, Harold," she said after telling him of all her doubts and troubles. "I must do it, there is no help for it, as I think you will see. I have asked for ten days' respite. I really hardly know why, except that it is a respite. And now what is there left to say to you except good-bye? I love you, Harold, I make no secret of it, and I shall never love any other. Remember all your life that I love you and have not forgotten you, and never can forget. For

people placed as we are there is but one hope--the grave. In the grave earthly considerations fail and earthly contracts end, and there I trust and believe we shall find each other--or at the least forgetfulness. My heart is so sore I know not what to say to you, for it is difficult to put all I feel in words. I am overwhelmed, my spirit is broken, and I wish to heaven that I were dead. Sometimes I almost cease to believe in a God who can allow His creatures to be so tormented and give us love only that it may be daily dishonoured in our sight; but who am I that I should complain, and after all what are our troubles compared to some we know of? Well, it will come to an end at last, and meanwhile pity me and think of me.

"Pity me and think of me; yes, but never see me more. As soon as this engagement is publicly announced, go away, the further the better. Yes, go to New Zealand, as you suggested once, and in pity of our human weakness never let me see your face again. Perhaps you may write to me sometimes--if Mr. Cossey will allow it. Go there and occupy yourself, it will divert your mind--you are still too young a man to lay yourself upon the shelf--mix yourself up with the politics of the place, take to writing; anything, so long as you can absorb yourself. I sent you a photograph of myself (I have nothing better) and a ring which I have worn night and day since I was a child. I think that it will fit your little finger and I hope you will always wear it in memory of me. It was my mother's. And now it is late and I am tired, and what is there more that a woman can say to the man she loves--and whom she must leave for ever? Only one word--Good-bye. Ida."

When Harold got this letter it fairly broke him down. His hopes had been revived when he thought that all was lost, and now again they were utterly dashed and broken. He could see no way out of it, none at all. He could not quarrel with Ida's decision, shocking as it was, for the simple reason that he knew in his heart she was acting rightly and even nobly. But, oh, the thought of it made him mad. It is probable that to a man of imagination and deep feeling hell itself can invent no more hideous torture than he must undergo in the position in which Harold Quaritch found himself. To truly love some good woman or some woman whom he thinks good--for it comes to the same thing--to love her more than life, to hold her dearer even than his honour, to be, like Harold, beloved in turn; and then to know that this woman, this one thing for which he would count the world well lost, this light that makes his days beautiful, has been taken from him by the bitterness of Fate (not by Death, for that he could bear), taken from him, and given --for money or money's worth--to some other man! It is, perhaps, better that a man should die than that he should pass through such an experience as that which threatened Harold Quaritch now: for though the man die not, yet will it kill all that is best in him; and whatever triumphs may await him, whatever women may be ready in the future to pin their favours to his breast, life will never be for him what it might have been, because his lost love took its glory with her.

No wonder, then, that he despaired. No wonder, too, that there rose up

in his breast a great anger and indignation against the man who had brought this last extremity of misery upon them. He was just, and could make allowances for his rival's infatuation--which, indeed, Ida being concerned, it was not difficult for him to understand. But he was also, and above all things, a gentleman; and the spectacle of a woman being inexorably driven into a distasteful marriage by money pressure, put on by the man who wished to gain her, revolted him beyond measure, and, though he was slow to wrath, moved him to fiery indignation. So much did it move him that he took a resolution; Mr. Cossey should know his mind about the matter, and that at once. Ringing the bell, he ordered his dog-cart, and drove to Edward Cossey's rooms with the full intention of giving that gentleman a very unpleasant quarter-of-an-hour.

Mr. Cossey was in. Fearing lest he should refuse to see him, the Colonel followed the servant up the stairs, and entered almost as she announced his name. There was a grim and even a formidable look upon his plain but manly face, and something of menace, too, in his formal and soldierly bearing; nor did his aspect soften when his eyes fell upon the full-length picture of Ida over the mantelpiece.

Edward Cossey rose with astonishment and irritation, not unmixed with nervousness, depicted on his face. The last person whom he wished to see and expected a visit from was Colonel Quaritch, whom in his heart he held in considerable awe. Besides, he had of late received such a series of unpleasant calls that it is not wonderful that he began to

dread these interviews.

"Good-day," he said coldly. "Will you be seated?"

The Colonel bowed his head slightly, but he did not sit down.

"To what am I indebted for the pleasure?" began Edward Cossey with much politeness.

"Last time I was here, Mr. Cossey," said the Colonel in his deep voice, speaking very deliberately, "I came to give an explanation; now I come to ask one."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. To come to the point, Miss de la Molle and I are attached to each other, and there has been between us an understanding that this attachment might end in marriage."

"Oh! has there?" said the younger man with a sneer.

"Yes," answered the Colonel, keeping down his rising temper as well as he could. "But now I am told, upon what appears to be good authority, that you have actually condescended to bring, directly and indirectly, pressure of a monetary sort to bear upon Miss de la Molle and her father in order to force her into a distasteful marriage with

yourself."

"And what the devil business of yours is it, sir," asked Cossey, "what I have or have not done? Making every allowance for the disappointment of an unsuccessful suitor, for I presume that you appear in that character," and again he sneered, "I ask, what business is it of yours?"

"It is every business of mine, Mr. Cossey, because if Miss de la Molle is forced into this marriage, I shall lose my wife."

"Then you will certainly lose her. Do you suppose that I am going to consider you? Indeed," he went on, being now in a towering passion, "I should have thought that considering the difference of age and fortune between us, you might find other reasons than you suggest to account for my being preferred, if I should be so preferred. Ladies are apt to choose the better man, you know."

"I don't quite know what you mean by the 'better man,' Mr. Cossey," said the Colonel quietly. "Comparisons are odious, and I will make none, though I admit that you have the advantage of me in money and in years. However, that is not the point; the point is that I have had the fortune to be preferred to /you/ by the lady in question, and /not/ you to me. I happen to know that the idea of her marriage with you is as distasteful to Miss de la Molle as it is to me. This I know from her own lips. She will only marry you, if she does so at all,

under the pressure of direst necessity, and to save her father from the ruin you are deliberately bringing upon him."

"Well, Colonel Quaritch," he answered, "have you quite done lecturing me? If you have, let me tell you, as you seem anxious to know my mind, that if by any legal means I can marry Ida de la Molle I certainly intend to marry her. And let me tell you another thing, that when once I am married it will be the last that you shall see of her, if I can prevent it."

"Thank you for your admissions," said Harold, still more quietly. "So it seems that it is all true; it seems that you are using your wealth to harass this unfortunate gentleman and his daughter until you drive them into consenting to this marriage. That being so, I wish to tell you privately what I shall probably take some opportunity of telling you in public, namely, that a man who does these things is a cur, and worse than a cur, he is a /blackguard/, and /you/ are such a man, Mr. Cossey."

Edward Cossey's face turned perfectly livid with fury, and he drew himself up as though to spring at his adversary's throat.

The Colonel held up his hand. "Don't try that on with me," he said.

"In the first place it is vulgar, and in the second you have only just recovered from an accident and are no match for me, though I am over forty years old. Listen, our fathers had a way of settling their

troubles; I don't approve of that sort of thing as a rule, but in some cases it is salutary. If you think yourself aggrieved it does not take long to cross the water, Mr. Cossey."

Edward Cossey looked puzzled. "Do you mean to suggest that I should fight a duel with you?" he said.

"To challenge a man to fight a duel," answered the Colonel with deliberation, "is an indictable offence, therefore I make no such challenge. I have made a suggestion, and if that suggestion falls in with your views as," and he bowed, "I hope it may, we might perhaps meet accidentally abroad in a few days' time, when we could talk this matter over further."

"I'll see you hanged first," answered Cossey. "What have I to gain by fighting you except a very good chance of being shot? I have had enough of being shot as it is, and we will play this game out upon the old lines, until I win it."

"As you like," said Harold. "I have made a suggestion to you which you do not see fit to accept. As to the end of the game, it is not finished yet, and therefore it is impossible to say who will win it. Perhaps you will be checkmated after all. In the meanwhile allow me again to assure you that I consider you both a cur and a blackguard, and to wish you good-morning." And he bowed himself out, leaving Edward Cossey in a curious condition of concentrated rage.