CHAPTER VI

LAWYER QUEST

The day following that of the conversation just described was one of those glorious autumn mornings which sometimes come as a faint compensation for the utter vileness and bitter disappointment of the season that in this country we dignify by the name of summer. Notwithstanding his vigils and melancholy of the night before, the Squire was up early, and Ida, who between one thing and another had not had the best of nights, heard his loud cheery voice shouting about the place for "George."

Looking out of her bedroom window, she soon perceived that functionary himself, a long, lean, powerful-looking man with a melancholy face and a twinkle in his little grey eyes, hanging about the front steps. Presently her father emerged in a brilliant but ancient dressing gown, his white locks waving on the breeze.

"Here, George, where are you, George?"

"Here I be, sir."

"Ah, yes; then why didn't you say so? I have been shouting myself hoarse for you."

"Yis, Squire," replied the imperturbable George, "I hev been a-standing here for the last ten minutes, and I heard you."

"You heard me, then why the dickens didn't you answer?"

"Because I didn't think as you wanted me, sir. I saw that you hadn't finished your letter."

"Well, then, you ought to. You know very well that my chest is weak, and yet I have to go hallooing all over the place after you. Now look here, have you got that fat pony of yours in the yard?"

"Yis, Squire, the pony is here, and if so be as it is fat it bean't for the want of movement."

"Very well, then, take this letter," and he handed him an epistle sealed with a tremendous seal, "take this letter to Mr. Quest at Boisingham, and wait for an answer. And look here, mind you are about the place at eleven o'clock, for I expect Mr. Quest to see me about the Moat Farm."

"Yis, Squire."

"I suppose that you have heard nothing more from Janter, have you?"

"No, Squire, nawthing. He means to git the place at his own price or

chuck it."

"And what is his price?"

"Five shillings an acre. You see, sir, it's this way. That army gent, Major Boston, as is agent for all the College lands down the valley, he be a poor weak fule, and when all these tinants come to him and say that they must either hev the land at five shillings an acre or go, he gits scared, he du, and down goes the rent of some of the best meadow land in the country from thirty-five shillings to five. Of course it don't signify to him not a halfpenny, the College must pay him his salary all the same, and he don't know no more about farming, nor land, nor northing, than my old mare yinder. Well, and what comes of it? Of course every tinant on the place hears that those College lands be going for five shillings an acre, and they prick up their ears and say they must have their land at the same figger, and it's all owing to that Boston varmint, who ought to be kicked through every holl on the place and then drowned to dead in a dyke."

"Yes, you're right there, George, that silly man is a public enemy, and ought to be treated as such, but the times are very bad, with corn down to twenty-nine, very bad."

"I'm not a-saying that they ain't bad, Squire," said his retainer, his long face lighting up; "they are bad, cruel bad, bad for iverybody. And I'm not denying that they is bad for the tinants, but if they is

bad for the tinants they is wus for the landlord. It all comes on his shoulders in the long run. If men find they can get land at five shillings an acre that's worth twenty, why it isn't in human natur to pay twenty, and if they find that the landlord must go as they drive him, of course they'll lay on the whip. Why, bless you, sir, when a tinant comes and says that he is very sorry but he finds he can't pay his rent, in nine cases out of ten, you'd find that the bank was paid, the tradesmen were paid, the doctor's paid, iverybody's paid before he thinks about his rent. Let the landlord suffer, because he can't help hisself; but Lord bless us, if a hundred pounds were overdue to the bank it would have the innards out of him in no time, and he knows it. Now as for that varmint, Janter, to tell me that he can't pay fifteen shillings an acre for the Moat Farm, is nonsense. I only wish I had the capital to take it at the price, that I du."

"Well, George," said the Squire, "I think that if it can be managed I shall borrow the money and take the farm on hand. I am not going to let Janter have it at five shillings an acre."

"Ah, sir, that's the best way. Bad as times be, it will go hard if I can't make the interest and the rent out of it too. Besides, Squire, if you give way about this here farm, all the others will come down on you. I'm not saying a word agin your tinants, but where there's money to be made you can't trust not no man."

"Well, well," said the Squire, "perhaps you are right and perhaps you

ain't. Right or wrong, you always talk like Solomon in all his glory. Anyway, be off with that note and let me have the answer as soon as you get back. Mind you don't go loafing and jawing about down in Boisingham, because I want my answer."

"So he means to borrow the money if he can get it," said Ida to herself as she sat, an invisible auditor, doing her hair by the open window. "George can do more with him in five minutes than I can do in a week, and I know that he hates Janter. I believe Janter threw up the farm because of his quarrelling with George. Well, I suppose we must take our chance."

Meanwhile George had mounted his cart and departed upon the road to Boisingham, urging his fat pony along as though he meant to be there in twenty minutes. But so soon as he was well out of reach of the Squire's shouts and sight of the Castle gates, he deliberately turned up a bye lane and jogged along for a mile or more to a farm, where he had a long confabulation with a man about thatching some ricks. Thence he quietly made his way to his own little place, where he proceeded to comfortably get his breakfast, remarking to his wife that he was of opinion that there was no hurry about the Squire's letter, as the "lawyers" wasn't in the habit of coming to office at eight in the morning.

Breakfast over, the philosophic George got into his cart, the fat pony having been tied up outside, and leisurely drove into the picturesque

old town which lay at the head of the valley. All along the main street he met many acquaintances, and with each he found it necessary to stop and have a talk, indeed with two he had a modest half-pint. At length, however, his labour o'er, he arrived at Mr. Quest's office, that, as all the Boisingham world knows, was just opposite the church, of which Mr. Quest was one of the churchwardens, and which but two years before was beautifully restored, mainly owing to his efforts and generous contributions. Driving up to the small and quiet-looking doorway of a very unpretentious building, George descended and knocked. Thereon a clerk opened the door, and in answer to his inquiries informed him that he believed Mr. Quest had just come over to the office.

In another minute he was shown into an inner room of the ordinary country lawyer's office stamp, and there at the table sat Mr. Quest himself.

Mr. Quest was a man of about forty years of age, rather under than over, with a pale ascetic cast of face, and a quiet and pleasant, though somewhat reserved, manner. His features were in no way remarkable, with the exception of his eyes, which seemed to have been set in his head owing to some curious error of nature. For whereas his general tone was dark, his hair in particular being jet black, these eyes were grey, and jarred extraordinarily upon their companion features. For the rest, he was a man of some presence, and with the manners of a gentleman.

"Well, George," he said, "what is it that brings you to Boisingham? A letter from the Squire. Thank you. Take a seat, will you, will I look through it? Umph, wants me to come and see him at eleven o'clock. I am very sorry, but I can't manage that anyway. Ah, I see, about the Moat Farm. Janter told me that he was going to throw it up, and I advised him to do nothing of the sort, but he is a dissatisfied sort of a fellow, Janter is, and Major Boston has upset the whole country side by his very ill-advised action about the College lands."

"Janter is a warmint and Major Boston, begging his pardon for the language, is an ass, sir. Anyway there it is, Janter has thrown up, and where I am to find a tinant between now and Michaelmas I don't know; in fact, with the College lands going at five shillings an acre there ain't no chance."

"Then what does the Squire propose to do--take the land in hand?"

"Yes, sir, that's it; and that's what he wants to see you about."

"More money, I suppose," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, yis, sir. You see there will be covenants to meet, and then the farm is three hundred acres, and to stock it proper as it should be means nine pounds an acre quite, on this here heavy land."

"Yes, yes, I know, a matter of four thousand more or less, but where is it to come from, that's the question? Cossey's do not like land now, any more than other banks do. However, I'll see my principal about it. But, George, I can't possibly get up to the Castle at eleven. I have got a churchwardens' meeting at a quarter to, about that west pinnacle, you know. It is in a most dangerous condition, and by-the-way, before you go I should like to have your opinion, as a practical man, as to the best way to deal with it. To rebuild it would cost a hundred and twenty pounds, and that is more than we see our way to at present, though I can promise fifty if they can scape up the rest. But about the Squire. I think that the best thing I can do will be to come up to the Castle to lunch, and then I can talk over matters with him. Stay, I will just write him a note. By-the-way, you would like a glass of wine, wouldn't you, George? Nonsense man, here it is in the cupboard, a glass of wine is a good friend to have handy sometimes."

George, who like most men of his stamp could put away his share of liquor and feel thankful for it, drank his glass of wine while Mr. Quest was engaged in writing the note, wondering meanwhile what made the lawyer so civil to him. For George did not like Mr. Quest. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that he hated him. But this was a feeling which he never allowed to appear; he was too much afraid of the man for that, and in his queer way too much devoted to the old Squire's interests to run the risk of imperilling them by the exhibition of any aversion to Mr. Quest. He knew more of his master's

affairs than anybody living, unless, perhaps, it was Mr. Quest himself, and was aware that the lawyer held the old gentleman in a bondage that could not be broken. Now, George was a man with faults. He was somewhat sly, and, perhaps within certain lines, at times capable of giving the word honesty a liberal interpretation. But amongst many others he had one conspicuous virtue: he loved the old Squire as a Highlandman loves his chief, and would almost, if not quite, have died to serve him. His billet was no easy one, for Mr. de la Molle's temper was none of the best at times, and when things went wrong, as they pretty frequently did, he was exceedingly apt to visit his wrath on the head of the devoted George, saying things to him which he should not have said. But his retainer took it all in the day's work, and never bore malice, continuing in his own cadging pigheaded sort of way to labour early and late to prop up his master's broken fortunes. "Lord, sir," as he once said to Harold Quaritch when the Colonel condoled with him after a violent and unjust onslaught made by the Squire in his presence, "Lord, sir, that ain't nawthing, that ain't. I don't pay no manner of heed to that. Folk du say how as I wor made for he, like a safety walve for a traction engine."

Indeed, had it not been for George's contrivings and procrastinations, Honham Castle and its owner would have parted company long before.