CHAPTER XLII

IDA GOES TO MEET HER FATE

Most people of a certain age and a certain degree of sensitiveness, in looking back down the vista of their lives, whereon memory's melancholy light plays in fitful flashes like the alternate glow of a censer swung in the twilight of a tomb, can recall some one night of peculiar mental agony. It may have come when first we found ourselves face to face with the chill and hopeless horror of departed life; when, in our soul's despair, we stretched out vain hands and wept, called and no answer came; when we kissed those beloved lips and shrunk aghast at contact with their clay, those lips more eloquent now in the rich pomp of their unutterable silence than in the brightest hour of their unsealing. It may have come when our honour and the hope of all our days lay at our feet shattered like a sherd on the world's hard road. It may have come when she, the star of our youth, the type of completed beauty and woman's most perfect measure, she who held the chalice of our hope, ruthlessly emptied and crushed it, and, as became a star, passed down our horizon's ways to rise upon some other sky. It may have come when Brutus stabbed us, or when a child whom we had cherished struck us with a serpent-fang of treachery and left the poison to creep upon our heart. One way or another it has been with most of us, that long night of utter woe, and all will own that it is a ghastly thing to face.

And so Ida de la Molle had found it. The shriek of the great gale rushing on that Christmas Eve round the stout Norman towers was not more strong than the breath of the despair which shook her life. She could not sleep--who could sleep on such a night, the herald of such a morrow? The wail and roar of the wind, the crash of falling trees, and the rattle of flying stones seemed to form a fit accompaniment to the turmoil of her mind.

She rose, went to the window, and in the dim light watched the trees gigantically tossing in struggle for their life. An oak and a birch were within her view. The oak stood the storm out--for a while. Presently there came an awful gust and beat upon it. It would not bend, and the tough roots would not give, so beneath the weight of the gale the big tree broke in two like a straw, and its spreading top was whirled into the moat. But the birch gave and bent; it bent till its delicate filaments lay upon the wind like a woman's streaming hair, and the fierceness of the blast wore itself away and spared it.

"See what happens to those who stand up and defy their fate," said Ida to herself with a bitter laugh. "The birch has the best of it."

Ida turned and closed the shutters; the sight of the tempest affected her strained nerves almost beyond bearing. She began to walk up and down the big room, flitting like a ghost from end to end and back again, and again back. What could she do? What should she do? Her fate was upon her: she could no longer resist the inevitable--she must

marry him. And yet her whole soul revolted from the act with an overwhelming fierceness which astonished even herself. She had known two girls who had married people whom they did not like, being at the time, or pretending to be, attached to somebody else, and she had observed that they accommodated themselves to their fate with considerable ease. But it was not so with her; she was fashioned of another clay, and it made her faint to think of what was before her. And yet the prospect was one on which she could expect little sympathy. Her own father, although personally he disliked the man whom she must marry, was clearly filled with amazement that she should prefer Colonel Quaritch, middle-aged, poor, and plain, to Edward Cossey--handsome, young, and rich as Croesus. He could not comprehend or measure the extraordinary gulf which her love dug between the two. If, therefore, this was so with her own father, how would it be with the rest of the world?

She paced her bedroom till she was tired; then, in an access of despair, which was sufficiently distressing in a person of her reserved and stately manner, flung herself, weeping and sobbing, upon her knees, and resting her aching head upon the bed, prayed as she had never prayed before that this cup might pass from her.

She did not know--how should she?--that at this very moment her prayer was being answered, and that her lover was then, even as she prayed, lifting the broken stone and revealing the hoard of ruddy gold. But so it was; she prayed in despair and agony of mind, and the prayer

carried on the wild wings of the night brought a fulfilment with it. Not in vain were her tears and supplications, for even now the deliverer delved among

"The dust and awful treasures of the dead,"

and even now the light of her happiness was breaking on her tortured night as the cold gleams of the Christmas morning were breaking over the fury of the storm without.

And then, chilled and numb in body and mind, she crept into her bed again and at last lost herself in sleep.

By half-past nine o'clock, when Ida came down to breakfast, the gale had utterly gone, though its footprints were visible enough in shattered trees, unthatched stacks, and ivy torn in knotty sheets from the old walls it clothed. It would have been difficult to recognise in the cold and stately lady who stood at the dining-room window, noting the havoc and waiting for her father to come in, the lovely, passionate, dishevelled woman who some few hours before had thrown herself upon her knees praying to God for the succour she could not win from man. Women, like nature, have many moods and many aspects to express them. The hot fit had passed, and the cold fit was on her now. Her face, except for the dark hollows round the eyes, was white as

winter, and her heart was cold as winter's ice.

Presently her father came in.

"What a gale," he said, "what a gale! Upon my word I began to think that the old place was coming down about our ears, and the wreck among the trees is dreadful. I don't think there can have been such a wind since the time of King Charles I., when the top of the tower was blown right off the church. You remember I was showing you the entry about it in the registers the other day, the one signed by the parson and old Sir James de la Molle. The boy who has just come up with the letters tells me he hears that poor old Mrs. Massey's summer-house on the top of Dead Man's Mount has been blown away, which is a good riddance for Colonel Quaritch. Why, what's the matter with you, dear? How pale you look!"

"The gale kept me awake. I got very little sleep," answered Ida.

"And no wonder. Well, my love, you haven't wished me a merry Christmas yet. Goodness knows we want one badly enough. There has not been much merriment at Honham of late years."

"A merry Christmas to you, father," she said.

"Thank you, Ida, the same to you; you have got most of your Christmases before you, which is more than I have. God bless me, it

only seems like yesterday since the big bunch of holly tied to the hook in the ceiling there fell down on the breakfast table and smashed all the cups, and yet it is more than sixty years ago. Dear me! how angry my poor mother was. She never could bear the crockery to be broken--it was a little failing of your grandmother's," and he laughed more heartily than Ida had heard him do for some weeks.

She made no answer but busied herself about the tea. Presently, glancing up she saw her father's face change. The worn expression came back upon it and he lost his buoyant bearing. Evidently a new thought had struck him, and she was in no great doubt as to what it was.

"We had better get on with breakfast," he said. "You know that Cossey is coming up at ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock?" she said faintly.

"Yes. I told him ten so that we could go to church afterwards if we wished to. Of course, Ida, I am still in the dark as to what you have made up your mind to do, but whatever it is I thought that he had better once and for all hear your final decision from your own lips. If, however, you feel yourself at liberty to tell it to me as your father, I shall be glad to hear it."

She lifted her head and looked him full in the face, and then paused. He had a cup of tea in his hand, and held it in the air half way to

his mouth, while his whole face showed the over-mastering anxiety with which he was awaiting her reply.

"Make your mind easy, father," she said, "I am going to marry Mr. Cossey."

He put the cup down in such a fashion that he spilt half the tea, most of it over his own clothes, without even noticing it, and then turned away his face.

"Well," he said, "of course it is not my affair, or at least only indirectly so, but I must say, my love, I congratulate you on the decision which you have come to. I quite understand that you have been in some difficulty about the matter; young women often have been before you, and will be again. But to be frank, Ida, that Quaritch business was not at all suitable, either in age, fortune, or in anything else. Yes, although Cossey is not everything that one might wish, on the whole I congratulate you."

"Oh, pray don't," broke in Ida, almost with a cry. "Whatever you do, pray do not congratulate me!"

Her father turned round again and looked at her. But Ida's face had already recovered its calm, and he could make nothing of it.

"I don't quite understand you," he said; "these things are generally

considered matters for congratulation."

But for all he might say and all that he might urge in his mind to the contrary, he did more or less understand what her outburst meant. He could not but know that it was the last outcry of a broken spirit. In his heart he realised then, if he had never clearly realised it before, that this proposed marriage was a thing hateful to his daughter, and his conscience pricked him sorely. And yet--and yet--it was but a woman's fancy--a passing fancy. She would become reconciled to the inevitable as women do, and when her children came she would grow accustomed to her sorrow, and her trouble would be forgotten in their laughter. And if not, well it was but one woman's life which would be affected, and the very existence of his race and the very cradle that had nursed them from century to century were now at stake. Was all this to be at the mercy of a girl's whim? No! let the individual suffer.

So he argued. And so at his age and in his circumstances most of us would argue also, and, perhaps, considering all things, we should be right. For in this world personal desires must continually give way to the welfare of others. Did they not do so our system of society could not endure.

No more was said upon the subject. Ida made pretence of eating a piece of toast; the Squire mopped up the tea upon his clothes, and then drank some more.

Meanwhile the remorseless seconds crept on. It wanted but five minutes to the hour, and the hour would, she well knew, bring the man with it.

The five minutes passed slowly and in silence. Both her father and herself realised the nature of the impending situation, but neither of them spoke of it. Ah! there was the sound of wheels upon the gravel. So it had come.

Ida felt like death itself. Her pulse sunk and fluttered; her vital forces seemed to cease their work.

Another two minutes went by, then the door opened and the parlour-maid came in.

"Mr. Cossey, if you please, sir."

"Oh," said the Squire. "Where is he?"

"In the vestibule, sir."

"Very good. Tell him I will be there in a minute."

The maid went.

"Now, Ida," said her father, "I suppose that we had better get this

business over."

"Yes," she answered, rising; "I am ready."

And gathering up her energies, she passed out to meet her fate.