

## CHAPTER III

### THE TALE OF SIR JAMES DE LA MOLLE

"Is that you, father?" said a voice, a very sweet voice, but one of which the tones betrayed the irritation natural to a healthy woman who has been kept waiting for her dinner. The voice came from the recesses of the dusky room in which the evening gloom had gathered deeply, and looking in its direction, Harold Quaritch could see the outline of a tall form sitting in an old oak chair with its hands crossed.

"Is that you, father? Really it is too bad to be so late for dinner-- especially after you blew up that wretched Emma last night because she was five minutes after time. I have been waiting so long that I have almost been asleep."

"I am very sorry, my dear, very," said the old gentleman apologetically, "but--hullo! I've knocked my head--here, Mary, bring me a light!"

"Here is a light," said the voice, and at the same moment there was a sound of a match being struck.

In another moment the candle was burning, and the owner of the voice had turned, holding it in such a fashion that its rays surrounded her like an aureole--showing Harold Quaritch that face of which the memory

had never left him. There were the same powerful broad brow, the same nobility of look, the same brown eyes and soft waving hair. But the girlhood had gone out of them, the face was now the face of a woman who knew what life meant, and had not found it too easy. It had lost some of its dreaminess, he thought, though it had gained in intellectual force. As for the figure, it was much more admirable than the face, which was strictly speaking not a beautiful one. The figure, however, was undoubtedly beautiful, indeed, it is doubtful if many women could show a finer. Ida de la Molle was a large, strong woman, and there was about her a swing and a lissom grace which is very rare, and as attractive as it is rare. She was now nearly six-and-twenty years of age, and not having begun to wither in accordance with the fate which overtakes all unmarried women after thirty, was at her very best. Harold Quaritch, glancing at her well-poised head, her perfect neck and arms (for she was in evening dress) and her gracious form, thought to himself that he had never seen a nobler-looking woman.

"Why, my dear father," she went on as she watched the candle burn up, "you made such a fuss this morning about the dinner being punctually at half-past seven, and now it is eight o'clock and you are not dressed. It is enough to ruin any cook," and she broke off for the first time, seeing that her father was not alone.

"Yes, my dear, yes," said the old gentleman, "I dare say I did. It is human to err, my dear, especially about dinner on a fine evening. Besides, I have made amends and brought you a visitor, our new

neighbour, Colonel Quaritch. Colonel Quaritch, let me introduce you to my daughter, Miss de la Molle."

"I think that we have met before," said Harold, in a somewhat nervous fashion, as he stretched out his hand.

"Yes," answered Ida, taking it, "I remember. It was in the long drift, five years ago, on a windy afternoon, when my hat blew over the hedge and you went to fetch it."

"You have a good memory, Miss de la Molle," said he, feeling not a little pleased that she should have recollected the incident.

"Evidently not better than your own, Colonel Quaritch," was the ready answer. "Besides, one sees so few strangers here that one naturally remembers them. It is a place where nothing happens--time passes, that is all."

Meanwhile the old Squire, who had been making a prodigious fuss with his hat and stick, which he managed to send clattering down the flight of stone steps, departed to get ready, saying in a kind of roar as he went that Ida was to order in the dinner, as he would be down in a minute.

Accordingly she rang the bell, and told the maid to bring in the soup in five minutes and to lay another place. Then turning to Harold she

began to apologise to him.

"I don't know what sort of dinner you will get, Colonel Quaritch," she said; "it is so provoking of my father; he never gives one the least warning when he is going to ask any one to dinner."

"Not at all--not at all," he answered hurriedly. "It is I who ought to apologise, coming down on you like--like----"

"A wolf on the fold," suggested Ida.

"Yes, exactly," he went on earnestly, looking at his coat, "but not in purple and gold."

"Well," she went on laughing, "you will get very little to eat for your pains, and I know that soldiers always like good dinners."

"How do you know that, Miss de la Molle?"

"Oh, because of poor James and his friends whom he used to bring here. By the way, Colonel Quaritch," she went on with a sudden softening of the voice, "you have been in Egypt, I know, because I have so often seen your name in the papers; did you ever meet my brother there?"

"I knew him slightly," he answered. "Only very slightly. I did not know that he was your brother, or indeed that you had a brother. He

was a dashing officer."

What he did not say, however, was that he also knew him to have been one of the wildest and most extravagant young men in an extravagant regiment, and as such had to some extent shunned his society on the few occasions that he had been thrown in with him. Perhaps Ida, with a woman's quickness, divined from his tone that there was something behind his remark--at any rate she did not ask him for particulars of their slight acquaintance.

"He was my only brother," she continued; "there never were but we two, and of course his loss was a great blow to me. My father cannot get over it at all, although----" and she broke off suddenly, and rested her head upon her hand.

At this moment the Squire was heard advancing down the stairs, shouting to the servants as he came.

"A thousand pardons, my dear, a thousand pardons," he said as he entered the room, "but, well, if you will forgive particulars, I was quite unable to discover the whereabouts of a certain necessary portion of the male attire. Now, Colonel Quaritch, will you take my daughter? Stop, you don't know the way--perhaps I had better show you with the candle."

Accordingly he advanced out of the vestibule, and turning to the left,

led the way down a long passage till he reached the dining-room. This apartment was like the vestibule, oak-panelled, but the walls were decorated with family and other portraits, including a very curious painting of the Castle itself, as it was before its destruction in the time of Cromwell. This painting was executed on a massive slab of oak, and conceived in a most quaint and formal style, being relieved in the foreground with stags at gaze and woodeny horses, that must, according to any rule of proportion, have been about half as large as the gateway towers. Evidently, also, it was of an older date than the present house, which is Jacobean, having probably been removed to its present position from the ruins of the Castle. Such as it was, however, it gave a very good idea of what the ancient seat of the Boisseys and de la Molles had been like before the Roundheads had made an end of its glory. The dining-room itself was commodious, though not large. It was lighted by three narrow windows which looked out upon the moat, and bore a considerable air of solid comfort. The table, made of black oak, of extraordinary solidity and weight, was matched by a sideboard of the same material and apparently of the same date, both pieces of furniture being, as Mr. de la Molle informed his guests, relics of the Castle.

On this sideboard were placed several pieces of old and massive plate, each of which was rudely engraved with three falcons /or/, the arms of the de la Molle family. One piece, indeed, a very ancient salver, bore those of the Boisseys--a ragged oak, in an escutcheon of pretence--showing thereby that it dated from that de la Molle who in the time of

Henry the Seventh had obtained the property by marriage with the Boissey heiress.

Conversation having turned that way, as the dinner, which was a simple one, went on, the old Squire had this piece of plate brought to Harold Quaritch for him to examine.

"It is very curious," he said; "have you much of this, Mr. de la Molle?"

"No indeed," he said; "I wish I had. It all vanished in the time of Charles the First."

"Melted down, I suppose," said the Colonel.

"No, that is the odd part of it. I don't think it was. It was hidden somewhere--I don't know where, or perhaps it was turned into money and the money hidden. But I will tell you the story if you like as soon as we have done dinner."

Accordingly, when the servants had removed the cloth, and after the old fashion placed the wine upon the naked wood, the Squire began his tale, of which the following is the substance.

"In the time of James I. the de la Molle family was at the height of its prosperity, that is, so far as money goes. For several generations

previous the representatives of the family had withdrawn themselves from any active participation in public affairs, and living here at small expense upon their lands, which were at that time very large, had amassed a quantity of wealth that, for the age, might fairly be called enormous. Thus, Sir Stephen de la Molle, the grandfather of the Sir James who lived in the time of James I., left to his son, also named Stephen, a sum of no less than twenty-three thousand pounds in gold. This Stephen was a great miser, and tradition says that he trebled the sum in his lifetime. Anyhow, he died rich as Croesus, and abominated alike by his tenants and by the country side, as might be expected when a gentleman of his race and fame degraded himself, as this Sir Stephen undoubtedly did, to the practice of usury.

"With the next heir, Sir James, however, the old spirit of the de la Molles seems to have revived, although it is sufficiently clear that he was by no means a spendthrift, but on the contrary, a careful man, though one who maintained his station and refused to soil his fingers with such base dealing as it had pleased his uncle to do. Going to court, he became, perhaps on account of his wealth, a considerable favourite with James I., to whom he was greatly attached and from whom he bought a baronetcy. Indeed, the best proof of his devotion is, that he on two occasions lent large sums of money to the King which were never repaid. On the accession of Charles I., however, Sir James left court under circumstances which were never quite cleared up. It is said that smarting under some slight which was put upon him, he made a somewhat brusque demand for the money that he had lent to James.



Thereon the King, with sarcastic wit, congratulated him on the fact that the spirit of his uncle, Sir Stephen de la Molle, whose name was still a byword in the land, evidently survived in the family. Sir James turned white with anger, bowed, and without a word left the court, nor did he ever return thither.

"Years passed, and the civil war was at its height. Sir James had as yet steadily refused to take any share in it. He had never forgiven the insult put upon him by the King, for like most of his race, of whom it was said that they never forgave an injury and never forgot a kindness, he was a pertinacious man. Therefore he would not lift a finger in the King's cause. But still less would he help the Roundheads, whom he hated with a singular hatred. So time went, till at last, when he was sore pressed, Charles, knowing his great wealth and influence, brought himself to write a letter to this Sir James, appealing to him for support, and especially for money.

"'I hear,' said the King in his letter, 'that Sir James de la Molle, who was aforetyme well affected to our person and more especially to the late King, our sainted father, doth stand idle, watching the growing of this bloody struggle and lifting no hand. Such was not the way of the race from which he sprang, which, unless history doth greatly lie, hath in the past been ever found at the side of their kings striking for the right. It is told to me also, that Sir James de la Molle doth thus place himself aside blowing neither hot nor cold, because of some sharp words which we spake in heedless jest many a

year that's gone. We know not if this be true, doubting if a man's memory be so long, but if so it be, then hereby do we crave his pardon, and no more can we do. And now is our estate one of grievous peril, and sorely do we need the aid of God and man. Therefore, if the heart of our subject Sir James de la Molle be not rebellious against us, as we cannot readily credit it to be, we do implore his present aid in men and money, of which last it is said he hath large store, this letter being proof of our urgent need.'

"These were, as nearly as I can remember, the very words of the letter, which was written with the King's own hand, and show pretty clearly how hardly he was pressed. It is said that when he read it, Sir James, forgetting his grievance, was much affected, and, taking paper, wrote hastily as follows, which indeed he certainly did, for I have seen the letter in the Museum. 'My liege,--Of the past I will not speak. It is past. But since it hath graciously pleased your Majesty to ask mine aid against the rebels who would overthrow your throne, rest assured that all I have is at your Majesty's command, till such time as your enemies are discomfited. It hath pleased Providence to so prosper my fortunes that I have stored away in a safe place, till these times be past, a very great sum in gold, whereof I will at once place ten thousand pieces at the disposal of your Majesty, so soon as a safe means can be provided of conveying the same, seeing that I had sooner die than that these great moneys should fall into the hands of rebels to the furtherance of a wicked cause.'

"Then the letter went on to say that the writer would at once buckle to and raise a troop of horse among his tenantry, and that if other satisfactory arrangements could not be made for the conveyance of the moneys, he would bring them in person to the King.

"And now comes the climax of the story. The messenger was captured and Sir James's incautious letter taken from his boot, as a result of which within ten days' time he found himself closely besieged by five hundred Roundheads under the command of one Colonel Playfair. The Castle was but ill-provisioned for a siege, and in the end Sir James was driven by sheer starvation to surrender. No sooner had he obtained an entry, then Colonel Playfair sent for his prisoner, and to his astonishment produced to Sir James's face his own letter to the King.

"Now, Sir James,' he said, 'we have the hive, and I must ask you to lead us to the honey. Where be those great moneys whereof you talk herein? Fain would I be fingering these ten thousand pieces of gold, the which you have so snugly stored away.'

"Ay,' answered old Sir James, 'you have the hive, but the secret of the honey you have not, nor shall you have it. The ten thousand pieces in gold is where it is, and with it is much more. Find it if you may, Colonel, and take it if you can.'

"I shall find it by to-morrow's light, Sir James, or otherwise--or otherwise you die.'

"I must die--all men do, Colonel, but if I die, the secret dies with me.'

"This shall we see,' answered the Colonel grimly, and old Sir James was marched off to a cell, and there closely confined on bread and water. But he did not die the next day, nor the next, nor for a week, indeed.

"Every day he was brought up before the Colonel, and under the threat of immediate death questioned as to where the treasure was, not being suffered meanwhile to communicate by word or sign with any one, save the officers of the rebels. Every day he refused, till at last his inquisitor's patience gave out, and he was told frankly that if he did not communicate the secret he would be shot at the following dawn.

"Old Sir James laughed, and said that shoot him they might, but that he consigned his soul to the Devil if he would enrich them with his treasures, and then asked that his Bible might be brought to him that he might read therein and prepare himself for death.

"They gave him the Bible and left him. Next morning at the dawn, a file of Roundheads marched him into the courtyard of the Castle and here he found Colonel Playfair and his officers waiting.

"Now, Sir James, for your last word,' said the Roundhead. 'Will you

reveal where the treasure lies, or will you choose to die?'

"I will not reveal,' answered the old man. 'Murder me if ye will. The deed is worthy of Holy Presbyters. I have spoken and my mind is fixed.'

"Bethink you,' said the Colonel.

"I have thought,' he answered, 'and I am ready. Slay me and seek the treasure. But one thing I ask. My young son is not here. In France hath he been these three years, and nought knows he of where I have hid this gold. Send to him this Bible when I am dead. Nay, search it from page to page. There is nought therein save what I have writ here upon this last sheet. It is all I have left to give.'

"The book shall be searched,' answered the Colonel, 'and if nought is found therein it shall be sent. And now, in the name of God, I adjure you, Sir James, let not the love of lucre stand between you and your life. Here I make you one last offer. Discover but to us the ten thousand pounds whereof you speak in this writing,' and he held up the letter to the King, 'and you shall go free--refuse and you die.'

"I refuse,' he answered.

"Musqueteers, make ready,' shouted the Colonel, and the file of men stepped forward.

"But at that moment there came up so furious a squall of wind, and with it such dense and cutting rain, that for a while the execution was delayed. Presently it passed, the wild light of the November morning swept out from the sky, and revealed the doomed man kneeling in prayer upon the sodden turf, the water running from his white hair and beard.

"They called to him to stand up, but he would not, and continued praying. So they shot him on his knees."

"Well," said Colonel Quaritch, "at any rate he died like a gallant gentleman."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and the servant came in.

"What is it?" asked the Squire.

"George is here, please, sir," said the girl, "and says that he would like to see you."

"Confound him," growled the old gentleman; "he is always here after something or other. I suppose it is about the Moat Farm. He was going to see Janter to-day. Will you excuse me, Quaritch? My daughter will tell you the end of the story if you care to hear any more. I will join you in the drawing-room."