

CHAPTER XXXIV

GEORGE'S DIPLOMATIC ERRAND

George carried out his intention of going to London. On the second morning after the day when Mr. Quest had driven the auctioneer in the dog-cart to Honham, he might have been seen an hour before it was light purchasing a third class return ticket to Liverpool Street.

Arriving there in safety he partook of a second breakfast, for it was ten o'clock, and then hiring a cab caused himself to be driven to the end of that street in Pimlico where he had gone with the fair "Edithia" and where Johnnie had made acquaintance with his ash stick.

Dismissing the cab he made his way to the house with the red pillars, but on arriving was considerably taken aback, for the place had every appearance of being deserted. There were no blinds to the windows, and on the steps were muddy footmarks and bits of rag and straw which seemed to be the litter of a recent removal. Indeed, there on the road were the broad wheelmarks of the van which had carted off the furniture. He stared at this sight in dismay. The bird had apparently flown, leaving no address, and he had taken his trip for nothing.

He pressed upon the electric bell; that is, he did this ultimately.

George was not accustomed to electric bells, indeed he had never seen one before, and after attempting in vain to pull it with his fingers (for he knew that it must be a bell because there was the word itself

written on it), as a last resource he condescended to try his teeth. Ultimately, however, he discovered how to use it, but without result. Either the battery had been taken away, or it was out of gear. Just as he was wondering what to do next he made a discovery--the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it and it opened--revealing a dirty hall, stripped of every scrap of furniture. Entering, he shut the door and walked up the stairs to the room whence he had fled after thrashing Johnnie. Here he paused and listened, thinking that he heard somebody in the room. Nor was he mistaken, for presently a well-remembered voice shrilled out:

"Who's skulking round outside there? If it's one of those bailiffs he'd better hook it, for there's nothing left here."

George's countenance positively beamed at the sound.

"Bailiffs, marm?" he called through the door--"it ain't no varminty bailiffs, it's a friend, and just when you're a-wanting one seemingly. Can I come in?"

"Oh, yes, come in, whoever you are," said the voice. Accordingly he opened the door and entered, and this was what he saw. The room, like the rest of the house, had been stripped of everything, with the solitary exceptions of a box and a mattress, beside which were an empty bottle and a dirty glass. On the mattress sat the fair Edithia, /alias/ Mrs. d'Aubigne, /alias/ the Tiger, /alias/ Mrs. Quest, and

such a sight as she presented George had never seen before. Her fierce face bore traces of recent heavy drinking and was moreover dirty, haggard and dreadful to look upon; her hair was a frowsy mat, on some patches of which the golden dye had faded, leaving it its natural hue of doubtful grey. She wore no collar and her linen was open at the neck. On her feet were a filthy pair of white satin slippers, and on her back that same gorgeous pink satin tea-gown which Mr. Quest had observed on the occasion of his visit, now however soiled and torn. Anything more squalid or repulsive than the whole picture cannot be imagined, and though his nerves were pretty strong, and in the course of his life he had seen many a sight of utter destitution, George literally recoiled from it.

"What's the matter?" said the hag sharply, "and who the dickens are you? Ah, I know now; you're the chap who whacked Johnnie," and she burst into a hoarse scream of laughter at the recollection. "It was mean of you though to hook it and leave me. He pulled me, and I was fined two pounds by the beak."

"Mean of /him/, marm, not me, but he was a mean varmint altogether he was; to go and pull a lady too, I niver heard of such a thing. But, marm, if I might say so, you seem to be in trouble here," and he took a seat upon the deal box.

"In trouble, I should think I was in trouble. There's been an execution in the house, that is, there's been three executions, one

for rates and taxes, one for a butcher's bill, and one for rent. They all came together, and fought like wild cats for the things. That was yesterday, and you see all they have left me; cleaned out everything down to my new yellow satin, and then asked for more. They wanted to know where my jewellery was, but I did them, hee, hee!"

"Meaning, marm?"

"Meaning that I hid it, that is, what was left of it, under a board. But that ain't the worst. When I was asleep that devil Ellen, who's had her share all these years, got to the board and collared the things and bolted with them, and look what she's left me instead," and she held up a scrap of paper, "a receipt for five years' wages, and she's had them over and over again. Ah, if ever I get a chance at her," and she doubled her long hand and made a motion as of a person scratching. "She's bolted and left me here to starve. I haven't had a bit since yesterday, nor a drink either, and that's worse. What's to become of me? I'm starving. I shall have to go to the workhouse. Yes, me," she added in a scream, "me, who have spent thousands; I shall have to go to a workhouse like a common woman!"

"It's cruel, marm, cruel," said the sympathetic George, "and you a lawful wedded wife 'till death do us part.' But, marm, I saw a public over the way. Now, no offence, but you'll let me just go over and fetch a bite and a sup."

"Well," she answered hungrily, "you're a gent, you are, though you're a country one. You go, while I just make a little toilette, and as for the drink, why let it be brandy."

"Brandy it shall be," said the gallant George, and departed.

In ten minutes he returned with a supply of beef patties, and a bottle of good, strong "British Brown," which as everybody knows is a sufficient quantity to render three privates or two blue-jackets drunk and incapable.

The woman, who now presented a slightly more respectable appearance, seized the bottle, and pouring about a wine-glass and a half of its contents into a tumbler mixed it with an equal quantity of water and drank it off at a draught.

"That's better," she said, "and now for a patty. It's a real picnic, this is."

He handed her one, but she could not eat more than half of it, for alcohol destroys the healthier appetites, and she soon went back to the brandy bottle.

"Now, marm, that you are a little more comfortable, perhaps you will tell me how as you got into this way, and you with a rich husband, as I well knows, to love and cherish you."

"A husband to love and cherish me?" she said; "why, I have written to him three times to tell him that I'm starving, and never a cent has he given me--and there's no allowance due yet, and when there is they'll take it, for I owe hundreds."

"Well," said George, "I call it cruel--cruel, and he rolling in gold. Thirty thousand pounds he hev just made, that I knows on. You must be an angel, marm, to stand it, an angel without wings. If it were my husband, now I'd know the reason why."

"Ay, but I daren't. He'd murder me. He said he would."

George laughed gently. "Lord! Lord!" he said, "to see how men play it off upon poor weak women, working on their narves and that like. He kill you! Laryer Quest kill you, and he the biggest coward in Boisingham; but there it is. This is a world of wrong, as the parson says, and the poor shorn lambs must jamb their tails down and turn their backs to the wind, and so must you, marm. So it's the workhus you'll be in to-morrow. Well, you'll find it a poor place; the skilly is that rough it do fare to take the skin off your throat, and not a drop of liquor, not even of a cup of hot tea, and work too, lots of it --scrubbing, marm, scrubbing!"

This vivid picture of miseries to come drew something between a sob and a howl from the woman. There is nothing more horrible to the

imagination of such people than the idea of being forced to work. If their notions of a future state of punishment could be got at, they would be found in nine cases out of ten to resolve themselves into a vague conception of hard labour in a hot climate. It was the idea of the scrubbing that particularly affected the Tiger.

"I won't do it," she said, "I'll go to chokey first----"

"Look here, marm," said George, in a persuasive voice, and pushing the brandy bottle towards her, "where's the need for you to go to the workhus or to chokey either--you with a rich husband as is bound by law to support you as becomes a lady? And, marm, mind another thing, a husband as hev wickedly deserted you--which how he could do so it ain't for me to say--and is living along of another young party."

She took some more brandy before she answered.

"That's all very well, you duffer," she said; "but how am I to get at him? I tell you I'm afraid of him, and even if I weren't, I haven't a cent to travel with, and if I got there what am I to do?"

"As for being afeard, marm," he answered, "I've told you Laryer Quest is a long sight more frightened of you than you are of him. Then as for money, why, marm, I'm a-going down to Boisingham myself by the train as leaves Liverpool Street at half-past one, and that's an hour and a bit from now, and it's proud and pleased I should be to take a

lady down and be the means of bringing them as has been in holy matrimony together again. And as to what you should do when you gets there, why, you should just walk up with your marriage lines and say, 'You are my lawful husband, and I calls on you to cease living as you didn't oughter and to take me back;' and if he don't, why then you swears an information, and it's a case of warrant for bigamy."

The woman chuckled, and then suddenly seized with suspicion looked at her visitor sharply.

"What do you want me to blow the gaff for?" she said; "you're a leery old hand, you are, for all your simple ways, and you've got some game on, I'll take my davy."

"I a game--I----!" answered George, an expression of the deepest pain spreading itself over his ugly features. "No, marm--and when one hev wanted to help a friend too. Well, if you think that--and no doubt misfortune hev made you doubtful-like--the best I can do is to bid you good-day, and to wish you well out of your troubles, workhus and all, marm, which I do according," and he rose from his box with much dignity, politely bowed to the hag on the mattress, and then turning walked towards the door.

She sprung up with an oath.

"I'll go," she said. "I'll take the change out of him; I'll teach him

to let his lawful wife starve on a beggarly pittance. I don't care if he does try to kill me. I'll ruin him," and she stamped upon the floor and screamed, "I'll ruin him, I'll ruin him!" presenting such a picture of abandoned rage and wickedness that even George, whose feelings were not finely strung, inwardly shrank from her.

"Ah, marm," he said, "no wonder you're put about. When I think of what you've had to suffer, I own it makes my blood go a-biling through my veins. But if you is a-coming, mayhap it would be as well to stop cursing of and put your hat on, and we hev got to catch the train." And he pointed to a head-gear chiefly made of somewhat dilapidated peacock feathers, and an ulster which the bailiffs had either overlooked or left through pity.

She put on the hat and cloak. Then going to the hole beneath the board, out of which she said the woman Ellen had stolen her jewellery, she extracted the copy of the certificate of marriage which that lady had not apparently thought worth taking, and placed it in the pocket of her pink silk /peignoir/.

Then George having first secured the remainder of the bottle of brandy, which he slipped into his capacious pocket, they started, and drove to Liverpool Street. Such a spectacle as the Tiger upon the platform George was wont in after days to declare he never did see. But it can easily be imagined that a fierce, dissolute, hungry-looking woman, with half-dyed hair, who had drunk as much as was good for her,

dressed in a hat made of shabby peacock feathers, dirty white shoes, an ulster with some buttons off, and a gorgeous but filthy pink silk tea-gown, presented a sufficiently curious appearance. Nor did it lose strength by contrast with that of her companion, the sober and melancholy-looking George, who was arrayed in his pepper-and-salt Sunday suit.

So curious indeed was their aspect that the people loitering about the platform collected round them, and George, who felt heartily ashamed of the position, was thankful enough when once the train started. From motives of economy he had taken her a third-class ticket, and at this she grumbled, saying that she was accustomed to travel, like a lady should, first; but he appeased her with the brandy bottle.

All the journey through he talked to her about her wrongs, till at last, what between the liquor and his artful incitements, she was inflamed into a condition of savage fury against Mr. Quest. When once she got to this point he would let her have no more brandy, seeing that she was now ripe for his purpose, which was of course to use her to ruin the man who would ruin the house he served.

Mr. Quest, sitting in state as Clerk to the Magistrates assembled in Quarter Sessions at the Court House, Boisingham, little guessed that the sword at whose shadow he had trembled all these years was even now falling on his head. Still less did he dream that the hand to cut the thread which held it was that of the stupid bumpkin whose warning he

had despised.