

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF THE TALE

As soon as her father had gone, Ida rose and suggested that if Colonel Quaritch had done his wine they should go into the drawing-room, which they accordingly did. This room was much more modern than either the vestibule or the dining-room, and had an air and flavour of nineteenth century young lady about it. There were the little tables, the draperies, the photograph frames, and all the hundred and one knick-knacks and odds and ends by means of which a lady of taste makes a chamber lovely in the eyes of brutal man. It was a very pleasant place to look upon, this drawing-room at Honham Castle, with its irregular recesses, its somewhat faded colours illuminated by the soft light of a shaded lamp, and its general air of feminine dominion. Harold Quaritch was a man who had seen much of the world, but who had not seen very much of drawing-rooms, or, indeed, of ladies at large. They had not come in his way, or if they did come in his way he had avoided them. Therefore, perhaps, he was the more susceptible to such influences when he was brought within their reach. Or perchance it was Ida's gracious presence which threw a charm upon the place that added to its natural attractiveness, as the china bowls of lavender and rose leaves added perfume to the air. Anyhow, it struck him that he had rarely before seen a room which conveyed to his mind such strong suggestions of refinement and gentle rest.

"What a charming room," he said, as he entered it.

"I am glad you think so," answered Ida; "because it is my own territory, and I arrange it."

"Yes," he said, "it is easy to see that."

"Well, would you like to hear the end of the story about Sir James and his treasure?"

"Certainly; it interests me very much."

"It positively /fascinates/ me," said Ida with emphasis.

"Listen, and I will tell you. After they had shot old Sir James they took the Bible off him, but whether or no Colonel Playfair ever sent it to the son in France, is not clear.

"The story is all known historically, and it is certain that, as my father said, he asked that his Bible might be sent, but nothing more. This son, Sir Edward, never lived to return to England. After his father's murder, the estates were seized by the Parliamentary party, and the old Castle, with the exception of the gate towers, razed to the ground, partly for military purposes and partly in the long and determined attempt that was made to discover old Sir James's treasure, which might, it was thought, have been concealed in some secret

chamber in the walls. But it was all of no use, and Colonel Playfair found that in letting his temper get the better of him and shooting Sir James, he had done away with the only chance of finding it that he was ever likely to have, for to all appearance the secret had died with its owner. There was a great deal of noise about it at the time, and the Colonel was degraded from his rank in reward for what he had done. It was presumed that old Sir James must have had accomplices in the hiding of so great a mass of gold, and every means was taken, by way of threats and promises of reward--which at last grew to half of the total amount that should be discovered--to induce these to come forward if they existed, but without result. And so the matter went on, till after a few years the quest died away and was forgotten.

"Meanwhile the son, Sir Edward, who was the second and last baronet, led a wandering life abroad, fearing or not caring to return to England now that all his property had been seized. When he was two-and-twenty years of age, however, he contracted an imprudent marriage with his cousin, a lady of the name of Ida Dofferleigh, a girl of good blood and great beauty, but without means. Indeed, she was the sister of Geoffrey Dofferleigh, who was a first cousin and companion in exile of Sir Edward's, and as you will presently see, my lineal ancestor. Well, within a year of this marriage, poor Ida, my namesake, died with her baby of fever, chiefly brought on, they say, by want and anxiety of mind, and the shock seems to have turned her husband's brain. At any rate, within three or four months of her death, he committed suicide. But before he did so, he formally executed a rather elaborate

will, by which he left all his estates in England, 'now unjustly withheld from me contrary to the law and natural right by the rebel pretender Cromwell, together with the treasure hidden thereon or elsewhere by my late murdered father, Sir James de la Molle,' to John Geoffrey Dofferleigh, his cousin, and the brother of his late wife, and his heirs for ever, on condition only of his assuming the name and arms of the de la Molle family, the direct line of which became extinct with himself. Of course, this will, when it was executed, was to all appearance so much waste paper, but within three years from that date Charles II. was King of England.

"Thereon Geoffrey Dofferleigh produced the document, and on assuming the name and arms of de la Molle actually succeeded in obtaining the remains of the Castle and a considerable portion of the landed property, though the baronetcy became extinct. His son it was who built this present house, and he is our direct ancestor, for though my father talks of them as though they were--it is a little weakness of his--the old de la Molles are not our direct male ancestors."

"Well," said Harold, "and did Dofferleigh find the treasure?"

"No, ah, no, nor anybody else; the treasure has vanished. He hunted for it a great deal, and he did find those pieces of plate which you saw to-night, hidden away somewhere, I don't know where, but there was nothing else with them."

"Perhaps the whole thing was nonsense," said Harold reflectively.

"No," answered Ida shaking her head, "I am sure it was not, I am sure the treasure is hidden away somewhere to this day. Listen, Colonel Quaritch--you have not heard quite all the story yet--/I/ found something."

"You, what?"

"Wait a minute and I will show you," and going to a cabinet in the corner, she unlocked it, and took out a despatch box, which she also unlocked.

"Here," she said, "I found this. It is the Bible that Sir James begged might be sent to his son, just before they shot him, you remember," and she handed him a small brown book. He took it and examined it carefully. It was bound in leather, and on the cover was written in large letters, "Sir James de la Molle. Honham Castle, 1611." Nor was this all. The first sheets of the Bible, which was one of the earliest copies of the authorised version, were torn out, and the top corner was also gone, having to all appearance been shot off by a bullet, a presumption that a dark stain of blood upon the cover and edges brought near to certainty.

"Poor gentleman," said Harold, "he must have had it in his pocket when he was shot. Where did you find it?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Ida, "in fact I have no doubt of it. I found it when I was a child in an ancient oak chest in the basement of the western tower, quite hidden up in dusty rubbish and bits of old iron. But look at the end and you will see what he wrote in it to his son, Edward. Here, I will show you," and leaning over him she turned to the last page of the book. Between the bottom of the page and the conclusion of the final chapter of Revelations there had been a small blank space now densely covered with crabbed writing in faded ink, which she read aloud. It ran as follows:

"/Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly done to death by rebel murderers, for nought happeneth but according to God's will. And now farewell, Edward, till we shall meet in heaven. My monies have I hid and on account thereof I die unto this world, knowing that not one piece shall Cromwell touch. To whom God shall appoint, shall all my treasure be, for nought can I communicate./"

"There," said Ida triumphantly, "what do you think of that, Colonel Quaritch? The Bible, I think, was never sent to his son, but here it is, and in that writing, as I solemnly believe," and she laid her white finger upon the faded characters, "lies the key to wherever it is that the money is hidden, only I fear I shall never make it out.

For years I have puzzled over it, thinking that it might be some form of acrostic, but I can make nothing of it. I have tried it all ways. I have translated it into French, and had it translated into Latin, but still I can find out nothing--nothing. But some day somebody will hit upon it--at least I hope so."

Harold shook his head. "I am afraid," he said, "that what has remained undiscovered for so long will remain so till the end of the chapter. Perhaps old Sir James was hoaxing his enemies!"

"No," said Ida, "for if he was, what became of all the money? He was known to be one of the richest men of his day, and that he was rich we can see from his letter to the King. There was nothing found after his death, except his lands, of course. Oh, it will be found someday, twenty centuries hence, probably, much too late to be of any good to us," and she sighed deeply, while a pained and wearied expression spread itself over her handsome face.

"Well," said Harold in a doubtful voice, "there may be something in it. May I take a copy of that writing?"

"Certainly," said Ida laughing, "and if you find the treasure we will go shares. Stop, I will dictate it to you."

Just as this process was finished and Harold was shutting up his pocket-book, in which he put the fair copy he had executed on a half-

sheet of note paper, the old Squire came into the room again. Looking at his face, his visitor saw that the interview with "George" had evidently been anything but satisfactory, for it bore an expression of exceedingly low spirits.

"Well, father, what is the matter?" asked his daughter.

"Oh, nothing, my dear, nothing," he answered in melancholy tones.

"George has been here, that is all."

"Yes, and I wish he would keep away," she said with a little stamp of her foot, "for he always brings some bad news or other."

"It is the times, my dear, it is the times; it isn't George. I really don't know what has come to the country."

"What is it?" said Ida with a deepening expression of anxiety.

"Something wrong with the Moat Farm?"

"Yes; Janter has thrown it up after all, and I am sure I don't know where I am to find another tenant."

"You see what the pleasures of landed property are, Colonel Quaritch," said Ida, turning towards him with a smile which did not convey a great sense of cheerfulness.

"Yes," he said, "I know. Thank goodness I have only the ten acres that my dear old aunt left to me. And now," he added, "I think that I must be saying good-night. It is half-past ten, and I expect that old Mrs. Jobson is sitting up for me."

Ida looked up in remonstrance, and opened her lips to speak, and then for some reason that did not appear changed her mind and held out her hand. "Good-night, Colonel Quaritch," she said; "I am so pleased that we are going to have you as a neighbour. By-the-way, I have a few people coming to play lawn tennis here to-morrow afternoon, will you come too?"

"What," broke in the Squire, in a voice of irritation, "more lawn tennis parties, Ida? I think that you might have spared me for once--with all this business on my hands, too."

"Nonsense, father," said his daughter, with some acerbity. "How can a few people playing lawn tennis hurt you? It is quite useless to shut oneself up and be miserable over things that one cannot help."

The old gentleman collapsed with an air of pious resignation, and meekly asked who was coming.

"Oh, nobody in particular. Mr. and Mrs. Jeffries--Mr. Jeffries is our clergyman, you know, Colonel Quaritch--and Dr. Bass and the two Miss Smiths, one of whom he is supposed to be in love with, and Mr. and

Mrs. Quest, and Mr. Edward Cossey, and a few more."

"Mr. Edward Cossey," said the Squire, jumping off his chair; "really, Ida, you know I detest that young man, that I consider him an abominable young man; and I think you might have shown more consideration to me than to have asked him here."

"I could not help it, father," she answered coolly. "He was with Mrs. Quest when I asked her, so I had to ask him too. Besides, I rather like Mr. Cossey, he is always so polite, and I don't see why you should take such a violent prejudice against him. Anyhow, he is coming, and there is an end of it."

"Cossey, Cossey," said Harold, throwing himself into the breach, "I used to know that name." It seemed to Ida that he winced a little as he said it. "Is he one of the great banking family?"

"Yes," said Ida, "he is one of the sons. They say he will have half a million of money or more when his father, who is very infirm, dies. He is looking after the branch banks of his house in this part of the world, at least nominally. I fancy that Mr. Quest really manages them; certainly he manages the Boisingham branch."

"Well, well," said the Squire, "if they are coming, I suppose they are coming. At any rate, I can go out. If you are going home, Quaritch, I will walk with you. I want a little air."

"Colonel Quaritch, you have not said if you will come to my party to-morrow, yet," said Ida, as he stretched out his hand to say good-bye.

"Oh, thank you, Miss de la Molle; yes, I think I can come, though I play tennis atrociously."

"Oh, we all do that. Well, good-night. I am so very pleased that you have come to live at Molehill; it will be so nice for my father to have a companion," she added as an afterthought.

"Yes," said the Colonel grimly, "we are almost of an age--good-night."

Ida watched the door close and then leant her arm on the mantelpiece, and reflected that she liked Colonel Quaritch very much, so much that even his not very beautiful physiognomy did not repel her, indeed rather attracted her than otherwise.

"Do you know," she said to herself, "I think that is the sort of man I should like to marry. Nonsense," she added, with an impatient shrug, "nonsense, you are nearly six-and-twenty, altogether too old for that sort of thing. And now there is this new trouble about the Moat Farm. My poor old father! Well, it is a hard world, and I think that sleep is about the best thing in it."

And with a sigh she lighted her candle to go to bed, then changed her mind and sat down to await her father's return.