

## CHAPTER XLIII

### GEORGE IS SEEN TO LAUGH

Ida and her father reached the vestibule to find Edward Cossey standing with his face to the mantelpiece and nervously toying with some curiosities upon it. He was, as usual, dressed with great care, and his face, though white and worn from the effects of agitation of mind, looked if anything handsomer than ever. As soon as he heard them coming, which owing to his partial deafness he did not do till they were quite close to him, he turned round with a start, and a sudden flush of colour came upon his pale face.

The Squire shook hands with him in a solemn sort of way, as people do when they meet at a funeral, but Ida barely touched his outstretched fingers with her own.

A few random remarks followed about the weather, which really for once in a way was equal to the conversational strain put upon it. At length these died away and there came an awful pause. It was broken by the Squire, who, standing with his back to the fire, his eyes fixed upon the wall opposite, after much humming and hawing, delivered himself thus:

"I understand, Mr. Cossey, that you have come to hear my daughter's final decision on the matter of the proposal of marriage which you

have made and renewed to her. Now, of course, this is a very important question, very important indeed, and it is one with which I cannot presume even to seem to interfere. Therefore, I shall without comment leave my daughter to speak for herself."

"One moment before she does so," Mr. Cossey interrupted, drawing indeed but a poor augury of success from Ida's icy looks. "I have come to renew my offer and to take my final answer, and I beg Miss de la Molle to consider how deep and sincere must be that affection which has endured through so many rebuffs. I know, or at least I fear, that I do not occupy the place in her feelings that I should wish to, but I look to time to change this; at any rate I am willing to take my chance. As regards money, I repeat the offer which I have already made."

"There, I should not say too much about that," broke in the Squire impatiently.

"Oh, why not?" said Ida, in bitter sarcasm. "Mr. Cossey knows it is a good argument. I presume, Mr. Cossey, that as a preliminary to the renewal of our engagement, the persecution of my father which is being carried on by your lawyers will cease?"

"Absolutely."

"And if the engagement is not renewed the money will of course be

called in?"

"My lawyers advise that it should be," he answered sullenly; "but see here, Ida, you may make your own terms about money. Marriage, after all, is very much a matter of bargaining, and I am not going to stand out about the price."

"You are really most generous," went on Ida in the same bitter tone, the irony of which made her father wince, for he understood her mood better than did her lover. "I only regret that I cannot appreciate such generosity more than I do. But it is at least in my power to give you the return which you deserve. So I can no longer hesitate, but once and for all----"

She stopped dead, and stared at the glass door as though she saw a ghost. Both her father and Edward Cossey followed the motion of her eyes, and this was what they saw. Up the steps came Colonel Quaritch and George. Both were pale and weary-looking, but the former was at least clean. As for George, this could not be said. His head was still adorned with the red nightcap, his hands were cut and dirty, and on his clothes was an unlimited quantity of encrusted filth.

"What the dickens----" began the Squire, and at that moment George, who was leading, knocked at the door.

"You can't come in now," roared the Squire; "don't you see that we are

engaged?"

"But we must come in, Squire, begging your pardon," answered George, with determination, as he opened the door; "we've got that to say as won't keep."

"I tell you that it must keep, sir," said the old gentleman, working himself into a rage. "Am I not to be allowed a moment's privacy in my own house? I wonder at your conduct, Colonel Quaritch, in forcing your presence upon me when I tell you that it is not wanted."

"I am sure that I apologise, Mr. de la Molle," began the Colonel, utterly taken aback, "but what I have to say is----"

"The best way that you can apologise is by withdrawing," answered the Squire with majesty. "I shall be most happy to hear what you have to say on another occasion."

"Oh, Squire, Squire, don't be such a fule, begging your pardon for the word," said George, in exasperation. "Don't you go a-knocking of your head agin a brick wall."

"Will you be off, sir?" roared his master in a voice that made the walls shake.

By this time Ida had recovered herself. She seemed to feel that her

lover had something to say which concerned her deeply--probably she read it in his eyes.

"Father," she said, raising her voice, "I won't have Colonel Quaritch turned away from the door like this. If you will not admit him I will go outside and hear what it is that he has to say."

In his heart the Squire held Ida in some awe. He looked at her, and saw that her eyes were flashing and her breast heaving. Then he gave way.

"Oh, very well, since my daughter insists on it, pray come in," and he bowed. "If such an intrusion falls in with your ideas of decency it is not for me to complain."

"I accept your invitation," answered Harold, looking very angry, "because I have something to say which you must hear, and hear at once. No, thank you, I will stand. Now, Mr. de la Molle, it is this, wonderful as it may seem. It has been my fortune to discover the treasure hidden by Sir James de la Molle in the year 1643!"

There was a general gasp of astonishment.

"/What!/" exclaimed the Squire. "Why, I thought that the whole thing was a myth."

"No, that it ain't, sir," said George with a melancholy smile, "cos I've seen it."

Ida had sunk into a chair.

"What is the amount?" she asked in a low eager voice.

"I have been unable to calculate exactly, but, speaking roughly, it cannot be under fifty thousand pounds, estimated on the value of the gold alone. Here is a specimen of it," and Harold pulled out a handful of rials and other coins, and poured them on to the table.

Ida hid her face in her hand, and Edward Cossey realising what this most unexpected development of events might mean for him, began to tremble.

"I should not allow myself to be too much elated, Mr. de la Molle," he said with a sneer, "for even if this tale be true, it is treasure trove, and belongs to the Crown."

"Ah," said the Squire, "I never thought of that."

"But I have," answered the Colonel quietly. "If I remember right, the last of the original de la Molles left a will in which he especially devised this treasure, hidden by his father, to your ancestor. That it is the identical treasure I am fortunately in a position to prove by

this parchment," and he laid upon the table the writing he had found with the gold.

"Quite right--quite right," said the Squire, "that will take it out of the custom."

"Perhaps the Solicitor to the Treasury may hold a different opinion," said Cossey, with another sneer.

Just then Ida took her hand from her face. There was a dewy look about her eyes, and the last ripples of a happy smile lingered round the corners of her mouth.

"Now that we have heard what Colonel Quaritch had to say," she said in her softest voice, and addressing her father, "there is no reason why we should not finish our business with Mr. Cossey."

Here Harold and George turned to go. She waved them back imperiously, and began speaking before any one could interfere, taking up her speech where she had broken it off when she caught sight of the Colonel and George coming up the steps.

"I can no longer hesitate," she said, "but once and for all I decline to marry you, Mr. Cossey, and I hope that I shall never see your face again."

At this announcement the bewildered Squire put his hand to his head. Edward Cossey staggered visibly and rested himself against the table, while George murmured audibly, "That's a good job."

"Listen," said Ida, rising from her chair, her dark eyes flashing as the shadow of all the shame and agony that she had undergone rose up within her mind. "Listen, Mr. Cossey," and she pointed her finger at him; "this is the history of our connection. Some months ago I was so foolish as to ask your help in the matter of the mortgages which your bank was calling in. You then practically made terms that if it should at any time be your wish I should become engaged to you; and I, seeing no option, accepted. Then, in the interval, while it was inconvenient to you to enforce those terms, I gave my affection elsewhere. But when you, having deserted the lady who stood in your way--no, do not interrupt me, I know it, I know it all, I know it from her own lips--came forward and claimed my promise, I was forced to consent. But a loophole of escape presented itself and I availed myself of it. What followed? You again became possessed of power over my father and this place, you insulted the man I loved, you resorted to every expedient that the law would allow to torture my father and myself. You set your lawyers upon us like dogs upon a hare, you held ruin over us and again and again you offered me money, as much money as I wished, if only I would sell myself to you. And then you bided your time, leaving despair to do its work.

"I saw the toils closing round us. I knew that if I did not yield my



father would be driven from his home in his old age, and that the place he loved would pass to strangers--would pass to you. No, father, do not stop me, I /will/ speak my mind!

"And at last I determined that cost what it might I would yield. Whether I could have carried out my determination God only knows. I almost think that I should have killed myself upon my marriage day. I made up my mind. Not five minutes ago the very words were upon my lips that would have sealed my fate, when deliverance came. And now /go/. I have done with you. Your money shall be paid to you, capital and interest, down to the last farthing. I tender back my price, and knowing you for what you are, I--I despise you. That is all I have to say."

"Well, if that beant a master one," ejaculated George aloud.

Ida, who had never looked more beautiful than she did in this moment of passion, turned to seat herself, but the tension of her feelings and the torrent of her wrath and eloquence had been too much for her. She would have fallen had not Harold, who had been listening amazed to this overpowering outburst of nature, run up and caught her in his arms.

As for Edward Cossey, he had shrunk back involuntarily beneath the volume of her scorn, till he stood with his back against the panelled wall. His face was white as a sheet; despair and fury shone in his

dark eyes. Never had he desired this woman more fiercely than he did now, in the moment when he knew that she had escaped him for ever. In a sense he was to be pitied, for passion tore his heart in twain. For a moment he stood thus. Then with a spring rather than a step, he advanced across the room till he was face to face with Harold, who, with Ida still half fainting in his arms, and her head upon his shoulder, was standing on the further side of the fire-place.

"Damn you," he said, "I owe this to you--you half-pay adventurer," and he lifted his arm as though to strike him.

"Come, none of that," said the Squire, speaking for the first time. "I will have no brawling here."

"No," put in George, edging his long form between the two, "and begging your pardon, sir, don't you go a-calling of better men than yourself adventurers. At any rate, if the Colonel is an adventurer, he hev adventured to some purpose, as is easy for to see," and he pointed to Ida.

"Hold your tongue, sir," roared the Squire, as usual relieving his feelings on his retainer. "You are always shoving your oar in where it isn't wanted."

"All right, Squire, all right," said George the imperturbable; "thin his manners shouldn't be sich."

"Do you mean to allow this?" said Cossey, turning fiercely to the old gentleman. "Do you mean to allow this man to marry your daughter for her money?"

"Mr. Cossey," answered the Squire, with his politest and most old-fashioned bow, "whatever sympathy I may have felt for you is being rapidly alienated by your manner. I told you that my daughter must speak for herself. She has spoken very clearly indeed, and, in short, I have absolutely nothing to add to her words."

"I tell you what it is," Cossey said, shaking with fury, "I have been tricked and fooled and played with, and so surely as there is a heaven above us I will have my revenge on you all. The money which this man says that he has found belongs to the Queen, not to you, and I will take care that the proper people are informed of it before you can make away with it. When that is taken from you, if, indeed, the whole thing is not a trick, we shall see what will happen to you. I tell you that I will take this property and I will pull this old place you are so fond of down stone by stone and throw it into the moat, and send the plough over the site. I will sell the estate piecemeal and blot it out. I tell you I have been tricked--you encouraged the marriage yourself, you know you did, and forbade that man the house," and he paused for breath and to collect his words.

Again the Squire bowed, and his bow was a study in itself. You do not

see such bows now-a-days.

"One minute, Mr. Cossey," he said very quietly, for it was one of his peculiarities to become abnormally quiet in circumstances of real emergency, "and then I think that we may close this painful interview. When first I knew you I did not like you. Afterwards, through various circumstances, I modified my opinion and set my dislike down to prejudice. You are quite right in saying that I encouraged the idea of a marriage between you and my daughter, also that I forbade the house to Colonel Quaritch. I did so because, to be honest, I saw no other way of avoiding the utter ruin of my family; but perhaps I was wrong in so doing. I hope that you may never be placed in a position which will force you to such a decision. Also at the time, indeed never till this moment, have I quite realised how the matter really stood. I did not understand how strongly my daughter was attached in another direction, perhaps I was unwilling to understand it. Nor did I altogether understand the course of action by which it seems you obtained a promise of marriage from my daughter in the first instance. I was anxious for the marriage because I believed you to be a better man than you are, also because I thought that it would place my daughter and her descendants in a much improved position, and that she would in time become attached to you. I forbade Colonel Quaritch the house because I considered that an alliance with him would be undesirable for everybody concerned. I find that in all this I was acting wrongly, and I frankly admit it. Perhaps as we grow old we grow worldly also, and you and your agents pressed me very hard, Mr.

Cossey. Still I have always told you that my daughter was a free agent and must decide for herself, and therefore I owe you no apology on this score. So much then for the question of your engagement to Miss de la Molle. It is done with.

"Now as regards the threats you make. I shall try to meet them as occasion arises, and if I cannot do so it will be my misfortune. But one thing they show me, though I am sorry to have to say it to any man in a house which I can still call my own--they show me that my first impressions of you were the correct ones. /You are not a gentleman/, Mr. Cossey, and I must beg to decline the honour of your further acquaintance," and with another bow he opened the vestibule door and stood holding the handle in his hand.

Edward Cossey looked round with a stare of rage. Then muttering one most comprehensive curse he stalked from the room, and in another minute was driving fast through the ancient gateway.

Let us pity him, for he also certainly received his due.

George followed him to the outer door and then did a thing that nobody had seen him do before; he burst out into a loud laugh.

"What are you making that noise about?" asked his master sternly.

"This is no laughing matter."

"/Him!/" replied George, pointing to the retreating dog-cart--"/he's/ a-going to pull down the Castle and throw it into the moat and to send the plough over it, is he? /Him/--that varmint! Why, them old towers will be a-standing there when his beggarly bones is dust, and when his name ain't no more a name; and there'll be one of the old blood sitting in them too. I know it, and I hev allus knawed it. Come, Squire, though you allus du say how as I'm a fule, what did I tell yer? Didn't I tell yer that Prowidence weren't a-going to let this place go to any laryers or bankers or thim sort? Why, in course I did. And now you see. Not but what it is all owing to the Colonel. He was the man as found it, but then God Almighty taught him where to dig. But he's a good un, he is; and a gintleman, not like /him/," and once more he pointed with unutterable scorn to the road down which Edward Cossey had vanished.

"Now, look here," said the Squire, "don't you stand talking all day about things you don't understand. That's the way you waste time. You be off and look after this gold; it should not be left alone, you know. We will come down presently to Molehill, for I suppose that is where it is. No, I can't stop to hear the story now, and besides I want Colonel Quaritch to tell it to me."

"All right, Squire," said George, touching his red nightcap, "I'll be off," and he started.

"George," halloaed his master after him, but George did not stop. He

had a trick of deafness when the Squire was calling, that is if he wanted to go somewhere else.

"Confound you," roared the old gentleman, "why don't you stop when I call you?"

This time George brought his long lank frame to a standstill.

"Beg pardon, Squire."

"Beg pardon, yes--you're always begging pardon. Look here, you had better bring your wife and have dinner in the servants' hall to-day, and drink a glass of port."

"Thank you, Squire," said George again, touching his red nightcap.

"And look here, George. Give me your hand, man. Here's a merry Christmas to you. We've gone through some queerish times about this place together, but now it almost looks as though we were going to end our days in peace and plenty."

"Same to you, Squire, I'm sure, same to you," said George, pulling off his cap. "Yes, yes, we've had some bad years, what with poor Mr. James and that Quest and Cossey (he's the master varmint of the lot he is), and the bad times, and Janter, and the Moat Farm and all. But, bless you, Squire, now that there'll be some ready money and no debts, why,

if I don't make out somehow so that you all get a good living out of the place I'm a Dutchman. Why, yes, it's been a bad time and we're a-getting old, but there, that's how it is, the sky almost allus clears toward night-fall. God Almighty hev a mind to let one down easy, I suppose."

"If you would talk a little less about your Maker, and come to church a little more, it would be a good thing, as I've told you before," said the Squire; "but there, go along with you."

And the honest fellow went.