

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW GEORGE TREATED JOHNNIE

Some two or three days before the scene described in the last chapter the faithful George had suddenly announced his desire to visit London.

"What?" said the Squire in astonishment, for George had never been known to go out of his own county before. "Why, what on earth are you going to do in London?"

"Well, Squire," answered his retainer, looking marvellously knowing, "I don't rightly know, but there's a cheap train goes up to this here Exhibition on the Tuesday morning and comes back on the Thursday evening. Ten shillings both ways, that's the fare, and I see in the /Chronicle/, I du, that there's a wonnerful show of these new-fangled self-tying and delivering reapers, sich as they foreigners use over sea in America, and I'm rarely fell on seeing them and having a holiday look round Lunnon town. So as there ain't not nothing particler a-doing, if you hain't got anything to say agin it, I think I'll go, Squire."

"All right," said the Squire; "are you going to take your wife with you?"

"Why no, Squire; I said as I wanted to go for a holiday, and that

ain't no holiday to take the old missus too," and George chuckled in a manner which evidently meant volumes.

And so it came to pass that on the afternoon of the day of the transfer of the mortgages from Edward Cossey to Mr. Quest the great George found himself wandering vaguely about the vast expanse of the Colinderies, and not enjoying himself in the least. He had been recommended by some travelled individual in Boisingham to a certain lodging near Liverpool Street Station, which he found with the help of a friendly porter. Thence he set out for the Exhibition, but, being of a prudent mind, thought that he would do well to save his money and walk the distance. So he walked and walked till he was tired, and then, after an earnest consultation with a policeman, he took a 'bus, which an hour later landed him--at the Royal Oak. His further adventures we need not pursue; suffice it to say that, having started from his lodging at three, it was past seven o'clock at night when he finally reached the Exhibition, more thoroughly wearied than though he had done a good day's harvesting.

Here he wandered for a while in continual dread of having his pocket picked, seeking reaping machines and discovering none, till at length he found himself in the gardens, where the electric light display was in full swing. Soon wearying of this, for it was a cold damp night, he made a difficult path to a buffet inside the building, where he sat down at a little table, and devoured some very unpleasant-looking cold beef. Here slumber overcame him, for his weariness was great, and he

dozed.

Presently through the muffled roar and hum of voices which echoed in his sleep-dulled ears, he caught the sound of a familiar name, that woke him up "all of a heap," as he afterwards said. The name was "Quest." Without moving his body he opened his eyes. At the very next table to his own were seated two people, a man and a woman. He looked at the latter first. She was clad in yellow, and was very tall, thin and fierce-looking; so fierce-looking that George involuntarily jerked his head back, and brought it with painful force in contact with the wall. It was the Tiger herself, and her companion was the coarse, dreadful-looking man called Johnnie, whom she had sent away in the cab on the night of Mr. Quest's visit.

"Oh," Johnnie was saying, "so Quest is his name, is it, and he lives in a city called Boisingham, does he? Is he an off bird?" (rich)

"Rather," answered the Tiger, "if only one can make the dollars run, but he's a nasty mean boy, he is. Look here, not a cent, not a stiver have I got to bless myself with, and I daren't ask him for any more not till January. And how am I going to live till January? I got the sack from the music hall last week because I was a bit jolly. And now I can't get another billet any way, and there's a bill of sale over the furniture, and I've sold all my jewels down to my ticker, or at least most of them, and there's that brute," and her voice rose to a subdued scream, "living like a fighting-cock while his poor wife is

left to starve."

"Wife! Oh, yes, we know all about that," said the gentleman called Johnnie.

A look of doubt and cunning passed across the woman's face. Evidently she feared that she had said too much. "Well, it's a good a name as another," she said. "Oh, don't I wish that I could get a grip of him; I'd wring him," and she twisted her long bony hands as washerwomen do when they squeeze a cloth.

"I'd back you to," said Johnnie. "And now, adored Edithia, I've had enough of this blooming show, and I'm off. Perhaps I shall look in down Rupert Street way this evening. Ta-ta."

"Well, you may as well stand a drink first," said the adored one. "I'm pretty dry, I can tell you."

"Certainly, with pleasure; I will order one. Waiter, a brandy-and-soda for this lady--/six/ of brandy, if you please; she's very delicate and wants support."

The waiter grinned and brought the drink and the man Johnnie turned round as though to pay him, but really he went without doing so.

George watched him go, and then looked again at the lady, whose

appearance seemed to fascinate him.

"Well, if that ain't a master one," he said to himself, "and she called herself his wife, she did, and then drew up like a slug's horns. Hang me if I don't stick to her till I find out a bit more of the tale."

Thus ruminated George, who, be it observed, was no fool, and who had a hearty dislike and mistrust of Mr. Quest. While he was wondering how he was to go to work an unexpected opportunity occurred. The lady had finished her brandy-and-soda, and was preparing to leave, when the waiter swooped down upon her.

"Money please, miss," he said.

"Money!" she said, "why you're paid."

"Come, none of that," said the waiter. "I want a shilling for the brandy-and-soda."

"A shilling, do you? Then you'll have to want, you cheating white-faced rascal you; my friend paid you before he went away."

"Oh, we've had too much of that game," said the waiter, beckoning to a constable, to whom, in spite of the "fair Edithia's" very vigorous and pointed protestations, he went on to give her in charge, for it

appeared that she had only twopence about her. This was George's opportunity, and he interfered.

"I think, marm," he said, "that the fat gent with you was a-playing of a little game. He only pretended to pay the waiter."

"Playing a game, was he?" gasped the infuriated Tiger. "If I don't play a little game on him when I get a chance my name is not Edith d'Aubigne, the nasty mean beast--the----"

"Permit me, marm," said George, putting a shilling on the table, which the waiter took and went away. "I can't bear to see a real lady like you in difficulty."

"Well, you are a gentleman, you are," she said.

"Not at all, marm. That's my way. And now, marm, won't you have another?"

No objection was raised by the lady, who had another, with the result that she became if not exactly tipsy at any rate not far off it.

Shortly after this the building was cleared, and George found himself standing in Exhibition Road with the woman on his arm.

"You're going to give me a lift home, ain't you?" she said.

"Yes, marm, for sure I am," said George, sighing as he thought of the cab fare.

Accordingly they got into a hansom, and Mrs. d'Aubigne having given the address in Pimlico, of which George instantly made a mental note, they started.

"Come in and have a drink," she said when they arrived, and accordingly he paid the cab--half-a-crown it cost him--and was ushered by the woman with a simper into the gilded drawing-room.

Here the Tiger had another brandy-and-soda, after which George thought that she was about in a fit state for him to prosecute his inquiries.

"Wonderful place this Lunnon, marm; I niver was up here afore and had no idea that I should find folks so friendly. As I was a saying to my friend Laryer Quest down at Boisingham yesterday----"

"Hullo, what's that?" she said. "Do you know the old man?"

"If you means Laryer Quest, why in course I do, and Mrs. Quest too. Ah! she's a pretty one, she is."

Here the lady burst into a flood of incoherent abuse which tired her so much that she had a fourth brandy-and-soda; George mixed it for her

and he mixed it strong.

"Is he rich?" she asked as she put down the glass.

"What! Laryer Quest? Well I should say that he is about the warmest man in our part of the county."

"And here am I starving," burst out the horrible woman with a flood of drunken tears. "Starving without a shilling to pay for a cab or a drink while my wedded husband lives in luxury with another woman. You tell him that I won't stand it; you tell him that if he don't find a 'thou.' pretty quick I'll let him know the reason why."

"I don't quite understand, marm," said George; "there's a lady down in Boisingham as is the real Mrs. Quest."

"It's a lie!" she shrieked, "it's a lie! He married me before he married her. I could have him in the dock to-morrow, and I would, too, if I wasn't afraid of him, and that's a fact."

"Come, marm, come," said George, "draw it mild from that tap."

"You won't believe me, won't you?" said the woman, on whom the liquor was now beginning to take its full effect; "then I'll show you," and she staggered to a desk, unlocked it and took from it a folded paper, which she opened.

It was a properly certified copy of a marriage certificate, or purported so to be; but George, who was not too quick at his reading, had only time to note the name Quest, and the church, St. Bartholomew's, Hackney, when she snatched it away from him and locked it up again.

"There," she said, "it isn't any business of yours. What right have you to come prying into the affairs of a poor lone woman?" And she sat down upon the sofa beside him, threw her long arm round him, rested her painted face upon his shoulder and began to weep the tears of intoxication.

"Well, blow me!" said George to himself, "if this ain't a master one! I wonder what my old missus would say if she saw me in this fix. I say, marm----"

But at that moment the door opened, and in came Johnnie, who had evidently also been employing the interval in refreshing himself, for he rolled like a ship in a sea.

"Well," he said, "and who the deuce are you? Come get out of this, you Methody parson-faced clodhopper, you. Fairest Edithia, what means this?"

By this time the fairest Edithia had realised who her visitor was, and

the trick whereby he had left her to pay for the brandy-and-soda recurring to her mind she sprang up and began to express her opinion of Johnnie in violent and libellous language. He replied in appropriate terms, as according to the newspaper reports people whose healths are proposed always do, and fast and furious grew the fun. At length, however, it seemed to occur to Johnnie that he, George, was in some way responsible for this state of affairs, for without word or warning he hit him on the nose. This proved too much for George's Christian forbearance.

"You would, you lubber! would you?" he said, and sprang at him.

Now Johnnie was big and fat, but Johnnie was rather drunk, and George was tough and exceedingly strong. In almost less time that it takes to write it he grasped the abominable Johnnie by the scruff of the neck and had with a mighty jerk hauled him over the sofa so that he lay face downwards thereon. By the door quite convenient to his hand stood George's ground ash stick, a peculiarly good and well-grown one which he had cut himself in Honham wood. He seized it. "Now, boar," he said, "I'll teach you how we do the trick where I come from," and he laid on without mercy. /Whack! whack! whack!/ came the ground ash on Johnnie's tight clothes. He yelled, swore and struggled in the grip of the sturdy countryman, but it was of no use, the ash came down like fate; never was a Johnnie so bastinadoed before.

"Give it the brute, give it him," shrilled the fair Edithia,

bethinking her of her wrongs, and he did till he was tired.

"Now, Johnnie boar," he panted at last, "I'm thinking I've pretty nigh whacked you to dead. Perhaps you'll larn to be more careful how you handles your betters by-and-by." Then seizing his hat he ran down the stairs without seeing anybody and slipping into the street crossed over and listened.

They were at it again. Seeing her enemy prostrate the Tiger had fallen on him, with the fire-irons to judge from the noise.

Just then a policeman hurried up.

"I say, master," said George, "the folk in that there house with the red pillars do fare to be a murdering of each other."

The policeman listened to the din and then made for the house. Profiting by his absence George retreated as fast as he could, his melancholy countenance shining with sober satisfaction.

On the following morning, before he returned to Honham, George paid a visit to St. Bartholomew's Church, Hackney. Here he made certain investigations in the registers, the results of which were not unsatisfactory to him.