CHAPTER XLIV

CHRISTMAS CHIMES

The Squire turned and entered the house. He generally was fairly noisy in his movements, but on this occasion he was exceptionally so. Possibly he had a reason for it.

On reaching the vestibule he found Harold and Ida standing side by side as though they were being drilled. It was impossible to resist the conclusion that they had suddenly assumed that attitude because it happened to be the first position into which they could conveniently fall.

There was a moment's silence, then Harold took Ida's hand and led her up to where her father was standing.

"Mr. de la Molle," he said simply, "once more I ask you for your daughter in marriage. I am quite aware of my many disqualifications, especially those of my age and the smallness of my means; but Ida and myself hope and believe that under all the circumstances you will no longer withhold your consent," and he paused.

"Quaritch," answered the Squire, "I have already in your presence told Mr. Cossey under what circumstances I was favourably inclined to his proposal, so I need not repeat all that. As regards your means,

although they would have been quite insufficient to avert the ruin which threatened us, still you have, I believe, a competence, and owing to your wonderful and most providential discovery the fear of ruin seems to have passed away. It is owing to you that this discovery, which by the way I want to hear all about, has been made; had it not been for you it never would have been made at all, and therefore I certainly have no right to say anything more about your means. As to your age, well, after all forty-four is not the limit of life, and if Ida does not object to marrying a man of those years, I cannot object to her doing so. With reference to your want of occupation, I think that if you marry Ida this place will, as times are, keep your hands pretty full, especially when you have an obstinate donkey like that fellow George to deal with. I am getting too old and stupid to look after it myself, and besides things are so topsy-turvy that I can't understand them. There is one thing more that I want to say: I forbade you the house. Well, you are a generous-minded man, and it is human to err, so I think that perhaps you will understand my action and not bear me a grudge on that account. Also, I dare say that at the time, and possibly at other times, I said things I should be sorry for if I could remember what they were, which I can't, and if so, I apologise to you as a gentleman ought when he finds himself in the wrong. And so I say God bless you both, and I hope you will be happy in life together; and now come here, Ida, my love, and give me a kiss. You have been a good daughter all your life, and so Quaritch may be sure that you will be a good wife too."

Ida did as she was bid. Then she went over to her lover and took him by his hand, and he kissed her on the forehead. And thus after all their troubles they finally ratified the contract.

* * * * *

And we, who have followed them thus far, and have perhaps been a little moved by their struggles, hopes, and fears, will surely not grudge to re-echo the Squire's old-fashioned prayer, "God bless them both."

God bless them both. Long may they live, and happily.

Long may they live, and for very long may their children's children of the race, if not of the name of de la Molle, pass in and out through the old Norman gateway and by the sturdy Norman towers. The Boisseys, who built them, here had their habitation for six generations. The de la Molles who wedded the heiress of the Boisseys lived here for thirteen generations. May the Quaritchs whose ancestor married Ida, heiress of the de la Molles, endure as long!

Surely it is permitted to us to lift a corner of the curtain of futurity and in spirit see Ida Quaritch, stately and beautiful as we knew her, but of a happier countenance. We see her seated on some Christmas Eve to come in the drawing-room of the Castle, telling to the children at her knees the wonderful tale of how their father and

old George on this very night, when the gale blew long years ago, discovered the ruddy pile of gold, hoarded in that awful storehouse amid the bones of Saxon or Danish heroes, and thus saved her to be their mother. We can see their wide wondering eyes and fixed faces, as for the tenth time they listen to a story before which the joys of Crusoe will grow pale. We can hear the eager appeal for details made to the military-looking gentleman, very grizzled now, but grown better-looking with the advancing years, who is standing before the fire, the best, most beloved husband and father in all that country side.

Perhaps there may be a vacant chair, and another tomb among the ranks of the departed de la Molles; perhaps the ancient walls will no longer echo to the sound of the Squire's stentorian voice. And what of that? It is our common lot.

But when he goes the country side will lose a man of whom they will not see the like again, for the breed is dead or dying; a man whose very prejudices, inconsistencies, and occasional wrong-headed violence will be held, when he is no longer here, to have been endearing qualities. And for manliness, for downright English God-fearing virtues, for love of Queen, country, family and home, they may search in vain to find his equal among the cosmopolitan Englishmen of the dawning twentieth century. His faults were many, and at one time he went near to sacrificing his daughter to save his house, but he would not have been the man he was without them.

And so to him, too, farewell. Perchance he will find himself better placed in the Valhalla of his forefathers, surrounded by those stout old de la Molles whose memory he regarded with so much affection, than here in this thin-blooded Victorian era. For as has been said elsewhere the old Squire would undoubtedly have looked better in a chain shirt and bearing a battle axe than ever he did in a frock coat, especially with his retainer George armed to the teeth behind him.

* * * * *

They kissed, and it was done.

Out from the church tower in the meadows broke with clash and clangour a glad sound of Christmas bells. Out it swept over layer, pitle and fallow, over river, plantain, grove and wood. It floated down the valley of the Ell, it beat against Dead Man's Mount (henceforth to the vulgar mind more haunted than ever), it echoed up the Castle's Norman towers and down the oak-clad vestibule. Away over the common went the glad message of Earth's Saviour, away high into the air, startling the rooks upon their airy courses, as though the iron notes of the World's rejoicing would fain float to the throned feet of the World's Everlasting King.

Peace and goodwill! Ay and happiness to the children of men while their span is, and hope for the Beyond, and heaven's blessing on holy

love and all good things that are. This is what those liquid notes seemed to say to the most happy pair who stood hand in hand in the vestibule and thought on all they had escaped and all that they had won.

* * * * *

"Well, Quaritch, if you and Ida have quite done staring at each other, which isn't very interesting to a third party, perhaps you will not mind telling us how you happened on old Sir James de la Molle's hoard."

Thus adjured, Harold began his thrilling story, telling the whole history of the night in detail, and if his hearers had expected to be astonished certainly their expectations were considerably more than fulfilled.

"Upon my word," said the Squire when he had done, "I think I am beginning to grow superstitious in my old age. Hang me if I don't believe it was the finger of Providence itself that pointed out those letters to you. Anyway, I'm off to see the spoil. Run and get your hat, Ida, my dear, and we will all go together."

And they went and looked at the chest full of red gold, yes, and passed down, all three of them, into those chill presences in the bowels of the Mount. Then coming thence awed and silent they sealed up

the place for ever.

CONCLUSION

GOOD-BYE

On the following morning such of the inhabitants of Boisingham as chanced to be about were much interested to see an ordinary farm tumbrel coming down the main street. It was being driven, or rather led, by no less a person than George himself, while behind it walked the well-known form of the old Squire, arm-in-arm with Colonel Quaritch.

They were still more interested, however, when the tumbrel drew up at the door of the bank--not Cossey's, but the opposition bank--where, although it was Boxing Day, the manager and the clerk were apparently waiting for its arrival.

But their interest culminated when they perceived that the cart only contained a few bags, and yet that each of these bags seemed to require three or four men to lift it with any comfort.

Thus was the gold safely housed. Upon being weighed its value was found to be about fifty-three thousand pounds of modern money. But as

some of the coins were exceedingly rare, and of great worth to museums and collectors, this value was considerably increased, and the treasure was ultimately sold for fifty-six thousand two hundred and fifty-four pounds. Only Ida kept back enough of the choicest coins to make a gold waistband or girdle and a necklace for herself, destined no doubt in future days to form the most cherished heirloom of the Quaritch family.

On that same evening the Squire and Harold went to London and opened up communications with the Solicitor to the Treasury. Fortunately they were able to refer to the will of Sir Edward de la Molle, the second baronet, in which he specially devised to his cousin, Geoffrey Dofferleigh, and his heirs for ever, not only his estates, but his lands, "together with the treasure hid thereon or elsewhere by my late murdered father, Sir James de la Molle." Also they produced the writing which Ida had found in the old Bible, and the parchment discovered by George among the coin. These three documents formed a chain of evidence which even officials interested for the Treasury could not refuse to admit, and in the upshot the Crown renounced its claims, and the property in the gold passed to the Squire, subject to the payment of the same succession duty which he would have been called upon to meet had he inherited a like sum from a cousin at the present time.

And so it came to pass that when the mortgage money was due it was paid to the last farthing, capital and interest, and Edward Cossey

lost his hold upon Honham for ever.

As for Edward Cossey himself, we may say one more word about him. In the course of time he sufficiently recovered from his violent passion for Ida to allow him to make a brilliant marriage with the only daughter of an impecunious peer. She keeps her name and title and he plays the part of the necessary husband. Anyhow, my reader, if it is your fortune to frequent the gilded saloons of the great, you may meet Lady Honoria Tallton and Mr. Cossey. If you do meet him, however, it may be as well to avoid him, for the events of his life have not been of a nature to improve his temper. This much then of Edward Cossey.

If after leaving the gilded saloons aforesaid you should happen to wander through the London streets, you may meet another character in this history. You may see a sweet pale face, still stamped with a child-like roundness and simplicity, but half hidden in the coarse hood of the nun. You may see her, and if you care to follow you may find what is the work wherein she seeks her peace. It would shock you; but it is her work of mercy and loving kindness and she does it unflinchingly. Among her sister nuns there is no one more beloved than Sister Agnes. So good-bye to her also.

Harold Quaritch and Ida were married in the spring and the village children strewed the churchyard path with primroses and violets--the same path where in anguish of soul they had met and parted on that dreary winter's night.

And there at the old church door, when the wreath is on her brow and the veil about her face, let us bid farewell to Ida and her husband, Harold Quaritch.

THE END