

CHAPTER X

THE TENNIS PARTY

Ida shook hands coldly enough with the lawyer, for whom she cherished a dislike not unmixed with fear. Many women are by nature gifted with an extraordinary power of intuition which fully makes up for their deficiency in reasoning force. They do not conclude from the premisses of their observation, they /know/ that this man is to be feared and that trusted. In fact, they share with the rest of breathing creation that self-protective instinct of instantaneous and almost automatic judgment, given to guard it from the dangers with which it is continually threatened at the hands of man's over-mastering strength and ordered intelligence. Ida was one of these. She knew nothing to Mr. Quest's disadvantage, indeed she always heard him spoken of with great respect, and curiously enough she liked his wife. But she could not bear the man, feeling in her heart that he was not only to be avoided on account of his own hidden qualities, but that he was moreover an active personal enemy.

They went into the dining-room, where the luncheon was set, and while Ida allowed Mr. Quest to cut her some cold boiled beef, an operation in which he did not seem to be very much at home, she came to a rapid conclusion in her own mind. She had seen clearly enough from her father's face that his interview with the lawyer had been of a most serious character, but she knew that the chances were that she would

never be able to get its upshot out of him, for the old gentleman had a curious habit of keeping such unpleasant matters to himself until he was absolutely forced by circumstances to reveal them. She also knew that her father's affairs were in a most critical condition, for this she had extracted from him on the previous night, and that if any remedy was to be attempted it must be attempted at once, and on some heroic scale. Therefore, she made up her mind to ask her /bete noire/, Mr. Quest, what the truth might be.

"Mr. Quest," she said, with some trepidation, as he at last triumphantly handed her the beef, "I hope you will forgive me for asking you a plain question, and that, if you can, you will favour me with a plain answer. I know my father's affairs are very much involved, and that he is now anxious to borrow some more money; but I do not know quite how matters stand, and I want to learn the exact truth."

"I am very glad to hear you speak so, Miss de la Molle," answered the lawyer, "because I was trying to make up my mind to broach the subject, which is a painful one to me. Frankly, then--forgive me for saying it, your father is absolutely ruined. The interest on the mortgages is a year in arrear, his largest farm has just been thrown upon his hands, and, to complete the tale, the mortgagees are going to call in their money or foreclose."

At this statement, which was almost brutal in its brief

comprehensiveness, Ida turned pale as death, as well she might, and dropped her fork with a clatter upon the plate.

"I did not realise that things were quite so bad," she murmured. "Then I suppose that the place will be taken from us, and we shall--shall have to go away."

"Yes, certainly, unless money can be found to take up the mortgages, of which I see no chance. The place will be sold for what it will fetch, and that now-a-days will be no great sum."

"When will that be?" she asked.

"In about six or nine months' time."

Ida's lips trembled, and the sight of the food upon her plate became nauseous to her. A vision arose before her mind's eye of herself and her old father departing hand in hand from the Castle gates, behind and about which gleamed the hard wild lights of a March sunset, to seek a place to hide themselves. The vivid horror of the phantasy almost overcame her.

"Is there no way of escape?" she asked hoarsely. "To lose this place would kill my father. He loves it better than anything in the world; his whole life is wrapped up in it."

"I can quite understand that, Miss de la Molle; it is a most charming old place, especially to anybody interested in the past. But unfortunately mortgagees are no respecters of feelings. To them land is so much property and nothing more."

"I know all that," she said impatiently, "you do not answer my question;" and she leaned towards him, resting her hand upon the table. "Is there no way out of it?"

Mr. Quest drank a little claret before he answered. "Yes," he said, "I think that there is, if only you will take it."

"What way?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, though as I said just now, the mortgagees of an estate as a body are merely a business corporation, and look at things from a business point of view only, you must remember that they are composed of individuals, and that individuals can be influenced if they can be got at. For instance, Cossey and Son are an abstraction and harshly disposed in their abstract capacity, but Mr. Edward Cossey is an individual, and I should say, so far as this particular matter is concerned, a benevolently disposed individual. Now Mr. Edward Cossey is not himself at the present moment actually one of the firm of Cossey and Son, but he is the heir of the head of the house, and of course has authority, and, what is better still, the command of money."

"I understand," said Ida. "You mean that my father should try to win over Mr. Edward Cossey. Unfortunately, to be frank, he dislikes him, and my father is not a man to keep his dislikes to himself."

"People generally do dislike those to whom they are crushingly indebted; your father dislikes Mr. Cossey because his name is Cossey, and for no other reason. But that is not quite what I meant--I do not think that the Squire is the right person to undertake a negotiation of the sort. He is a little too outspoken and incautious. No, Miss de la Molle, if it is to be done at all /you/ must do it. You must put the whole case before him at once--this very afternoon, there is no time for delay; you need not enter into details, he knows all about them--only ask him to avert this catastrophe. He can do so if he likes, how he does it is his own affair."

"But, Mr. Quest," said Ida, "how can I ask such a favour of any man? I shall be putting myself in a dreadfully false position."

"I do not pretend, Miss de la Molle, that it is a pleasant task for any young lady to undertake. I quite understand your shrinking from it. But sometimes one has to do unpleasant things and make compromises with one's self-respect. It is a question whether or no your family shall be utterly ruined and destroyed. There is, as I honestly believe, no prospect whatever of your father being able to get the money to pay off Cossey and Son, and if he did, it would not help him,

because he could not pay the interest on it. Under these circumstances you have to choose between putting yourself in an equivocal position and letting events take their course. It would be useless for anybody else to undertake the task, and of course I cannot guarantee that even you will succeed, but I will not mince matters--as you doubtless know, any man would find it hard to refuse a favour asked by such a suppliant. And now you must make up your own mind. I have shown you a path that may lead your family from a position of the most imminent peril. If you are the woman I take you for, you will not shrink from following it."

Ida made no reply, and in another moment the Squire came in to take a couple of glasses of sherry and a biscuit. But Mr. Quest, furtively watching her face, said to himself that she had taken the bait and that she would do it. Shortly after this a diversion occurred, for the clergyman, Mr. Jeffries, a pleasant little man, with a round and shining face and a most unclerical eyeglass, came up to consult the Squire upon some matter of parish business, and was shown into the dining-room. Ida took advantage of his appearance to effect a retreat to her own room, and there for the present we may leave her to her meditations.

No more business was discussed by the Squire that afternoon. Indeed it interested Mr. Quest, who was above all things a student of character, to observe how wonderfully the old gentleman threw off his trouble. To listen to him energetically arguing with the Rev. Mr. Jeffries as to

whether or no it would be proper, as had hitherto been the custom, to devote the proceeds of the harvest festival collection (1 pound 18s. 3d. and a brass button) to the county hospital, or whether it should be applied to the repair of the woodwork in the vestry, was under the circumstances most instructive. The Rev. Mr. Jeffries, who suffered severely from the condition of the vestry, at last gained his point by triumphantly showing that no patient from Honham had been admitted to the hospital for fifteen months, and that therefore the hospital had no claim on this particular year, whereas the draught in the vestry was enough to cut any clergyman in two.

"Well, well," said the old gentleman, "I will consent for this year, and this year only. I have been churchwarden of this parish for between forty and fifty years, and we have always given the harvest festival collection to the hospital, and although under these exceptional circumstances it may possibly be desirable to diverge from that custom, I cannot and will not consent to such a thing in a permanent way. So I shall write to the secretary and explain the matter, and tell him that next year and in the future generally the collection will be devoted to its original purpose."

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Quest to himself. "And the man must know that in all human probability the place will be sold over his head before he is a year older. I wonder if he puts it on or if he deceives himself. I suppose he has lived here so long that he cannot realise a condition of things under which he will cease to live here

and the place will belong to somebody else. Or perhaps he is only brazening it out." And then he strolled away to the back of the house and had a look at the condition of the outhouses, reflecting that some of them would be sadly expensive to repair for whoever came into possession here. After that he crossed the moat and walked through the somewhat extensive plantations at the back of the house, wondering if it would not be possible to get enough timber out of them, if one went to work judiciously, to pay for putting the place in order. Presently he came to a hedgerow where a row of very fine timber oaks had stood, of which the Squire had been notoriously fond, and of which he had himself taken particular and admiring notice in the course of the previous winter. The trees were gone. In the hedge where they had grown were a series of gaps like those in an old woman's jaw, and the ground was still littered with remains of bark and branches and of faggots that had been made up from the brushwood.

"Cut down this spring fell," was Mr. Quest's ejaculation. "Poor old gentleman, he must have been pinched before he consented to part with those oaks."

Then he turned and went back to the house, just in time to see Ida's guests arriving for the lawn tennis party. Ida herself was standing on the lawn behind the house, which, bordered as it was by the moat and at the further end by a row of ruined arches, was one of the most picturesque in the country and a very effective setting to any young lady. As the people came they were shown through the house on to the

lawn, and here she was receiving them. She was dressed in a plain, tight-fitting gown of blue flannel, which showed off her perfect figure to great advantage, and a broad-brimmed hat, that shaded her fine and dignified face. Mr. Quest sat down on a bench beneath the shade of an arbutus, watching her closely, and indeed, if the study of a perfect English lady of the noblest sort has any charms, he was not without his reward. There are some women--most of us know one or two--who are born to hold a great position and to sail across the world like a swan through meaner fowl. It would be very hard to say to what their peculiar charm and dignity is owing. It is not to beauty only, for though they have presence, many of these women are not beautiful, while some are even plain. Nor does it spring from native grace and tact alone; though these things must be present. Rather perhaps it is the reflection of a cultivated intellect acting upon a naturally pure and elevated temperament, which makes these ladies conspicuous and fashions them in such kind that all men, putting aside the mere charm of beauty and the natural softening of judgment in the atmosphere of sex, must recognise in them an equal mind, and a presence more noble than their own.

Such a woman was Ida de la Molle, and if any one doubted it, it was sufficient to compare her in her simplicity to the various human items by whom she was surrounded. They were a typical county society gathering, such as needs no description, and would not greatly interest if described; neither very good nor very bad, very handsome nor very plain, but moving religiously within the lines of custom and

on the ground of commonplace.

It is no wonder, then, that a woman like Ida de la Molle was /facile princeps/ among such company, or that Harold Quaritch, who was somewhat poetically inclined for a man of his age, at any rate where the lady in question was concerned, should in his heart have compared her to a queen. Even Belle Quest, lovely as she undoubtedly was in her own way, paled and looked shopgirlish in face of that gentle dignity, a fact of which she was evidently aware, for although the two women were friendly, nothing would induce the latter to stand long near Ida in public. She would tell Edward Cossey that it made her look like a wax doll beside a live child.

While Mr. Quest was still watching Ida with complete satisfaction, for she appealed to the artistic side of his nature, Colonel Quaritch arrived upon the scene, looking, Mr. Quest thought, particularly plain with his solid form, his long thin nose, light whiskers, and square massive chin. Also he looked particularly imposing in contrast to the youths and maidens and domesticated clergymen. There was a gravity, almost a solemnity, about his bronzed countenance and deliberate ordered conversation, which did not, however, favourably impress the aforesaid youths and maidens, if a judgment might be formed from such samples of conversational criticism as Mr. Quest heard going on on the further side of his arbutus.