

CHAPTER XII

GEORGE PROPHECIES

Ida, for obvious reasons, said nothing to her father of her interview with Edward Cossey, and thus it came to pass that on the morning following the lawn tennis party, there was a very serious consultation between the faithful George and his master. It appeared to Ida, who was lying awake in her room, to commence somewhere about daybreak, and it certainly continued with short intervals for refreshment till eleven o'clock in the forenoon. First the Squire explained the whole question to George at great length, and with a most extraordinary multiplicity of detail, for he began at his first loan from the house of Cossey and Son, which he had contracted a great many years before. All this while George sat with a very long face, and tried to look as though he were following the thread of the argument, which was not possible, for his master had long ago lost it himself, and was mixing up the loan of 1863 with the loan of 1874, and the money raised in the severance of the entail with both, in a way which would have driven anybody except George, who was used to this sort of thing, perfectly mad. However he sat it through, and when at last the account was finished, remarked that things "sertainly did look queer."

Thereupon the Squire called him a stupid owl, and having by means of some test questions discovered that he knew very little of the details which had just been explained to him at such portentous length, in

spite of the protest of the wretched George, who urged that they "didn't seem to be gitting no forrader somehow," he began and went through every word of it again.

This brought them to breakfast time, and after breakfast, George's accounts were thoroughly gone into, with the result that confusion was soon worse confounded, for either George could not keep accounts or the Squire could not follow them. Ida, sitting in the drawing-room, could occasionally hear her father's ejaculatory outbursts after this kind:

"Why, you stupid donkey, you've added it up all wrong, it's nine hundred and fifty, not three hundred and fifty;" followed by a "No, no, Squire, you be a-looking on the wrong side--them there is the dibits," and so on till both parties were fairly played out, and the only thing that remained clear was that the balance was considerably on the wrong side.

"Well," said the Squire at last, "there you are, you see. It appears to me that I am absolutely ruined, and upon my word I believe that it is a great deal owing to your stupidity. You have muddled and muddled and muddled till at last you have muddled us out of house and home."

"No, no, Squire, don't say that--don't you say that. It ain't none of my doing, for I've been a good sarvant to you if I haven't had much book larning. It's that there dratted borrowing, that's what it is,

and the interest and all the rest on it, and though I says it as didn't ought, poor Mr. James, God rest him and his free-handed ways. Don't you say it's me, Squire."

"Well, well," answered his master, "it doesn't much matter whose fault it is, the result is the same, George; I'm ruined, and I suppose that the place will be sold if anybody can be found to buy it. The de la Molles have been here between four and five centuries, and they got it by marriage with the Boisseys, who got it from the Norman kings, and now it will go to the hammer and be bought by a picture dealer, or a manufacturer of brandy, or someone of that sort. Well, everything has its end and God's will be done."

"No, no, Squire, don't you talk like that," answered George with emotion. "I can't bear to hear you talk like that. And what's more it ain't so."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the old gentleman sharply. "It /is/ so, there's no getting over it unless you can find thirty thousand pounds or thereabouts, to take up these mortgages with. Nothing short of a miracle can save it. That's always your way. 'Oh, something will turn up, something will turn up.'"

"Thin there'll be a miricle," said George, bringing down a fist like a leg of mutton with a thud upon the table, "it ain't no use of your talking to me, Squire. I know it, I tell you I know it. There'll never

be no other than a de la Molle up at the Castle while we're alive, no, nor while our childer is alive either. If the money's to be found, why drat it, it will be found. Don't you think that God Almighty is going to put none of them there counter jumpers into Honham Castle, where gentlefolk hev lived all these ginerations, because He ain't. There, and that's the truth, because I knaw it and so help me God--and if I'm wrong it's a master one."

The Squire, who was striding up and down the room in his irritation, stopped suddenly in his walk, and looked at his retainer with a sharp and searching gaze upon his noble features. Notwithstanding his prejudices, his simplicity, and his occasional absurdities, he was in his own way an able man, and an excellent judge of human nature. Even his prejudices were as a rule founded upon some solid ground, only it was as a general rule impossible to get at it. Also he had a share of that marvellous instinct which, when it exists, registers the mental altitude of the minds of others with the accuracy of an aneroid. He could tell when a man's words rang true and when they rang false, and what is more when the conviction of the true, and the falsity of the false, rested upon a substantial basis of fact or error. Of course the instinct was a vague, and from its nature an undefinable one, but it existed, and in the present instance arose in strength. He looked at the ugly melancholy countenance of the faithful George with that keen glance of his, and observed that for the moment it was almost beautiful--beautiful in the light of conviction which shone upon it. He looked, and it was borne in upon him that what George said was

true, and that George knew it was true, although he did not know where the light of truth came from, and as he looked half the load fell from his heart.

"Hullo, George, are you turning prophet in addition to your other occupations?" he said cheerfully, and as he did so Edward Cossey's splendid bay horse pulled up at the door and the bell rang.

"Well," he added as soon as he saw who his visitor was, "unless I am much mistaken, we shall soon know how much truth there is in your prophecies, for here comes Mr. Cossey himself."

Before George could sufficiently recover from his recent agitation to make any reply, Edward Cossey, looking particularly handsome and rather overpowering, was shown into the room.

The Squire shook hands with him this time, though coldly enough, and George touched his forelock and said, "Sarvant, sir," in the approved fashion. Thereon his master told him that he might retire, though he was to be sure not to go out of hearing, as he should want him again presently.

"Very well, sir," answered George, "I'll just step up to the Poplars. I told a man to be round there to-day, as I want to see if I can come to an understanding with him about this year's fell in the big wood."

"There," said the Squire with an expression of infinite disgust, "there, that's just like your way, your horrid cadging way; the idea of telling a man to be 'round about the Poplars' sometime or other to-day, because you wanted to speak to him about a fell. Why didn't you write him a letter like an ordinary Christian and make an offer, instead of dodging him round a farm for half a day like a wild Indian? Besides, the Poplars is half a mile off, if it's a yard."

"Lord, sir," said George as he retired, "that ain't the way that folks in these parts like to do business, that ain't. Letter writing is all very well for Londoners and other furriners, but it don't do here. Besides, sir, I shall hear you well enough up there. Sarvant, sir!" this to Edward Cossey, and he was gone.

Edward burst out laughing, and the Squire looked after his retainer with a comical air.

"No wonder that the place has got into a mess with such a fellow as that to manage it," he said aloud. "The idea of hunting a man round the Poplars Farm like--like an Indian squaw! He's a regular cadger, that's what he is, and that's all he's fit for. However, it's his way of doing business and I shan't alter him. Well, Mr. Cossey," he went on, "this is a very sad state of affairs, at any rate so far as I am concerned. I presume of course that you know of the steps which have been taken by Cossey and Son to force a foreclosure, for that is what

it amounts to, though I have not as yet received the formal notice; indeed, I suppose that those steps have been taken under your advice."

"Yes, Mr. de la Molle, I know all about it, and here is the notice calling in the loans," and he placed a folded paper on the table.

"Ah," said the Squire, "I see. As I remarked to your manager, Mr. Quest, yesterday, I think that considering the nature of the relationship which has existed for so many generations between our family and the business firm of which you are a member, considering too the peculiar circumstances in which the owners of land find themselves at this moment, and the ruinous loss--to put questions of sentiment aside--that must be inflicted by such sale upon the owner of property, more consideration might have been shown. However, it is useless to try to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, or to get blood from a stone, so I suppose that I must make the best of a bad job--and," with a most polite bow--"I really do not know that I have anything more to say to you, Mr. Cossey. I will forward the notice to my lawyers; indeed I think that it might have been sent to them in the first instance."

Edward Cossey had all this while been sitting on an old oak chair, his eyes fixed upon the ground, and slowly swinging his hat between his legs. Suddenly he looked up and to the Squire's surprise said quietly:

"I quite agree with you. I don't think that you can say anything too

bad about the behaviour of my people. A Shoreditch Jew could not have done worse. And look here, Mr. de la Molle, to come to the point and prevent misunderstanding, I may as well say at once that with your permission, I am anxious to take up these mortgages myself, for two reasons; I regard them as a desirable investment even in the present condition of land, and also I wish to save Cossey and Son from the discredit of the step which they meditate."

For the second time that morning the Squire looked up with the sharp and searching gaze he occasionally assumed, and for the second time his instinct, for he was too heady a man to reason overmuch, came into play and warned him that in making this offer Edward Cossey had other motives than those which he had brought forward. He paused to consider what they might be. Was he anxious to get the estate for himself? Was he put forward by somebody else? Quest, perhaps; or was it something to do with Ida? The first alternative seemed the most probable to him. But whatever the lender's object, the result to him was the same, it gave him a respite. For Mr. de la Molle well knew that he had no more chance of raising the money from an ordinary source, than he had of altering the condition of agriculture.

"Hum," he said, "this is an important matter, a most important matter. I presume, Mr. Cossey, that before making this definite offer you have consulted a legal adviser."

"Oh yes, I have done all that and am quite satisfied with the security

--an advance of thirty thousand charged on all the Honham Castle estates at four per cent. The question now is if you are prepared to consent to the transfer. In that case all the old charges on the property will be paid off, and Mr. Quest, who will act for me in the matter, will prepare a single deed charging the estate for the round total."

"Ah yes, the plan seems a satisfactory one, but of course in so important a matter I should prefer to consult my legal adviser before giving a final answer, indeed I think that it would be better if the whole affair were carried out in a proper and formal way?"

"Surely, surely, Mr. de la Molle," said the younger man with some irritation, for the old gentleman's somewhat magnificent manner rather annoyed him, which under the circumstances was not unnatural. "Surely you do not want to consult a legal adviser to make up your mind as to whether or no you will allow a foreclosure. I offer you the money at four per cent. Cannot you let me have an answer now, yes or no?"

"I don't like being hurried. I can't bear to be hurried," said the Squire pettishly. "These important matters require consideration, a great deal of consideration. Still," he added, observing signs of increasing irritation upon Edward Cossey's face, and not having the slightest intention of throwing away the opportunity, though he would dearly have liked to prolong the negotiations for a week or two, if it was only to enjoy the illusory satisfaction of dabbling with such a

large sum of money. "Still, as you are so pressing about it, I really, speaking off hand, can see no objection to your taking up the mortgages on the terms you mention."

"Very well, Mr. de la Molle. Now I have on my part one condition and one only to attach to this offer of mine, which is that my name is not mentioned in connection with it. I do not wish Cossey and Son to know that I have taken up this investment on my own account. In fact, so necessary to me is it that my name should not be mentioned, that if it does transpire before the affair is completed I shall withdraw my offer, and if it transpires afterwards I shall call the money in. The loan will be advanced by a client of Mr. Quest's. Is that understood between us?"

"Hum," said the Squire, "I don't quite like this secrecy about these matters of business, but still if you make a point of it, why of course I cannot object."

"Very good. Then I presume that you will write officially to Cossey and Son stating that the money will be forthcoming to meet their various charges and the overdue interest. And now I think that we have had about enough of this business for once, so with your permission I will pay my respects to Miss de la Molle before I go."

"Dear me," said the Squire, pressing his hand to his head, "you do hurry me so dreadfully--I really don't know where I am. Miss de la

Molle is out; I saw her go out sketching myself. Sit down and we will talk this business over a little more."

"No, thank you, Mr. de la Molle, I have to talk about money every day of my life and I soon have enough of the subject. Quest will arrange all the details. Good-bye, don't bother to ring, I will find my horse." And with a shake of the hand he was gone.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman to himself when his visitor had departed, "he asked for Ida, so I suppose that is what he is after. But it is a queer sort of way to begin courting, and if she finds it out I should think that it would go against him. Ida is not the sort of woman to be won by a money consideration. Well, she can very well look after herself, that's certain. Anyway it has been a good morning's work, but somehow I don't like that young man any the better for it. I have it--there's something wanting. He is not quite a gentleman. Well, I must find that fellow George," and he rushed to the front door and roared for "George," till the whole place echoed and the pheasants crowed in the woods.

After a while there came faint answering yells of "Coming, Squire, coming," and in due course George's long form became visible, striding swiftly up the garden.

"Well!" said his master, who was in high good humour, "did you find your man?"

"Well no, Squire--that is, I had a rare hunt after him, and I had just happened of him up a tree when you began to halloa so loud, that he went nigh to falling out of it, so I had to tell him to come back next week, or the week after."

"You happened of him up a tree. Why what the deuce was the man doing up a tree--measuring it?"

"No, Squire, I don't rightly know what he wor after, but he is a curious kind of a chap, and he said he had a fancy to wait there."

"Good heavens! no wonder the place is going to ruin, when you deal with men who have a fancy to transact their business up a tree. Well, never mind that, I have settled the matter about the mortgages. Of course somebody, a client of Mr. Quest's, has been found without the least difficulty to take them up at four per cent. and advance the other five thousand too, so that there be no more anxiety about that."

"Well that's a good job at any rate," answered George with a sigh of relief.

"A good job? Of course it's a good job, but it is no more than I expected. It wasn't likely that such an eligible investment, as they say in the advertisements, would be allowed to go begging for long. But that's just the way with you; the moment there's a hitch you come

with your long face and your uneducated sort of way, and swear that we are all ruined and that the country is breaking up, and that there's nothing before us but the workhouse, and nobody knows what."

George reflected that the Squire had forgotten that not an hour before he himself had been vowing that they were ruined, while he, George, had stoutly sworn that something would turn up to help them. But his back was accustomed to those vicarious burdens, nor to tell the truth did they go nigh to the breaking of it.

"Well, it's a good job anyway, and I thank God Almighty for it," said he, "and more especial since there'll be the money to take over the Moat Farm and give that varmint Janter the boot."

"Give him /what?/"

"Why, kick him out, sir, for good and all, begging your pardon, sir."

"Oh, I see. I do wish that you would respect the Queen's English a little more, George, and the name of the Creator too. By the way the parson was speaking to me again yesterday about your continued absence from church. It really is disgraceful; you are a most confirmed Sabbath-breaker. And now you mustn't waste my time here any longer. Go and look after your affairs. Stop a minute, would you like a glass of port?"

"Well, thank you, sir," said George reflectively, "we hev had a lot of talk and I don't mind if I do, and as for that there parson, begging his pardon, I wish he would mind his own affairs and leave me to mind mine."