

CHAPTER XXXII

GEORGE PROPHECIES AGAIN

Six weeks passed, and in that time several things happened. In the first place the miserly old banker, Edward Cossey's father, had died, his death being accelerated by the shock of his son's accident. On his will being opened, it was found that property and money to no less a value than 600,000 pounds passed under it to Edward absolutely, the only condition attached being that he should continue in the house of Cossey and Son and leave a certain share of his fortune in the business.

Edward Cossey also, thanks chiefly to Belle's tender nursing, had almost recovered, with one exception--he was, and would be for life, stone deaf in the right ear. The paralysis which the doctors feared had not shown itself. One of his first questions when he became convalescent was addressed to Belle Quest.

As in a dream, he had always seen her sweet face hanging over him, and dimly known that she was ministering to him.

"Have you nursed me ever since the accident, Belle?" he said.

"Yes," she answered.

"It is very good of you, considering all things," he murmured. "I wonder that you did not let me die."

But she turned her face to the wall and never said a word, nor did any further conversation on these matters pass between them.

Then as his strength came back so did his passion for Ida de la Molle revive. He was not allowed to write or even receive letters, and with this explanation of her silence he was fain to content himself. But the Squire, he was told, often called to inquire after him, and once or twice Ida came with him.

At length a time came--it was two days after he had been told of his father's death--when he was pronounced fit to be moved into his own rooms and to receive his correspondence as usual.

The move was effected without any difficulty, and here Belle bade him good-bye. Even as she did so George drove his fat pony up to the door, and getting down gave a letter to the landlady, with particular instructions that it was to be delivered into Mr. Cossey's own hands. As she passed Belle saw that it was addressed in the Squire's handwriting.

When it was delivered to him Edward Cossey opened it with eagerness. It contained an inclosure in Ida's writing, and this he read first. It ran as follows:

"Dear Mr. Cossey,--

"I am told that you are now able to read letters, so I hasten to write to you. First of all, let me say how thankful I am that you are in a fair way to complete recovery from your dreadful accident. And now I must tell you what I fear will be almost as painful to you to read as it is for me to write, namely, that the engagement between us is at an end. To put the matter frankly, you will remember that I rightly or wrongly became engaged to you on a certain condition. That condition has not been fulfilled, for Mr. Quest, to whom the mortgages on my father's property have been transferred by you, is pressing for their payment. Consequently the obligation on my part is at an end, and with it the engagement must end also, for I grieve to tell you that it is not one which my personal inclination will induce me to carry out. Wishing you a speedy and complete recovery, and every happiness and prosperity in your future life, believe me, dear Mr. Cossey,

"Very truly yours,

"Ida de la Molle."

He put down this uncompromising and crushing epistle and nervously glanced at the Squire's, which was very short.

"My dear Cossey," it began,--

"Ida has shown me the inclosed letter. I think that you did unwisely when you entered into what must be called a money bargain for my daughter's hand. Whether under all the circumstances she does either well or wisely to repudiate the engagement after it has once been agreed upon, is not for me to judge. She is a free agent and has a natural right to dispose of her life as she thinks fit. This being so I have of course no option but to endorse her decision, so far as I have anything to do with the matter. It is a decision which I for some reasons regret, but which I am quite powerless to alter.

"Believe me, with kind regards,

"Truly yours,

"James de la Molle."

Edward Cossey turned his face to the wall and indulged in such meditations as the occasion gave rise to, and they were bitter enough. He was as bent upon this marriage as he had ever been, more so in fact, now that his father was out of the way. He knew that Ida disliked him, he had known that all along, but he had trusted to time and marriage to overcome the dislike. And now that accursed Quest had

brought about the ruin of his hopes. Ida had seen her chance of escape, and, like a bold woman, had seized upon it. There was one ray of hope, and one only. He knew that the money would not be forthcoming to pay off the mortgages. He could see too from the tone of the Squire's letter that he did not altogether approve of his daughter's decision. And his father was dead. Like Caesar, he was the master of many legions, or rather of much money, which is as good as legions. Money can make most paths smooth to the feet of the traveller, and why not this? After much thought he came to a conclusion. He would not trust his chance to paper, he would plead his cause in person. So he wrote a short note to the Squire acknowledging Ida's and his letter, and saying that he hoped to come and see them as soon as ever the doctor would allow him out of doors.

Meanwhile George, having delivered his letter, had gone upon another errand. Pulling up the fat pony in front of Mr. Quest's office he alighted and entered. Mr. Quest was disengaged, and he was shown straight into the inner office, where the lawyer sat, looking more refined and gentlemanlike than ever.

"How do you do, George?" he said cheerily; "sit down; what is it?"

"Well, sir," answered that lugubrious worthy, as he awkwardly took a seat, "the question is what isn't it? These be rum times, they be, they fare to puzzle a man, they du."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest, balancing a quill pen on his finger, "the times are bad enough."

Then came a pause.

"Dash it all, sir," went on George presently, "I may as well get it out; I hev come to speak to you about the Squire's business."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, sir," went on George, "I'm told that these dratted mortgages hev passed into your hands, and that you hev called in the money."

"Yes, that is correct," said Mr. Quest again.

"Well, sir, the fact is that the Squire can't git the money. It can't be had nohow. Nobody won't take the land as security. It might be so much water for all folk to look at it."

"Quite so. Land is in very bad odour as security now."

"And that being so, sir, what is to be done?"

Mr. Quest shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. If the money is not forthcoming, of course I shall, however unwillingly, be forced to take my legal remedy."

"Meaning, sir----"

"Meaning that I shall bring an action for foreclosure and do what I can with the lands."

George's face darkened.

"And that reads, sir, that the Squire and Miss Ida will be turned out of Honham, where they and theirs hev been for centuries, and that you will turn in?"

"Well, that is what it comes to, George. I am sincerely sorry to press the Squire, but it's a matter of thirty thousand pounds, and I am not in a position to throw away thirty thousand pounds."

"Sir," said George, rising in indignation, "I don't rightly know how you came by them there mortgages. There is some things as laryers know and honest men don't know, and that's one on them. But it seems that you've got 'em and are a-going to use 'em--and that being so, Mr. Quest, I have summut to say to you--and that is that no good won't come to you from this here move."

"What do you mean by that, George?" said the lawyer sharply.

"Niver you mind what I mean, sir. I means what I says. I means that

sometimes people has things in their lives snugged away where nobody can't see 'em, things as quiet as though they was dead and buried, and that ain't dead nor buried neither, things so much alive that they fare as though they were fit to kick the lid off their coffin. That's what I means, sir, and I means that when folk set to work to do a hard and wicked thing those dead things sometimes gits up and walks where they is least wanting; and mayhap if you goes on for to turn the old Squire and Miss Ida out of the Castle, mayhap, sir, summut of that sort will happen to you, for mark my word, sir, there's justice in the world, sir, as mebbe you will find out. And now, sir, begging your pardon, I'll wish you good-morning, and leave you to think on what I've said," and he was gone.

"George!" called Mr. Quest after him, rising from his chair, "George!" but George was out of hearing.

"Now what did he mean by that--what the devil did he mean?" said Mr. Quest with a gasp as he sat down again. "Surely," he thought, "that man cannot have got hold of anything about Edith. Impossible, impossible; if he had he would have said more, he would not have confined himself to hinting, that would take a cleverer man, he would have shown his hand. He must have been speaking at random to frighten me, I suppose. By heaven! what a thing it would be if he /had/ got hold of something. Ruin! absolute ruin! I'll settle up this business as soon as I can and leave the country; I can't stand the strain, it's like having a sword over one's head. I've half a mind to leave it in

somebody else's hands and go at once. No, for that would look like running away. It must be all rubbish; how could he know anything about it?"

So shaken was he, however, that though he tried once and yet again, he found it impossible to settle himself down to work till he had taken a couple of glasses of sherry from the decanter in the cupboard. Even as he did so he wondered if the shadow of the sword disturbed him so much, how he would be affected if it ever was his lot to face the glimmer of its naked blade.

No further letter came to Edward Cossey from the Castle, but, impatient as he was to do so, another fortnight elapsed before he was able to see Ida and her father. At last one fine December morning for the first time since his accident he was allowed to take carriage exercise, and his first drive was to Honham Castle.

When the Squire, who was sitting in the vestibule writing letters, saw a poor pallid man, rolled up in fur, with a white face scarred with shot marks and black rings round his large dark eyes, being helped from a closed carriage, he did not know who it was, and called to Ida, who was passing along the passage, to tell him.

Of course she recognised her admirer instantly, and wished to leave the room, but her father prevented her.

"You got into this mess," he said, forgetting how and for whom she got into it, "and now you must get out of it in your own way."

When Edward, having been assisted into the room, saw Ida standing there, all the blood in his wasted body seemed to rush into his pallid face.

"How do you do, Mr. Cossey?" she said. "I am glad to see you out, and hope that you are better."

"I beg your pardon, I cannot hear you," he said, turning round; "I am stone deaf in my right ear."

A pang of pity shot through her heart. Edward Cossey, feeble, dejected, and limping from the jaws of Death, was a very different being to Edward Cossey in the full glow of his youth, health, and strength. Indeed, so much did his condition appeal to her sympathies that for the first time since her mental attitude towards him had been one of entire indifference, she looked on him without repugnance.

Meanwhile her father had shaken him by the hand, and led him to an armchair before the fire.

Then after a few questions and answers as to his accident and merciful recovery there came a pause.

At length he broke it. "I have come to see you both," he said with a faint nervous smile, "about the letters you wrote me. If my condition had allowed I should have come before, but it would not."

"Yes," said the Squire attentively, while Ida folded her hands in her lap and sat still with her eyes fixed upon the fire.

"It seems," he went on, "that the old proverb has applied to my case as to so many others--being absent I have suffered. I understand from these letters that my engagement to you, Miss de la Molle, is broken off."

She made a motion of assent.

"And that it is broken off on the ground that having been forced by a combination of circumstances which I cannot enter into to transfer the mortgages to Mr. Quest, consequently I broke my bargain with you?"

"Yes," said Ida.

"Very well then, I come to tell you both that I am ready to find the money to meet those mortgages and to pay them off in full."

"Ah!" said the Squire.

"Also that I am ready to do what I offered to do before, and which, as

my father is now dead, I am perfectly in a position to do, namely, to settle two hundred thousand pounds absolutely upon Ida, and indeed generally to do anything else that she or you may wish," and he looked at the Squire.

"It is no use looking to me for an answer," said he with some irritation. "I have no voice in the matter."

He turned to Ida, who put her hand before her face and shook her head.

"Perhaps," said Edward, somewhat bitterly, "I should not be far wrong if I said that Colonel Quaritch has more to do with your change of mind than the fact of the transfer of these mortgages."

She dropped her hand and looked him full in the face.

"You are quite right, Mr. Cossey," she said boldly. "Colonel Quaritch and I are attached to each other, and we hope one day to be married."

"Confound that Quaritch," growled the Squire beneath his breath.

Edward winced visibly at this outspoken statement.

"Ida," he said, "I make one last appeal to you. I am devoted to you with all my heart; so devoted that though it may seem foolish to say so, especially before your father, I really think I would rather not

have recovered from my accident than that I should have recovered for this. I will give you everything that a woman can want, and my money will make your family what it was centuries ago, the greatest in the country side. I don't pretend to have been a saint--perhaps you may have heard something against me in that way--or to be anything out of the common. I am only an ordinary every-day man, but I am devoted to you. Think, then, before you refuse me altogether."

"I have thought, Mr. Cossey," answered Ida almost passionately: "I have thought until I am tired of thinking, and I do not consider it fair that you should press me like this, especially before my father."

"Then," he said, rising with difficulty, "I have said all I have to say, and done all that I can do. I shall still hope that you may change your mind. I shall not yet abandon hope. Good-bye."

She touched his hand, and then the Squire offering him his arm, he went down the steps to his carriage.

"I hope, Mr. de la Molle," he said, "that bad as things look for me, if they should take a turn I shall have your support."

"My dear sir," answered the Squire, "I tell you frankly that I wish my daughter would marry you. As I said before, it would for obvious reasons be desirable. But Ida is not like ordinary women. When she sets her mind upon a thing she sets it like a flint. Times may change,

however, and that is all I can say. Yes, if I were you, I should remember that this is a changeable world, and women are the most changeable things in it."

When the carriage was gone he re-entered the vestibule. Ida, who was going away much disturbed in mind, saw him come, and knew from the expression of his face that there would be trouble. With characteristic courage she turned, determined to brave it out.