

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

At last the weary journey was over, and to George's intense relief he found himself upon the platform at Boisingham. He was a pretty tough subject, but he felt that a very little more of the company of the fair Edithia would be too much for him. As it happened, the station-master was a particular friend of his, and the astonishment of that worthy when he saw the respectable George in such company could scarcely be expressed in words.

"Why boar! Well I never! Is she a furriner?" he ejaculated in astonishment.

"If you mean me," said Edithia, who was by now in fine bellicose condition, "I'm no more foreign than you are. Shut up, can't you? or----" and she took a step towards the stout station-master. He retreated precipitately, caught his heel against the threshold of the booking office and vanished backwards with a crash.

"Steady, marm, steady," said George. "Save it up now, do, and as for you, don't you irritate her none of yer, or I won't answer for the consequences, for she's an injured woman she is, and injured women is apt to be dangerous."

It chanced that a fly which had brought somebody to the station was still standing there. George bundled his fair charge into it, telling the driver to go to the Sessions House.

"Now, marm," he said, "listen to me; I'm a-going to take you to the man as hev wronged you. He's sitting as clerk to the magistrates. Do you go up and call him your husband. Thin he'll tell the policeman to take you away. Thin do you sing out for justice, because when people sings out for justice everybody's bound to hearken, and say how as you wants a warrant agin him for bigamy, and show them the marriage lines. Don't you be put down, and don't you spare him. If you don't startle him you'll niver get northing out of him."

"Spare him," she snarled; "not I. I'll have his blood. But look here, if he's put in chokey, where's the tin to come from?"

"Why, marm," answered George with splendid mendacity, "it's the best thing that can happen for you, for if they collar him you git the property, and that's law."

"Oh," she answered, "if I'd known that he'd have been collared long ago, I can tell you."

"Come," said George, seeing that they were nearing their destination.

"Hev one more nip just to keep your spirits up," and he produced the brandy bottle, at which she took a long pull.

"Now," he said, "go for him like a wild cat."

"Never you fear," she said.

They got out of the cab and entered the Sessions House without attracting any particular notice. The court itself was crowded, for a case which had excited public interest was coming to a conclusion. The jury had given their verdict, and sentence was being pronounced by Mr. de la Molle, the chairman.

Mr. Quest was sitting at his table below the bench taking some notes.

"There's your husband," George whispered, "now do you draw on."

George's part in the drama was played, and with a sigh of relief he fell back to watch its final development. He saw the fierce tall woman slip through the crowd like a snake or a panther to its prey, and some compunction touched him when he thought of the prey. He glanced at the elderly respectable-looking gentleman by the table, and reflected that he too was stalking /his/ prey--the old Squire and the ancient house of de la Molle. Then his compunction vanished, and he rejoiced to think that he would be the means of destroying a man who, to fill his pockets, did not hesitate to ruin the family with which his life and the lives of his forefathers had been interwoven for many generations.

By this time the woman had fought her way through the press, bursting the remaining buttons off her ulster in so doing, and reached the bar which separated spectators from the space reserved for the officials. On the further side of the bar was a gangway, and beyond it a table at which Mr. Quest sat. He had been busy writing something all this time, now he rose, passed it to Mr. de la Molle, and then turned to sit down again.

Meanwhile his wife had craned her long lithe body forward over the bar till her head was almost level with the hither edge of the table. There she stood glaring at him, her wicked face alive with fury and malice, for the brandy she had drunk had caused her to forget her fears.

As Mr. Quest turned, his eye caught the flash of colour from the peacock feather hat. Thence it travelled to the face beneath.

He gave a gasp, and the court seemed to whirl round him. The sword had fallen indeed!

"Well, Billy!" whispered the hateful voice, "you see I've come to look you up."

With a desperate effort he recovered himself. A policeman was standing near. He beckoned to him, and told him to remove the woman, who was drunk. The policeman advanced and touched her on the arm.

"Come, you be off," he said, "you're drunk."

At that moment Mr. de la Molle ceased giving judgment.

"I ain't drunk," said the woman, loud enough to attract the attention of the whole court, which now for the first time observed her extraordinary attire, "and I've a right to be in the public court."

"Come on," said the policeman, "the clerk says you're to go."

"The clerk says so, does he?" she answered, "and do you know who the clerk is? I'll tell you all," and she raised her voice to a scream; "he's my husband, my lawful wedded husband, and here's proof of it," and she took the folded certificate from her pocket and flung it so that it struck the desk of one of the magistrates.

Mr. Quest sank into his chair, and a silence of astonishment fell upon the court.

The Squire was the first to recover himself.

"Silence," he said, addressing her. "Silence. This cannot go on here."

"But I want justice," she shrieked. "I want justice; I want a warrant against that man for /bigamy/." (Sensation.) "He's left me to starve;

me, his lawful wife. Look here," and she tore open the pink satin tea-gown, "I haven't enough clothes on me; the bailiffs took all my clothes; I have suffered his cruelty for years, and borne it, and I can bear it no longer. Justice, your worships; I only ask for justice."

"Be silent, woman," said Mr. de la Molle; "if you have a criminal charge to bring against anybody there is a proper way to make it. Be silent or leave this court."

But she only screamed the more for /justice/, and loudly detailed fragments of her woes to the eagerly listening crowd.

Then policemen were ordered to remove her, and there followed a frightful scene. She shrieked and fought in such a fashion that it took four men to drag her to the door of the court, where she dropped exhausted against the wall in the corridor.

"Well," said the observant George to himself, "she hev done the trick proper, and no mistake. Couldn't have been better. That's a master one, that is." Then he turned his attention to the stricken man before him. Mr. Quest was sitting there, his face ashen, his eyes wide open, and his hands placed flat on the table before him. When silence had been restored he rose and turned to the bench apparently with the intention of addressing the court. But he said nothing, either because he could not find the words or because his courage failed him. There

was a moment's intense silence, for every one in the crowded court was watching him, and the sense of it seemed to take what resolution he had left out of him. At any rate, he left the table and hurried from the court. In the passage he found the Tiger, who, surrounded by a little crowd, her hat awry and her clothes half torn from her back, was huddled gasping against the wall.

She saw him and began to speak, but he stopped and faced her. He faced her, grinding his teeth, and with such an awful fire of fury in his eyes that she shrank from him in terror, flattening herself against the wall.

"What did I tell you?" he said in a choked voice, and then passed on. A few paces down the passage he met one of his own clerks, a sharp fellow enough.

"Here, Jones," he said, "you see that woman there. She has made a charge against me. Watch her. See where she goes to, and find out what she is going to do. Then come and tell me at the office. If you lose sight of her, you lose your place too. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the astonished clerk, and Mr. Quest was gone.

He made his way direct to the office. It was closed, for he had told his clerks he should not come back after court, and that they could go at half-past four. He had his key, however, and, entering, lit the

gas. Then he went to his safe and sorted some papers, burning a good number of them. Two large documents, however, he put by his side to read. One was his will, the other was endorsed "Statement of the circumstances connected with Edith."

First he looked through his will. It had been made some years ago, and was entirely in favour of his wife, or, rather, of his reputed wife, Belle.

"It may as well stand," he said aloud; "if anything happens to me she'll take about ten thousand under it, and that was what she brought me." Taking the pen he went through the document carefully, and wherever the name of "Belle Quest" occurred he put a X, and inserted these words, "Gennett, commonly known as Belle Quest," Gennett being Belle's maiden name, and initialled the correction. Next he glanced at the Statement. It contained a full and fair account of his connection with the woman who had ruined his life. "I may as well leave it," he thought; "some day it will show Belle that I was not quite so bad as I seemed."

He replaced the statement in a brief envelope, sealed and directed it to Belle, and finally marked it, "Not to be opened till my death.--W. Quest." Then he put the envelope away in the safe and took up the will for the same purpose. Next it on the table lay the deeds executed by Edward Cossey transferring the Honham mortgages to Mr. Quest in consideration of his abstaining from the commencement of a suit for



divorce in which he proposed to join Edward Cossey as co-respondent. "Ah!" he thought to himself, "that game is up. Belle is not my legal wife, therefore I cannot commence a suit against her in which Cossey would figure as co-respondent, and so the consideration fails. I am sorry, for I should have liked him to lose his thirty thousand pounds as well as his wife, but it can't be helped. It was a game of bluff, and now that the bladder has been pricked I haven't a leg to stand on."

Then, taking a pen, he wrote on a sheet of paper which he inserted in the will, "Dear B.,--You must return the Honham mortgages to Mr. Edward Cossey. As you are not my legal wife the consideration upon which he transferred them fails, and you cannot hold them in equity, nor I suppose would you wish to do so.--W. Q."

Having put all the papers away, he shut the safe at the moment that the clerk whom he had deputed to watch his wife knocked at the door and entered.

"Well?" said his master.

"Well, sir, I watched the woman. She stopped in the passage for a minute, and then George, Squire de la Molle's man, came out and spoke to her. I got quite close so as to hear, and he said, 'You'd better get out of this.'

"'Where to?' she answered. 'I'm afraid.'

"'Back to London,' he said, and gave her a sovereign, and she got up without a word and slunk off to the station followed by a mob of people. She is in the refreshment room now, but George sent word to say that they ought not to serve her with any drink."

"What time does the next train go--7.15, does it not?" said Mr. Quest.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, go back to the station and keep an eye upon that woman, and when the time comes get me a first-class return ticket to London. I shall go up myself and give her in charge there. Here is some money," and he gave him a five-pound note, "and look here, Jones, you need not trouble about the change."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure," said Jones, to whom, his salary being a guinea a week, on which he supported a wife and family, a gift of four pounds was sudden wealth.

"Don't thank me, but do as I tell you. I will be down at the station at 7.10. Meet me outside and give me the ticket. That will do."

When Jones had gone Mr. Quest sat down to think.

So George had loosed this woman on him, and that was the meaning of his mysterious warnings. How did he find her? That did not matter, he had found her, and in revenge for the action taken against the de la Molle family had brought her here to denounce him. It was cleverly managed, too. Mr. Quest reflected to himself that he should never have given the man credit for the brains. Well, that was what came of underrating people.

And so this was the end of all his hopes, ambitions, shifts and struggles! The story would be in every paper in England before another twenty-four hours were over, headed, "/Remarkable occurrence at Boisingham Quarter Sessions.--Alleged bigamy of a solicitor./" No doubt, too, the Treasury would take it up and institute a prosecution. This was the end of his strivings after respectability and the wealth that brings it. He had overreached himself. He had plotted and schemed, and hardened his heart against the de la Molle family, and fate had made use of his success to destroy him. In another few months he had expected to be able to leave this place a wealthy and respected man--and now? He laid his hand upon the table and reviewed his past life--tracing it from year to year, and seeing how the shadow of this accursed woman had haunted him, bringing disgrace and terror and mental agony with it--making his life a misery. And now what was to be done? He was ruined. Let him fly to the utmost parts of the earth, let him burrow in the recesses of the cities of the earth, and his shame would find him out. He was an impostor, a bigamist; one who had seduced an innocent woman into a mock marriage and then taken her

fortune to buy the silence of his lawful wife. More, he had threatened to bring an action for divorce against a woman to whom he knew he was not really married and made it a lever to extort large sums of money or their value.

What is there that a man in his position can do?

He can do two things--he can revenge himself upon the author of his ruin, and he be bold enough, he can put an end to his existence and his sorrows at a blow.

Mr. Quest rose and walked to the door. Halting there, he turned and looked round the office in that peculiar fashion wherewith the eyes take their adieu. Then with a sigh he went.

Reaching his own house he hesitated whether or not to enter. Had the news reached Belle? If so, how was he to face her? Her hands were not clean, indeed, but at any rate she had no mock marriage in her record, and her dislike of him had been unconcealed throughout. She had never wished to marry him, and never for one single day regarded him otherwise than with aversion.

After reflection he turned and went round by the back way into the garden. The curtains of the French windows were drawn, but it was a wet and windy night, and the draught occasionally lifted the edge of one of them. He crept like a thief up to his own window and looked in.

The drawing-room was lighted, and in a low chair by the fire sat Belle. She was as usual dressed in black, and to Mr. Quest, who loved her, and who knew that he was about to bid farewell to the sight of her, she looked more beautiful now than ever she had before. A book lay open on her knee, and he noticed, not without surprise, that it was a Bible. But she was not reading it; her dimpled chin rested on her hand, her violent eyes were fixed on vacancy, and even from where he was he thought that he could see the tears in them.

She had heard nothing; he was sure of that from the expression of her face; she was thinking of her own sorrows, not of his shame.

Yes, he would go in.