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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

CETEWAYO AND HIS WHITE NEIGHBOURS.

DAWN.

THE WITCH'S HEAD.

KING SOLOMON'S MINES.

SHE.

JESS.

ALLAN QUATERMAIN.

MR. MEESON'S WILL.

MAIWA'S REVENGE.

COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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I Dedicate

THIS TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE

TO

MY FRIEND AND FELLOW - SPORTSMAN,

CHARLES J. LONGMAN.

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COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE.



CHAPTER I.

THE HAPPY DAYS.

THIS is a troublesome world enough, but thanks to that mitigating fate which now and again interferes to our advantage, there do come to most of us times and periods of existence which, if they do not quite fulfil all the conditions of ideal happiness, yet go near enough to that end to permit in after days of our imagining that they did so. I say to most of us, but in doing so I allude chiefly to those classes commonly known as the "upper," by which is understood those who have enough bread to put into their mouths and

clothes to warm them ; those, too, who are not the present subjects of remorseless and hideous ailments, who are not daily agonised by the sight of their famished offspring ; who are not doomed to beat out their lives against the madhouse bars, or to see their hearts' beloved and their most cherished hope wither toward that cold space from whence no message comes. For such unfortunates, and for their million-numbered kin upon the globe—the victims of war, famine, slave trade, oppression, usury, over-population, and the curse of competition, the rays of light must be few indeed ; few and far between, only just enough to save them from utter hopelessness. And even to the favoured ones, the well warmed and well fed, who are to a great extent lifted by fortune or by their native strength and wit above the degradations of the world, this light of happiness is but as the gleam of stars, uncertain, fitful, and continually lost in

clouds. Only the utterly selfish or the utterly ignorant can be happy with the happiness of savages or children, however prosperous their own affairs, for to the rest, to those who think and have hearts to feel, and imagination to realise, and a redeeming human sympathy to be touched, the mere weight of the world's misery pressing round them like an atmosphere, the mere echoes of the groans of the dying and the cries of the children are sufficient, and more than sufficient, to dull, aye, to destroy, the promise of their joys. But even to this finer sort there do come rare periods of almost complete happiness—little summers in the tempestuous climate of our years, green-fringed wells of water in our desert, pure northern lights breaking in upon our gloom. And strange as it may seem, these breadths of happy days, when the old questions cease to torment, and a man can trust in Providence and without one

qualifying thought bless the day that he was born, are very frequently connected with the passion which is known as love ; that mysterious symbol of our double nature, that strange tree of life which, with its roots sucking their strength from the dust-heap of humanity, yet springs aloft above our level, and bears its blooms in the face of heaven.

Why it is and what it means we shall perhaps never know for certain. But it does suggest itself, that as the greatest terror of our being lies in the utter loneliness, the unspeakable identity, and unchanging self-completeness of every living creature, so the greatest hope and the intensest natural yearning of our hearts go out towards that passion which in its fire heats has the strength, if only for a little while, to melt down the barriers of our individuality and give to the soul something of the power for which it yearns of losing its sense of solitude in converse with its

kind. For alone we are from infancy to death!—we, for the most part, grow not more near together but rather wider apart with the widening years. Where go the sympathies between the parent and the child, and where is the close old love of brother for his brother?

The invisible fates are continually wrapping us round and round with the winding sheets of our solitude, and none may know all our heart save He who made it. We are set upon the world as the stars are set upon the sky, and though in following our fated orbits we pass and repass, and each shine out on each, yet are we the same lonely lights, rolling obedient to laws we cannot understand, through spaces of which none may mark the measure.

Only, as says the poet in words of truth and beauty :

“ Only but this is rare—
When a beloved hand is laid in ours,
When jaded with the rush and glare

Of the interminable hours,
 Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear ;
 When our world-deafened ear
 Is by the tones of a loved voice caressed
 A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast
 And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again—
 And what we mean we say and what we would
 we know.

.
 And then he thinks he knows
 The hills where his life rose
 And the sea whereunto it goes."

Some such Indian summer of delight and forgetfulness of trouble, and the tragic conditions of our days, was now opening to Harold Quaritch and Ida de la Molle. Every day or almost every day they met and went upon their painting expeditions and argued the point of the validity or otherwise of the impressionist doctrines of art. Not that of all this painting came anything very wonderful, although in the evening the Colonel would take out his canvases and contemplate their rigid proportions with singular pride and satisfaction. It was a little weakness of his to

think that he could paint, and one of which he was somewhat tenacious. Like many another man he could do a number of things exceedingly well and one thing very badly, and yet had more faith in that bad thing than in all the good.

But strange to say, although he affected to believe so firmly in his own style of art and hold Ida's in such cheap regard, it was a little painting of the latter's that he valued most, and which was oftenest put upon his easel for purposes of solitary admiration. It was one of those very impressionist productions that faded away in the distance, and full of soft grey tints, such as his soul loathed. There was a tree with a blot of brown colour on it, and altogether (though as a matter of fact a clever thing enough) from his point of view of art it was utterly "anathema." This little picture in oils faintly shadowed out himself sitting at his easel, working in the soft grey of the autumn evening, and

Ida had painted it and given it to him, and that was why he admired it so much. For to speak the truth, our friend the Colonel was going, going fast—sinking out of sight of his former self into the depths of the love that possessed his soul.

He was a very simple and pure-minded man. Strange as it may appear, since that first unhappy business of his youth, of which he had never been heard to speak, no living woman had been anything to him. Therefore, instead of becoming further vulgarised and hardened by association with all the odds and ends of womankind that a man travelling about the globe comes in contact with, generally not greatly to his improvement, his faith had found time to grow up stronger even than at first. Once more he looked upon woman as a young man looks before he has had bitter experience of the world—as a being to be venerated and almost

worshipped, as something better, brighter, purer than himself, hardly to be won, and when won to be worn like a jewel prized at once for value and for beauty.

Now this is a dangerous state of mind for a man of three or four and forty to fall into, because it is a soft state, and this is a world in which the softest are apt to get the worst of it. At four-and-forty a man, of course, should be hard enough to get the better of other people, as indeed he generally is.

When Harold Quaritch, after that long interval, set his eyes again upon Ida's face, he felt a curious change come over him. All the vague ideas and more or less poetical aspirations which for five long years had gathered themselves about that memory, took shape and form, and in his heart he knew he loved her. Then as the days went on and he came to know her better, he grew to love her more and more, till at last his whole heart went out

towards his late found treasure, and she became more than life to him, more than aught else had been or could be. Serene and happy were those days which they spent in painting and talking as they wandered about the Honham Castle grounds. By degrees Ida's slight but perceptible hardness of manner wore away, and she stood out what she was, one of the sweetest and most natural women in England, and with it all, a woman having brains and force of character.

Soon Harold discovered that her life had been anything but an easy one. The constant anxiety about money and her father's affairs had worn her down and hardened her till as she said, she began to feel as though she had no heart left. Then too he heard all her trouble about her dead and only brother James, how dearly she had loved him, and what a sore trouble he had been with his extravagant ways and his continual demands

for money, which had to be met somehow or other. At last came the crushing blow of his death, and with it the certainty of the extinction of the male line of the de la Molles, and she said that for a while she had believed her father would never hold up his head again. But his vitality was equal to the shock, and after a time the debts began to come in, which although he was not legally bound to do so, her father would insist upon meeting to the last farthing for the honour of the family and out of respect for his son's memory. This increased their money troubles, which had gone on and on, always getting worse as the agricultural depression deepened, till things had reached their present position.

All this she told him bit by bit, only keeping back from him the last development of the drama with the part that Edward Cossey had played in it, and sad enough it made him to think of that

ancient house of de la Molle vanishing into the night of ruin.

Also she told him something of her own life, how companionless it had been since her brother went into the army, for she had no real friends about Honham, and not even an acquaintance of her own tastes, which, without being gushingly so, were decidedly artistic and intellectual. "I should have wished," she said, "to try to do something in the world. I daresay I should have failed, for I know that very few women meet with a success which is worth having. But still I should have liked to try, for I am not afraid of work. But the current of my life is against it; the only thing that is open to me is to strive and make both ends meet upon an income which is always growing smaller, and to save my father, poor dear, from as much worry as I can.

"Don't think that I am complaining,"

she went on hurriedly, "or that I want to rush into pleasure-seeking, because I do not—a little of that goes a long way with me. Besides, I know that I have many things to be thankful for. Few women have such a kind father as mine, though we do quarrel at times. Of course we cannot have everything our own way in this world, and I daresay that I do not make the best of things. Still, at times it does seem a little hard that I should be forced to lead such a narrow life, just when I feel that I could work in a wide one."

Harold looked up at her face and saw that a tear was gathering in her dark eyes and in his heart he registered a vow that if by any means it ever lay within his power to improve her lot he would give everything he had to do it. But all he said was:

"Don't be downhearted, Miss de la Molle. Things change in a wonderful way, and often they mend when they look worst.

You know," he went on a little nervously, "I am an old-fashioned sort of individual, and I believe in Providence and all that sort of thing, you see, and that matters generally come pretty straight in the long run if people deserve it."

Ida shook her head a little doubtfully and sighed.

"Perhaps," she said, "but I suppose that we do not deserve it. Anyhow, our good fortune is a long while coming," and the conversation dropped.

Still her friend's strong belief in the efficacy of Providence, and generally his masculine sturdiness, did cheer her up considerably. Even the strongest women, if they have any element that can be called feminine left in them, want somebody of the other sex to lean on, and she was no exception to the rule. Besides, if Ida's society had charms for Colonel Quaritch, his society had almost if not quite as much charm for her. It may be remembered

that on the night when they first met she had spoken to herself of him as the kind of man whom she would like to marry. The thought was a passing one, and it may be safely said that she had not since entertained any serious idea of marriage in connection with Colonel Quaritch. The only person whom there seemed to be the slightest probability of her marrying was Edward Cossey, and the mere thought of this was enough to make the whole idea of matrimony repugnant to her.

But this notwithstanding, day by day she found Harold Quaritch's society more congenial. Herself by nature, and also to a certain degree by education, a cultured woman, she rejoiced to find in him an entirely kindred spirit. For beneath his somewhat rugged and unpromising exterior Harold Quaritch hid a vein of considerable richness. Few of those who associated with him would have believed that the man had a side to his nature

which was almost poetic, or that he was a ripe and finished scholar, and, what is more, not devoid of a certain dry humour. Then he had travelled far and seen much of men and manners, gathering up all sorts of quaint odds and ends of information. But perhaps rather than these accomplishments it was the man's transparent honesty and simple-mindedness, his love for what is true and noble, and his contempt of what is mean and base, which, unwittingly peeping out through his conversation, attracted her more than all the rest. Ida was no more a young girl, to be caught by a handsome face or dazzled by a superficial show of mind. She was a thoughtful, ripened woman, quick to perceive, and with the rare talent of judgment wherewith to weigh the proceeds of her perception. In plain, middle-aged Colonel Quaritch she found a very perfect gentleman, and valued him accordingly.

And so day grew into day through that lovely autumntide. Edward Cossey was away in London, Quest had ceased from troubling, and journeying together through the sweet shadows of companionship, by slow but sure degrees they drew near to the sunlit plain of love. For it is not common, indeed it is so uncommon as to be almost impossible, that a man and woman between whom there stands no natural impediment can halt for very long in those shadowed ways. There is throughout all nature an impulse that pushes ever onwards towards completion, and from completion to fruition. Liking leads to sympathy, sympathy points the path to love, and then love demands its own. This is the order of affairs, and down its well-trodden road these two were quickly travelling.

George the wily saw it, and winked his eye with solemn meaning. The Squire also saw something of it, not being want-

ing in knowledge of the world, and after much cogitation and many solitary walks elected to leave matters alone for the present. He liked Colonel Quaritch, and thought that it would be a good thing for Ida to get married, though the idea of parting from her troubled his heart sorely. Whether or no it would be desirable from his point of view that she should marry the Colonel was a matter on which he had not as yet fully made up his mind. Sometimes he thought it would, and sometimes the reverse. Then at times vague ideas suggested by Edward Cossey's behaviour about the loan would come to puzzle him. But at present he was so much in the dark that he could come to no absolute decision, so with unaccustomed wisdom for so headstrong and precipitate a man, he determined to refrain from interference, and for a while at any rate allow events to take their natural course.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE WITH THE RED PILLARS.

Two days after his receipt of the second letter from the "Tiger," Mr. Quest announced to his wife that he was going to London on business connected with the bank, and expected to be away for a couple of nights.

She laughed straight out. "Really, William," she said, "you are a most consummate actor. I wonder that you think it worth while to keep up the farce with me. Well, I hope that Edith is not going to be very expensive this time, because we don't seem to be too rich just now, and you see there is no more of my money for her to have."

Mr. Quest winced visibly beneath this bitter satire, which his wife uttered with a

smile of infantile innocence playing upon her face, but he made no reply. She knew too much. Only in his heart he wondered what fate she would mete out to him if ever she got possession of the whole truth, and the thought made him tremble. It seemed to him that the owner of that baby face could be terribly merciless in her vengeance, and that those soft white hands would close round the throat of a man she hated and utterly destroy him. Now, if never before, he realised that between him and this woman there must be enmity and a struggle to the death; and yet strangely enough he still loved her!

Mr. Quest reached London about three o'clock, and his first act was to drive to Cossey and Son's, where he was informed that old Mr. Cossey was much better, and having heard that he was coming to town had sent to say that he particularly wished to see him, especially about the Honham Castle estates. Accordingly Mr. Quest

drove on to the old gentleman's mansion in Grosvenor Street, where he asked for Mr. Edward Cossey. The footman said that Mr. Edward was upstairs, and showed him into a study while he went to tell him of the arrival of his visitor. Mr. Quest glanced round the luxuriously-furnished room, which he saw was occupied by Edward himself, for some letters directed in his handwriting lay upon the desk, and a velveteen lounging coat that Mr. Quest recognised as belonging to him was hanging over the back of a chair. Mr. Quest's eye wandering over this coat, was presently caught by the corner of a torn flap of an envelope which projected from one of the pockets. It was of a peculiar bluish tinge, in fact of a hue much affected by his wife. Listening for a moment to hear if anybody was coming, he stepped to the coat and extracted the letter. It *was* in his wife's handwriting, so he took the liberty of hastily transferring it to his own pocket.

In another minute Edward Cossey entered, and the two men shook hands.

“How do you do, Quest?” said Edward. “I think that the old man is going to pull through this bout. He is helpless but keen as a knife, and has all the important matters from the bank referred to him. I believe that he will last a year yet, but he will scarcely allow me out of his sight. He preaches away about business the whole day long and says that he wants to communicate the fruits of his experience to me before it is too late. He wishes to see you, so if you will you had better come up.”

Accordingly they went upstairs to a large and luxurious bedroom on the first floor, where the stricken man lay upon a patent couch.

When Mr. Quest and Edward Cossey entered, a lady, old Mr. Cossey's eldest daughter, put down a paper out of which she had been reading the money article

aloud, and, rising, informed her father that Mr. Quest had come.

“Mr. Quest?” said the old man in a high thin voice. “Ah, yes, I want to see Mr. Quest very much. Go away now, Anna; you can come back by-and-by, business before pleasure—most instructive, though, that sudden fall in American railways. But I thought it would come and I got Cosseys clear of them,” and he sniffed with satisfaction and looked as though he would have rubbed his hands if he had not been physically incapacitated from so doing.

Mr. Quest came forward to where the invalid lay. He was a gaunt old man with white hair and a pallid face, which looked almost ghastly in contrast to his black velvet skull cap. So far as Mr. Quest could see, he appeared to be almost totally paralysed, with the exception of his head, neck, and left arm, which he could still move a little. His black eyes, however, were full of life

and intelligence, and roamed about the room without ceasing.

“How do you do, Mr. Quest?” he said; “sorry that I can’t shake hands with you but you see I have been stricken down, though my brain is clear enough, clearer than ever it was, I think. And I ain’t going to die yet—don’t think that I am, because I ain’t. I may live two years more—the doctor says that I am sure to live one at least. A lot of money can be made in a year if you keep your eyes open. Once I made a hundred and twenty thousand for Cosseys in one year; and I may do it again before I die. I may make a lot of money yet, ah, a lot of money!” and his voice went off into a thin scream that was not pleasant to listen to.

“I am sure I hope you will, sir,” said Mr. Quest politely.

“Thank you; take that for good luck, you know. Well, well, Mr. Quest, things haven’t done so bad down in your part of

the world; not at all bad considering the times. I thought we should have had to sell that old de la Molle up, but I hear that he is going to pay us off. Can't imagine who has been fool enough to lend him the money. A client of yours, eh? Well, he'll lose it I expect, and serve him right for his pains. But I am not sorry, for it is unpleasant for a house like ours to have to sell an old client up. Not that his account is worth much, nothing at all—more trouble than profit—or we should not have done it. He's no better than a bankrupt and the insolvency court is the best place for him. The world is to the rich and the fulness thereof. There's an insolvency court especially provided for de la Molle and his like—empty old windbags with long sounding names; let him go there and make room for the men who have made money—hee! hee! hee!” And once more his voice went off into a sort of scream.

Here Mr. Quest, who had enjoyed about

enough of this kind of thing, changed the conversation by beginning to comment on various business transactions which he had been conducting on behalf of the house. The old man listened with the greatest interest, his keen black eyes attentively fixed upon the speaker's face, till at last Mr. Quest happened to mention that amongst others a certain Colonel Quaritch had opened an account with their branch of the bank.

“Quaritch?” said the old man eagerly, “I know that name. Was he ever in the 105th Foot?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quest, who knew everything about everybody, “he was an ensign in that regiment during the Indian Mutiny, where he was badly wounded when still quite young, and got the Victoria Cross. I found it all out the other day.”

“That's the man; that's the man,” said old Mr. Cossey, jerking his head in an excited manner. “He's a blackguard; I tell you he's a blackguard; he jilted my wife's

sister. She was twenty years younger than my wife—jilted her a week before her marriage, and would never give a reason, and she went mad and is in a madhouse now. I should like to have the ruining of him for it. I should like to drive him into the poor-house.”

Mr. Quest and Edward looked at each other, and the old man let his head fall back exhausted.

“Now good-bye, Mr. Quest, they’ll give you a bit of dinner downstairs,” he said at length. “I’m getting tired, and I want to hear the rest of that money article. You’ve done very well for Cosseys, and Cosseys will do well for you, for we always pay by results; that’s the way to get good work and make a lot of money. Mind, Edward, if ever you get a chance don’t forget to pay that blackguard Quaritch out pound for pound, and twice as much again for compound interest—hee hee! hee!”

“The old gentleman keeps his head for business pretty well,” said Mr. Quest to Edward Cossey as soon as they were well outside the door.

“Keeps his head?” answered Edward, “I should just think he did. He’s a regular shark now, that’s what he is. I really believe that if he knew I had found thirty thousand for old de la Molle he would cut me off with a shilling.” Here Mr. Quest pricked up his ears. “And he’s close, too,” he went on, “so close that it is almost impossible to get anything out of him. I am not particular, but upon my word I think that it is rather disgusting to see an old man with one foot in the grave hanging on to his moneybags as though he expected to float to heaven on them.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Quest, “it is a curious thing to think of, but, you see, money *is* his heaven.”

“By-the-way,” said Edward, as they

entered the study, "that's queer about that fellow Quaritch, isn't it? I never liked the look of him, with his pious air."

"Very queer, Mr. Cossey," said he, "but do you know, I almost think that there must be some mistake. I do not believe that Colonel Quaritch is the man to do things of that sort without a very good reason. However, nobody can tell, and it is a long while ago."

"A long while ago or not I mean to let him know my opinion of him when I get back to Boisingham," said Edward viciously. "By Jove! it's twenty minutes past six, and in this establishment we dine at the pleasant hour of half-past. Won't you come and wash your hands."

Mr. Quest had a very good dinner, and contrary to his custom drank the best part of a bottle of old port after it. He had an unpleasant business to face that evening, and felt as though his nerves required bracing. About ten o'clock he

took his leave, and getting into a hansom bade the cabman drive to Rupert Street, Pimlico, where he arrived in due course. Having dismissed his cab, he walked slowly down the street till he reached a small house with red pillars to the doorway. Here he rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman with a cunning face and a simper. Mr. Quest knew her well. Nominally the Tiger's servant, she was really her jackal.

“Is Mrs. d'Aubigné at home, Ellen?” he said.

“No, sir,” she answered with a simper, “but she will be back from the music hall before long. She does not appear in the second part. But please come in, sir, you are quite a stranger here, and I am sure that Mrs. d'Aubigné will be very glad to see you, for she have been dreadfully pressed for money of late, poor dear; nobody knows the trouble that I have had with those sharks of tradesmen.”

By this time they were upstairs in the drawing-room, and Ellen had turned the gas up. The room was well furnished in a certain gaudy style, which included a good deal of gilt and plate glass. Evidently, however, it had not been tidied since the Tiger had left it, for there on the table were cards thrown this way and that amidst an array of empty soda-water bottles, glasses with dregs of brandy in them, and other *débris*, such as the ends of cigars and cigarettes, and a little copper and silver money. On the sofa, too, lay a gorgeous tea gown resplendent with pink satin, also a pair of gold embroidered slippers, not over small, and an odd gant de Suède, with such an extraordinary number of buttons that it almost looked like the cast off skin of a brown snake.

“I see that your mistress has been having company, Ellen,” he said coldly.

“Yes, sir, just a few lady friends in

to cheer her up a bit," answered the woman, with her abominable simper; "poor dear, she do get that low with you away so much, and no wonder; and then all these money troubles, and she night by night working hard for her living at the music hall. Often and often have I seen her crying over it all——"

"Ah," said he, breaking in upon her eloquence, "I suppose that the lady friends smoke cigars. Well, clear away this mess and leave me—stop, give me a brandy-and-soda first. I will wait for your mistress."

The woman stopped talking and did as she was bid, for there was a look in Mr. Quest's eyes which she did not quite like. So having placed the brandy and soda-water before him she left him to his own reflections.

Apparently they were not very pleasant ones. He walked round the room, which was reeking of patchouli or some such

compound, well mixed with the odour of stale cigar smoke, looking absently at the gee-gaw ornaments. On the mantelpiece were some photographs, and among them, to his disgust, he saw one of himself, taken many years ago. With something as near an oath as he ever indulged in, he seized it, and setting fire to it over the gas, waited till the flames began to scorch his fingers, and then flung it, still burning, down into the grate. Then he looked at himself in the glass over the mantelpiece—the room was full of mirrors—and laughed bitterly at the incongruity of his gentlemanlike, respectable, and even refined appearance, in that vulgar, gaudy, vicious-looking room.

Suddenly he bethought him of the letter in his wife's handwriting which he had stolen from the pocket of Edward Cossey's coat. He drew it out, and throwing the tea gown and the interminable glove off the sofa, sat down and began to read it. It was, as he had expected, a love letter,

a wildly passionate love letter, breathing language which in places almost touched the beauty of poetry, vows of undying affection that were throughout redeemed from vulgarity and even from silliness by their utter earnestness and self-abandonment. Had the letter been one written under happier circumstances and innocent of offence against morality, it would have been a beautiful letter, for passion at its highest has always a wild beauty of its own.

He read it through and then carefully folded it and restored it to his pocket. "The woman has a heart," he said to himself, "no one can doubt it. And yet I could never touch it, though God knows however much I wronged her I loved her, yes, and love her now. Well, it is a good bit of evidence, if ever I dare to use it. It is a game of bluff between me and her, and I expect that in the end the boldest player will win."

He rose from the sofa—the atmosphere

of the place stifled him, and going to the window threw it open and stepped out on to the balcony. It was a lovely moonlight night, though chilly, and for London the street was a quiet one.

Taking a chair he sat down there upon the balcony and began to think. His heart was softened by misery and his mind fell into a tender groove. He thought of his long-dead mother, whom he had dearly loved, and of how he used to say his prayers to her, and of how she sang hymns to him on Sunday evenings. Her death had seemed to choke all the beauty out of his being at the time, and yet now he thanked heaven that she was dead. And then he thought of the accursed woman who had been his ruin, and of how she had entered into his life and corrupted and destroyed him. Next there rose up before him a vision of Belle, Belle as he had first seen her, a maid of seventeen, the only child of that drunken old village doctor, now also

long since dead, and of how the sight of her had for a while stayed the corruption of his heart because he grew to love her. And then he married Belle by foul means, and the woman rose up in his path again, and he learnt that his wife hated him with all the energy of her passionate heart. Then came degradation after degradation and the abandonment of principle after principle, replaced only by a fierce craving for respectability and rest, a long, long struggle, which ever ended in new lapses from the right, till at length he saw himself a hardened schemer, remorselessly pursued by a fury from whom there was no escape. And yet he knew that under other circumstances he might have been a good and happy man — leading an honourable life. But now all hope had gone, that which he was he must be till the end. He leaned his head upon the stone railing in front of him and wept, yes, wept in the anguish of his soul, praying to heaven for

deliverance from the burden of his sins, well knowing that he had none to hope for.

For his chance was gone and his fate fixed.



CHAPTER III.

THE TIGRESS IN HER DEN.

PRESENTLY a hansom cab came rattling down the street and pulled up at the door.

“Now for it,” said Mr. Quest to himself as he metaphorically shook himself together.

Next minute he heard a voice, which he knew only too well, a loud high voice say from the cab, “Well, open the door, stupid, can’t you?”

“Certainly, my lady fair,” replied another voice—a coarse, somewhat husky male voice—“adored Edithia, in one moment.”

“Come stow that and let me out,” replied the adored Edithia sharply; and in another moment a large man in evening clothes, a horrible vulgar, carnal-looking

man with red cheeks and a hanging under lip, emerged into the lamplight and turned to hand the lady out. As he did so the woman Ellen advanced from the doorway, and going to the cab door whispered something to its occupant.

“Hullo, Johnnie,” said that lady, as she descended from the cab, so loudly that Mr. Quest on the balcony could hear every word, “you must be off; Mr. d’Aubigné has turned up, and perhaps he won’t think three good company, so you had just best take this cab back again, my son, and that will save me the trouble of paying it. Come, cut.”

“D’Aubigné,” growled the flashy man with an oath, “what do I care about d’Aubigné? Advance, d’Aubigné, and all’s well! You needn’t be jealous of me, I’m——”

“Now stop that noise and be off. He’s a lawyer and he might not freeze on to you: don’t you understand?”

“Well I’m a lawyer too and a pretty sharp one—*arcades ambo*,” said Johnnie with a coarse laugh; “and I tell you what it is, Edith, it ain’t good enough to cart a fellow down into this howling wilderness and then send him away without a drink; lend us another fiver at any rate. It ain’t good enough, I say.”

“Good enough or not you’ll have to go and you don’t get any fivers out of me to-night. Now pack sharp, or I’ll know the reason why,” and she pointed towards the cab in a fashion that seemed to cow her companion, for without another word he got into it. In another moment the cab had turned, and he was gone, muttering curses as he went.

The woman, who was none other than Mrs. d’Aubigné, *alias* Edith Jones, *alias* the Tiger, turned and entered the house, accompanied by her servant, Ellen, and presently Mr. Quest heard the rustle of her satin dress upon the stairs. He stepped

back into the darkness of the balcony and waited. She opened the door, entered, and closed it behind her, and then, a little dazzled by the light, stood for some seconds looking about for her visitor. She was a thin, tall woman, who might have been any age between forty and fifty, with the wrecks of a very fine agile-looking figure. Her face, which was plentifully bedaubed with paint and powder, was sharp, fierce and handsome, and crowned with a mane of false yellow hair. Her eyes were cold and blue, her lips thin and rather drawn, so as to show a double line of large and gleaming teeth. She was dressed in a rich and hideous tight-fitting gown of yellow satin, barred with black, and on her arms were long bright yellow gloves. She moved lightly and silently, and looked round her with a long searching gaze, like that of a cat, and her general appearance conveyed an idea of hunger and wicked ferocity. Such was the outward appearance of the Tiger, and of a

truth it justified her name. "Why, where the dickens has he got to?" she said aloud; "I wonder if he has given me the slip?"

"Here I am, Edith," said Mr. Quest quietly, as he stepped from the balcony into the room.

"Oh, there you are, are you?" she said, "hiding away in the dark—just like your nasty mean ways. Well, my long-lost one, so you have come home at last, and brought the tin with you. Well, give us a kiss," and she advanced on him with her long arms outspread.

Mr. Quest shivered visibly, and stretching out his hand, stopped her from coming near him.

"No, thank you," he said; "I don't like paint."

The taunt stopped her, and for a moment an evil light shone in her cold eyes.

"No wonder I have to paint," she said,

“when I am so worn out with poverty and hard work—not like the lovely Mrs. Q., who has nothing to do all day except spend the money that I ought to have. I’ll tell you what it is, my fine fellow: you had better be careful, or I’ll have that pretty cuckoo out of her soft nest, and pluck her borrowed feathers off her, like the monkey did to the parrot.”

“Perhaps you had better stop that talk, and come to business. I am in no mood for this sort of thing, Edith,” and he turned round, shut the window, and drew the blind.

“Oh, all right; I’m agreeable, I’m sure. Stop a bit, though—I must have a brandy-and-soda first. I am as dry as a lime-kiln, and so would you be if you had to sing comic songs at a music hall for a living. There, that’s better,” and she put down the empty glass and threw herself on to the sofa. “Now then, tune up as much as you like. How much tin have you brought?”

Mr. Quest sat down by the table, and then, as though suddenly struck by a thought, rose again, and going to the door, opened it and looked out into the passage. There was nobody there, so he shut the door again, locked it, and then under cover of drawing the curtain which hung over it, slipped the key into his pocket.

“What are you at there?” said the woman suspiciously.

“I was just looking to see that Ellen was not at the key-hole, that’s all. It would not be the first time that I have caught her there.”

“Just like your nasty low ways again,” she said. “You’ve got some game on. I’ll be bound that you have got some game on.”

Mr. Quest seated himself again, and without taking any notice of this last remark began the conversation.

“I have brought you two hundred and fifty pounds,” he said.

“Two hundred and fifty pounds!” she said, jumping up with a savage laugh. “No, my boy, you don’t get off for that if I know it. Why, I owe all that at this moment.”

“You had better sit down and be quiet,” he said, “or you will not get two hundred and fifty pence. In your own interest I recommend you to sit down.”

There was something about the man’s voice and manner that scared the female savage before him, fierce as she was, and she sat down.

“Listen,” he went on, “you are continually complaining of poverty; I come to your house—your house, mind you, not your rooms, and I find the *débris* of a card party lying about. I see champagne bottles freshly opened there in the corner. I see a dressing gown on the sofa that must have cost twenty or thirty pounds. I hear some brute associate of yours out in the street asking you to lend him

another 'fiver.' You complain of poverty and you have had over four hundred pounds from me this year alone, and I know that you earn twelve pounds a week at the music hall, and not five as you say. No, do not trouble to lie to me, for I have made enquiries."

"Spying again," said the woman with a sneer.

"Yes, spying, if you like; but there it is. And now to the point—I am not going on supplying you with money at this rate. I cannot do it and I will not do it. I am going to give you two hundred and fifty pounds now, and as much every year, and not one farthing more."

Once more she sat up. "You must be mad," she said in a tone that sounded more like a snarl than a human voice. "Are you such a fool as to believe that I will be put off with two hundred and fifty pounds a year, I, *your legal wife*? I'll

have you in the dock first, in the dock for bigamy."

"Yes," he answered, "I do believe it, for a reason that I shall give you presently. But first I want to go through our joint history, very briefly, just to justify myself if you like. Five and twenty years ago, or was it six and twenty, I was a boy of eighteen and you were a woman of twenty, a housemaid in my mother's house, and you made love to me. Then my mother was called away to nurse my brother who died at school at Portsmouth, and I fell sick with scarlet fever and you nursed me through it—it would have been kinder if you had poisoned me, and in my weak state you got a great hold over my mind, and I became attached to you, for you were handsome in those days. Then you dared me to marry you, and partly out of bravado, partly from affection, I took out a licence, to do which I made a false declaration that I was over age, and gave

false names of the parishes in which we resided. Next day, half tipsy and not knowing what I did, I went through the form of marriage with you, and a few days afterwards my mother returned, observed that we were intimate, and dismissed you. You went without a word as to our marriage, which we both looked on as a farce, and for years I lost sight of you. Fifteen years afterwards, when I had almost forgotten this adventure of my youth, I became acquainted with a young lady with whom I fell in love, and whose fortune, though not large, was enough to help me considerably in my profession as a country lawyer, in which I was doing well. I thought that you were dead, or that if you lived, the fact of my having made the false declaration of age and locality would be enough to invalidate the marriage, as would certainly have been the case if I had also made a false declaration of names; and my impulses and interests prompting

me to take the risk, I married that lady. Then it was that you hunted me down, and then for the first time I did what I ought to have done before, and took the best legal opinions as to the validity of the former marriage, which, to my horror, I found was undoubtedly a binding one. You also took opinions and came to the same conclusion. Since then the history has been a simple one. Out of my wife's fortune of ten thousand pounds, I paid you no less than seven thousand as hush money, on your undertaking to leave this country for America, and never return here again. I should have done better to face it out, but I feared to lose my position and practice. You left and wrote to me that you too had married in Chicago, but in eighteen months you returned, having squandered every farthing of the money, when I found that the story of your marriage was an impudent lie."

"Yes," she put in with a laugh, "and a

rare time I had with that seven thousand, too."

"You returned and demanded more blackmail, and I had no choice but to give, and give, and give. In eleven years you had something over twenty-three thousand pounds from me, and you continually demand more. I believe you will admit that this is a truthful statement of the case," and he paused.

"Oh yes," she said, "I am not going to dispute that, but what then? I am your wife, and you have committed bigamy; and if you don't go on paying me I'll have you in gaol, and that's all about it, old boy. You can't get out of it any way, you nasty mean brute," she went on, raising her voice and drawing up her thin lips so as to show the white teeth beneath. "So you thought that you were going to play it down low on me in that fashion, did you? Well, you've just made a little mistake for once in your life, and I'll tell you what it

is, you shall smart for it. I'll teach you what it is to leave your lawful wife to starve while you go and live with another woman in luxury. You can't help yourself; I can ruin you if I like. Supposing I go to a magistrate and ask for a warrant? What can you do to keep me quiet?"

Suddenly the virago stopped as though she were shot, and her fierce countenance froze into an appearance of terror, as well it might. Mr. Quest, who had been sitting listening to her with his hand over his eyes, had risen, and his face was as the face of a fiend, alight with an intense and quiet fury which seemed to be burning inwardly. On the mantelpiece lay a sharp-pointed Goorka knife, which one of Mrs. d'Aubigné's travelled admirers had presented to her. It was an awful-looking weapon, and keen-edged as a razor. This he had taken up and held in his right hand, and with it he was advancing towards her as she lounged on the sofa.

“If you make a sound I will kill you at once,” he said, speaking in a low and husky voice.

She had been paralysed with terror, for like most bullies, male and female, she was a great coward, but the sound of his voice roused her. The first note of a harsh screech had already issued from her lips, when he sprang upon her, and, placing the sharp point of the knife against her throat, pricked her with it. “Be quiet,” he said, “or you are a dead woman.”

She stopped screaming and lay there, her face twitching, and her eyes bright with terror.

“Now, listen,” he said, in the same husky voice. “You incarnate fiend, you asked me just now how I could keep you quiet. I will tell you; I can keep you quiet by running this knife up to the hilt in your throat,” and once more he pricked her with its point. “It would be murder,” he went on, “but I do not care for that. You and

others between you have not made my life so pleasant for me that I am especially anxious to preserve it. Now, listen. I will give you the two hundred and fifty pounds that I have brought, and you shall have the two hundred and fifty a year. But if you ever again attempt to extort more, or if you molest me, either by spreading stories against my character or by means of legal prosecution, or in any other way, I swear by the Almighty that I will murder you. I may have to kill myself afterwards—I don't care if I do, provided I kill you first. Do you understand me? you tiger, as you call yourself. If I have to hunt you down as they do tigers, I will come up with you at last and *kill* you. You have driven me to it, and, by Heaven! I will! Come, speak up, and tell me that you understand, or I may change my mind and do it now," and once more he touched her with the knife.

She rolled off the sofa on to the floor

and lay there, writhing in abject terror, looking in the shadow of the table, where her long lithe form was twisting about in its robe of yellow barred with black, more like one of the great cats from which she took her name than a human being. "Spare me," she gasped, "spare me, I don't want to die. I swear that I will never meddle with you again."

"I don't want your oaths, woman," answered the stern form bending over her with the knife. "A liar you have been from your youth up, and a liar you will be to the end. Do you understand what I have said?"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Ah! put away that knife, I can't bear it! It makes me sick."

"Very well then, get up."

She tried to rise, but her knees would not support her, so she sat upon the floor.

"Now," said Mr. Quest, replacing the knife upon the mantelpiece, "here is your

money," and he flung a bag of notes and gold into her lap, at which she clutched eagerly and almost automatically. "The two hundred and fifty pounds will be paid on the 1st of January in each year, and not one farthing more will you get from me. Remember what I tell you, try to molest me by word or act, and you are a dead woman; I forbid you even to write to me. Now go to the devil in your own way," and without another word he took up his hat and umbrella, walked to the door, unlocked it and went, leaving the Tiger huddled together upon the floor.

For half-an-hour or more the woman remained thus, the bag of money in her hand. Then she struggled to her feet, her face livid and her body shaking.

"Ugh," she said, "I'm as weak as a cat. I thought he meant to do it that time, and he will too, for sixpence. He's got me there. I am afraid to die. I can't bear to die. It is better to lose the

money than to die. Besides, if I blow on him he'll be put in chokey and I shan't be able to get anything out of him, and when he comes out he'll do for me." And then, losing her temper, she shook her fist in the air and broke out into a flood of language such as would neither be pretty to hear nor good to repeat.

Mr. Quest was a man of judgment. At last he had realised that in one way, and one only, can a wild beast be tamed, and that is by terror.



CHAPTER IV.

“WHAT SOME HAVE FOUND SO SWEET.”

TIME went on. Mr. Quest had been back at Boisingham for ten days or more, and was more cheerful than Belle (we can no longer call her his wife) had seen him for many a day. Indeed he felt as though ten years had been lifted off his back. He had taken a great and terrible decision and had acted upon it, and it had been successful, for he knew that his evil genius was so thoroughly terrified that for a long while at least he would be free from her persecutions. But with Belle his relations remained as strained as ever.

Now that the reader is in the secret of Mr. Quest's life, it will perhaps help him to understand the apparent strangeness of his conduct with reference to his wife and

Edward Cossey. It is quite true that Belle did not know the full extent of her husband's guilt. She did not know that he was not her husband, but she did know that nearly all of her little fortune had been paid over to another woman, and that woman a common, vulgar woman, as one of Edith's letters which had fallen into her hands by chance very clearly showed her. Therefore, had he attempted to expose her proceedings or even to control her actions, she had in her hand an effective weapon of defence wherewith she could and would have given blow for blow. This state of affairs of necessity forced each party to preserve an armed neutrality towards the other, whilst they waited for a suitable opportunity to assert themselves. Not that their objects were quite the same. Belle merely wished to be free from her husband, whom she had always disliked, and whom she now positively hated with that curious hatred which women occasion-

ally conceive toward those to whom they are legally bound, when they have been bad enough or unfortunate enough to fall in love with somebody else. He, on the contrary, had that desire for revenge upon her which even the gentler stamp of man is apt to conceive towards one who, herself the object of his strong affection, daily and hourly repels and repays it with scorn and infidelity. He did love her truly; she was the one living thing in all his bitter lonely life to whom his heart had gone out. True, he put pressure on her to marry him, or what comes to the same thing, allowed and encouraged her drunken old father to do so. But he had loved her and still loved her, and yet she mocked at him, and in the face of that fact about the money—her money, which he had paid away to the other woman, a fact which it was impossible for him to explain except by the admission of guilt which would be his ruin, what was he to urge to convince her of this, even

had she been open to conviction? But it was bitter to him, bitter beyond all conception, to have this, the one joy of his life, snatched from him. He threw himself with ardour into the pursuit after wealth and dignity of position, partly because he had a legitimate desire for these things, and partly to assuage the constant irritation of his mind, but to no purpose. These two spectres of his existence, his tiger wife and the fair woman who was his wife in name, constantly marched side by side before him, blotting out the beauty from every scene and souring the sweetness of every joy. But if in his pain he thirsted for revenge upon Belle, who would have none of him, how much more did he desire to be avenged upon Edward Cossey, who, as it were, had in sheer wantonness robbed him of the one good thing he had? It made him mad to think that this man, to whom he knew himself to be in every way superior, should have had the power thus

to injure him, and he longed to pay him back measure for measure, and through *his* heart's affections to strike him as mortal a blow as he had himself received.

Mr. Quest was no doubt a bad man; his whole life was a fraud, he was selfish and unscrupulous in his schemes and relentless in their execution, but whatever may have been the measure of his iniquities, he was not doomed to wait for another world to have them meted out to him again. His life, indeed, was full of miseries, the more keenly felt because of the high pitch and capacity of his nature, and perhaps the sharpest of them all was the sickening knowledge that had it not been for that one fatal error of his boyhood, that one false step down the steep of Avernus, he might have been a good and even a great man.

Just now, however, his load was a little lightened, and he was able to devote himself to his money-making and to the weaving of the web that was to destroy

his rival, Edward Cossey, with a mind a little less preoccupied with other cares.

Meanwhile, things at the Castle were going very pleasantly for everybody. The Squire was as happy in attending to the various details connected with the transfer of the mortgages as though he had been lending thirty thousand pounds instead of borrowing them. The great George was happy in the unaccustomed flow of cash, that enabled him to treat Janter with a lofty scorn not unmingled with pity, which was as balm to his harassed soul, and also to transact an enormous amount of business in his own peculiar way with men up trees and otherwise. For had he not to stock the Moat Farm, and was not Michaelmas at hand?

Ida, too, was happy, happier than she had been since her brother's death, for reasons that have already been hinted at. Besides, Mr. Edward Cossey was out of

the way, and that to Ida was a very great thing, for his presence to her was what a policeman is to a ticket-of-leave man—a most unpleasant and suggestive sight. She fully realised the meaning and extent of the bargain into which she had entered to save her father and her house, and there lay upon her the deep shadow of evil that was to come. Every time she saw her father bustling about with his business letters and his parchments, every time the universal George arrived with an air of melancholy satisfaction and a long list of the farming stock and implements he had bought at some neighbouring Michaelmas sale, the shadow deepened, and she heard the clanking of her chains. Therefore she was the more thankful for her respite.

Harold Quaritch was happy too, though in a somewhat restless and peculiar way. Mrs. Jobson (the old lady who attended to his wants at Molehill, with the help of a gardener and a simple village maid, her

niece, who smashed all the crockery and nearly drove the Colonel mad by banging the doors, shifting his papers and even dusting his trays of Roman coins) actually confided to some friends in the village that she thought the poor dear gentleman was going mad. When questioned on what she based this belief, she replied that he would walk up and down the oak-panelled dining-room by the hour together, that then, when he got tired of that exercise, whereby, said Mrs. Jobson, he had already worn a groove in the new Turkey carpet, he would take out a "rokey" (foggy) looking bit of a picture, set it upon a chair and stare at it through his fingers, shaking his head and muttering all the while. Then—further and conclusive proof of a yielding intellect, he would get a half-sheet of paper with some writing on it and put it on the mantelpiece and stare at that. Next he would turn it upside down and stare at it so, then sideways, then all

ways, then he would hold it before a looking-glass and stare at the looking-glass, and so on. When asked how she knew all this, she confessed that her niece Jane had seen it through the key-hole, not once but often.

Of course, as the practised and discerning reader will clearly understand, this meant only that when walking and wearing out the carpet the Colonel was thinking of *Ida*. When contemplating the painting that she had given him, he was admiring her work and trying to reconcile the admiration with his conscience and his somewhat peculiar views of art. And when glaring at the paper, he was vainly endeavouring to make head or tail of the message written to his son on the night before his execution by Sir James de la Molle in the reign of Charles I., confidently believed by *Ida* to contain a key to the whereabouts of the treasure he was supposed to have secreted.

Of course the tale of this worthy soul,

Mrs. Jobson, did not lose in the telling, and when it reached Ida's ears, which it did at last through the medium of George, for in addition to his numberless other functions, George was the sole authorised purveyor of village and county news, it read that Colonel Quaritch had gone raving mad.

Ten minutes afterwards this raving lunatic arrived at the Castle in dress clothes and his right mind, whereon Ida promptly repeated her thrilling history, somewhat to the subsequent discomfort of Mrs. Jobson and Jane.

No one, as somebody once said with equal truth and profundity, knows what a minute may bring forth, much less, therefore, does anybody know what an evening of say two hundred and forty minutes may produce. For instance, Harold Quaritch—though by this time he had gone so far as to freely admit to himself that he was utterly and hopelessly

in love with Ida, in love with her with that settled and determined passion which sometimes strikes a man or woman in middle age—certainly did not know that before the evening was out he would have declared his devotion with results that shall be made clear in their decent order. When he put on his dress clothes to come up to dinner, he had no more intention of proposing to Ida than he had of not taking them off when he went to bed. His love was deep enough and steady enough, but perhaps it did not possess that wild impetuosity which carries people so far in their youth, sometimes indeed a great deal further than their reason approves. It was essentially a middle-aged devotion, and bore the same resemblance to the picturesque passion of five and twenty that a snow-fed torrent does to a navigable river. The one rushes and roars and sweeps away the bridges and devastates happy homes,

while the other bears upon its placid breast the argosies of peace and plenty and is generally serviceable to the necessities of man. Still, there is something attractive about torrents. There is a grandeur in that first rush of passion which results from the sudden melting of the snows of the heart's purity and faith and high unstained devotion.

But both torrents and navigable rivers are liable to a common fate, they may fall over precipices, and when this comes to pass even the latter cease to be navigable for a space. Now this catastrophe was about to overtake our friend the Colonel.

To begin with, he had dined well, and whatever ardent twenty-three may think of so gross and material a fact, it is certainly true that if a man is in love before dinner, he is five and twenty per cent. more in love after it.

Well, Harold Quaritch had dined, and had enjoyed a pleasant as well as a good

dinner. The Squire, who of late had been cheerful as a cricket, was in his best form, and told long stories with an infinitesimal point. In anybody else's mouth these stories would have been wearisome to a degree, but there was a gusto, an originality, and a kind of Tudor period flavour about the old gentleman, which made his worst and longest story acceptable in any society. The Colonel himself had also come out in a most unusual way. He possessed a fund of dry humour which he rarely produced, but when he did produce it, it was of a most satisfactory order. On this particular night it was all on view, greatly to the satisfaction of Ida, who was a witty as well as a clever woman. And so it came to pass that the dinner was a very pleasant one.

Harold and the Squire were still sitting over their wine. The latter was for the fifth time giving his guest a full and particular account of how his deceased aunt,

Mrs. Massey, had been persuaded by a learned antiquarian to convert or rather to restore Dead Man's Mount into its supposed primitive condition of an ancient British dwelling, and of the extraordinary expression of her face when the bill came in, when suddenly the servant announced that George was waiting to see him.

The old gentleman grumbled a great deal, but finally got up and went to enjoy himself for the next hour or so in talking about things in general with his retainer, leaving his guest to find his way to the drawing-room.

When the Colonel reached the room, he found Ida seated at the piano, singing. She heard him shut the door, looked round, nodded prettily, and then went on with her singing. He came and sat down on a low chair some two paces from her, placing himself in such a position that he could see her face, which indeed he always found a wonderfully pleasant object of con-

templation. Ida was playing without music—the only light in the room was that of a low lamp with a red fringe to it. Therefore, he could not see very much, being with difficulty able to trace the outlines of her features, but if the shadow thus robbed him, it on the other hand lent her a beauty of its own, clothing her face with an atmosphere of wonderful softness which it did not always possess in the glare of day. The Colonel indeed (we must remember that he was in love and that it was after dinner) became quite poetical (internally of course) about it, and in his heart compared her first to St. Cecilia at her organ, and then to the Angel of the Twilight. He had never seen her look so lovely. At her worst she was a handsome and noble-looking woman, but now the shadow from without, and though he knew nothing of that, the shadow from her heart within also, aided maybe by the music's swell, had softened and purified her face

till it did indeed look almost like an angel's. It is strong, powerful faces that are capable of the most tenderness, not the soft and pretty ones, and even in a plain person, when such a face is in this way seen, it gathers a peculiar beauty of its own. But Ida was not a plain person, so on the whole it is scarcely wonderful that a certain effect was produced upon Harold Quaritch. Ida went on singing almost without a break, to outward appearance at any rate, all unconscious of what was passing in her admirer's mind. She had a good memory and a sweet voice, and really liked music for its own sake, so it was no great effort to her to do so.

Presently, she sang a song from Tennyson's "Maud," the tender and beautiful words whereof will be familiar to most readers of her story. It began :

O let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet.

The song is a lovely one, nor did it suffer from her rendering, and the effect it produced upon Harold was of a most peculiar nature. All his past life seemed to heave and break beneath the magic of the music and the magic of the singer, as a northern field of ice breaks up beneath the outburst of the summer sun. It broke, sank, and vanished into the depths of his nature, those dread unmeasured depths that roll and murmur in the vastness of each human heart as the sea rolls beneath its cloak of ice; that roll and murmur here, and set towards a shore of which we have no chart or knowledge. The past was gone, the frozen years had melted, and once more the sweet strong air of youth blew across his heart, and once more there was clear sky above, wherein the angels sailed. Before the breath of that sweet song the barrier of self fell down, his being went out to meet her being, and all the sleeping possibilities of life rose from the buried time.

He sat and listened, trembling as he listened, till the gentle echoes of the music died upon the quiet air. They died, and were gathered into the emptiness which receives and records all things, leaving him broken.

She turned to him, smiling faintly, for the song had moved her also, and he felt that he must speak.

“That is a beautiful song,” he said; “sing it again, if you do not mind.”

She made no answer, but once more she sang :

O let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet ;

and then suddenly broke off.

“Why are you looking at me?” she said. “I can feel you looking at me and it makes me nervous.”

He bent towards her and looked her in the eyes.

“I love you, Ida,” he said, “I love you

with all my heart," and he stopped suddenly.

She turned quite pale, even in that light he could see her pallor, and her hands fell heavily on the keys.

The echo of the crashing notes rolled round the room and slowly died away—but still she said nothing.



CHAPTER V.

IN PAWN.

AT last she spoke, apparently with a great effort.

“It is stifling in here,” she said, “let us go out.” She rose, took up a shawl that lay beside her on a chair, and stepped through the French window into the garden. It was a lovely autumn night, and the air was still as death, with just a touch of frost in it.

Ida threw the shawl over her shoulders and followed by Harold walked on through the garden till she came to the edge of the moat, where there was a seat. Here she sat down and fixed her eyes upon the hoary battlements of the gateway, now clad in a solemn robe of moonlight.

Harold looked at her and felt that if he had anything to say the time had come for him to say it, and that she had brought him here in order that she might be able to listen undisturbed. So he began again, and told her that he loved her dearly.

“I am some seventeen years older than you,” he went on, “and I suppose that the most active part of my life lies in the past ; and I don’t know if, putting other things aside, you would care to marry so old a man, especially as I am not rich. Indeed, I feel it presumptuous on my part, seeing what you are and what I am, to ask you to do so. And yet, Ida, I believe if you could care for me that, with Heaven’s blessing, we should be very happy together. I have led a lonely life, and have had little to do with women—once, many years ago, I was engaged, and the matter ended painfully, and that is all. But ever since I first saw your face in the drift five years and more ago, it has haunted me

and been with me. Then I came to live here and I have learnt to love you, Heaven only knows how much, and I should be ashamed to try to put it into words, for they would sound foolish. All my life is wrapped up in you, and I feel as though, should you see me no more, I could never be a happy man again," and he paused and looked anxiously at her face, which was set and drawn as though with pain.

"I cannot say 'yes,' Colonel Quaritch," she answered at length, in a tone that puzzled him, it was so tender and so unfitted to the words.

"I suppose," he stammered, "I suppose that you do not care for me? Of course, I have no right to expect that you would."

"As I have said that I cannot say 'yes,' Colonel Quaritch, do you not think that I had better leave that question unanswered?" she replied in the same soft notes which seemed to draw the heart out of him.

“I do not understand,” he went on.
“Why?”

“Why?” she broke in with a bitter little laugh, “shall I tell you why? Because I am *in pawn!* Look,” she went on, pointing to the stately towers and the broad lands beyond. “You see this place. *I* am security for it, *I myself* in my own person. Had it not been for me it would have been sold over our heads after having descended in our family for all these centuries, put upon the market and sold for what it would fetch, and my old father would have been turned out to die, for it would have killed him. So you see I did what unfortunate women have often been driven to do, I sold myself body and soul; and I got a good price too—thirty thousand pounds!” and suddenly she burst into a flood of tears and began to sob as though her heart would break.

For a moment Harold Quaritch looked on

bewildered, not in the least understanding what Ida meant, and then he followed the impulse common to mankind in similar circumstances and took her in his arms. She did not resent the movement, indeed she scarcely seemed to notice it, though to tell the truth, for a moment or two, which to the Colonel seemed the happiest of his life, her head rested on his shoulder.

Almost instantly, however, she raised it, freed herself from his embrace and ceased weeping.

“As I have told you so much,” she said, “I suppose that I had better tell you everything. I know that whatever the temptation,” and she laid great stress upon the words, “under any conceivable circumstances—indeed, even if you believed that you were serving me in so doing—I can rely upon you never to reveal to anybody, and above all to my father, what I now tell you,” and she paused and looked up at him with eyes in which the tears still swam.

“Of course, you can rely upon me,” he said.

“Very well. I am sure that I shall never have to reproach you with the words. I will tell you. I have virtually promised to marry Mr. Edward Cossey, should he at any time be in a position to claim fulfilment of the promise, on condition of his taking up the mortgages on Honham, which he has done.”

Harold Quaritch took a step back and looked at her in horrified astonishment.

“*What?*” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” she answered hastily, putting up her hand as though to shield herself from a blow. “I know what you mean; but do not think too hardly of me if you can help it. It was not for myself. I would rather work for my living with my hands than take a price, for there is no other word for it. It was for my father, and my family too. I could not bear to think of the old place going to the hammer,

and I did it all in a minute without consideration; but," and she set her face, "even as things are, I believe I should do it again, because I think that no one woman has a right to destroy her family in order to please herself. If one of the two must go, let it be the woman. But don't think hardly of me for it," she added almost pleadingly, "that is if you can help it."

"I am not thinking of you," he answered grimly; "by heaven I honour you for what you have done, for however much I may disagree with the act, it is a noble one. I am thinking of the man who could drive such a bargain with any woman. You say that you have promised to marry him should he ever be in a position to claim it. What do you mean by that? As you have told me so much you may as well tell me the rest."

He spoke clearly and with a voice full of authority, but his bearing did not seem to jar upon Ida.

“I meant,” she answered humbly, “that I believe—of course I do not know if I am right—I believe that Mr. Cossey is in some way entangled with a lady, in short with Mrs. Quest, and that the question of whether or no he comes forward again depends upon her.”

“Upon my word,” said the Colonel, “upon my word the thing gets worse and worse. I never heard anything like it; and for money too! The thing is beyond me.”

“At any rate,” she answered, “there it is. And now, Colonel Quaritch, one word before I go in. It is difficult for me to speak without saying too much or too little, but I do want you to understand how honoured and how grateful I feel for what you have told me to-night—I am so little worthy of all you have given me, and to be honest, I cannot feel as pained about it as I ought to feel. It is feminine vanity, you know, nothing else. I am sure that you will not press me to say more.”

“No,” he answered, “no. I think that I understand the position. But, Ida, there is one thing that I must ask—you will forgive me if I am wrong in doing so, but all this is very sad for me. If in the end circumstances should alter, as I pray heaven that they may, or if Mr. Cossey’s previous entanglement should prove too much for him, will you marry me, Ida?”

She thought for a moment, and then rising from the seat, gave him her hand and said simply:

“Yes, I *will* marry you.”

He made no answer, but lifting her hand touched it gently with his lips.

“Meanwhile,” she went on, “I have your promise, and I am sure that you will not betray it, come what may.”

“No,” he said, “I will not betray it.”

And they went in.

In the drawing-room they found the Squire puzzling over a sheet of paper, on which were scrawled some of George’s

accounts, in figures which at first sight bore about as much resemblance to Egyptian hieroglyphics as they did to those in use to-day.

“Hullo!” he said, “there you are. Where on earth have you been?”

“We have been looking at the Castle in the moonlight,” answered Ida coolly. “It is beautiful.”

“Um—ah,” said the Squire dryly, “I have no doubt that it is beautiful, but isn’t the grass rather damp? Well, look here,” and he held up the sheet of hieroglyphics, “perhaps you can add this up, Ida, for it is more than I can. George has bought stock and all sorts of things at the sale to-day and here is his account; three hundred and seventy-two pounds he makes it, but I make it four hundred and twenty, and hang me if I can find out which is right. It is most important that these accounts should be kept straight. Most important, and I cannot get this stupid fellow to do it.”

Ida took the sheet of paper and added it up, with the result that she discovered both totals to be wrong. Harold, watching her, wondered at the nerve of a woman who, after going through such a scene as that which had just occurred, could deliberately add up long rows of badly-written figures.

And this money which her father was expending so cheerfully was part of the price for which she had bound herself.

With a sigh he rose, said good-night, and went home with feelings almost too mixed to admit of accurate description. He had taken a great step in his life, and to a certain extent that step had succeeded. He had not altogether built his hopes upon sand, for from what Ida had said, and still more from what she had tacitly admitted, it was necessarily clear to him that she did more or less regard him as a man would wish to be regarded by a woman whom he dearly loved. This

was a great deal, more indeed than he had dared to believe, but then, as is usually the case in this imperfect world, where things but too often seem to be carefully arranged at sixes and sevens, came the other side of the shield. Of what use to him was it to have won this sweet woman's love, of what use to have put this pure water of happiness to his lips in the desert of his lonely life, only to see the cup that held it shattered at a blow? To him the story of the money loan—in consideration of which, as it were, Ida had put herself in pawn, as the Egyptians used to put the mummies of their fathers in pawn—was almost incredible. To a person of his simple and honourable nature, it seemed a preposterous and unheard of thing that any man calling himself a gentleman should find it possible to sink so low as to take such advantage of a woman's dire necessity and honourable desire to save her father from misery and her race from ruin, and

to extract from her a promise of marriage in consideration of value received. Putting aside his overwhelming personal interest in the matter, it made his blood boil to think that such a thing could be. And yet it was, and what was more, he believed he knew Ida well enough to be convinced that she would not shirk the bargain. If Edward Cossey came forward to claim his bond it would be paid down to the last farthing. It was a question of thirty thousand pounds; the happiness of his life and of Ida's depended upon a sum of money. If the money were forthcoming, Cossey could not claim his flesh and blood. But where was it to come from? He himself was worth perhaps ten thousand pounds, or with the commutation value of his pension, possibly twelve, and he had not the means of raising a farthing more. He thought the position over till he was tired of thinking, and then with a heavy heart and yet with a strange glow of happiness

shining through his grief, like sunlight through a grey sky, at last he went to sleep and dreamed that Ida had gone from him, and that he was once more utterly alone in the world.

But if he had cause for trouble, how much more was it so with Ida? Poor woman! under her somewhat cold and stately exterior lay a deep and at times a passionate nature. For some weeks she had been growing strangely attached to Harold Quaritch, and now she knew that she loved him, so that there was no one thing that she desired more in this wide world than to become his wife. And yet she was bound, bound by a sense of honour and a sense too of money received, to stay at the beck and call of a man she detested, and if at any time it pleased him to throw down the handkerchief, to be there to pick it up and hold it to her breast. It was bad enough to have had this hanging over her head when she was

herself more or less in a passive condition, and therefore to a certain extent reckless as to her future; but now that her heart was alight with the holy flame of a good woman's love, now that her whole nature rebelled and cried out aloud against the sacrilege involved, it was both revolting and terrible.

And yet so far as she could see there was no great probability of escape. A shrewd and observant woman, she could gauge Mr. Cossey's condition of mind towards herself with more or less accuracy. Also she did not think it in the least likely that having spent thirty thousand pounds to advance his object, he would be content to let his advantage drop. Such a course would be repellent to his trading instincts. She knew in her heart that the hour was not far off when he would claim his own, and that unless some accident occurred to prevent it, it was practically certain that she would be called upon to

fulfil her pledge, and whilst loving another man to become the wife of Edward Cossey.



CHAPTER VI.

“GOOD-BYE TO YOU, EDWARD.”

IT was on the day following the one upon which Harold proposed to Ida, that Edward Cossey returned to Boisingham. His father had so far recovered from his attack as to be at last prevailed upon to allow his departure, being chiefly moved thereto by the supposition that Cossey and Son's branch establishments were suffering from his son's absence.

“Well,” he said, in his high, piercing voice, “business is business, and must be attended to, so perhaps you had better go. They talk about the fleeting character of things, but there is one thing that never changes, and that is money. Money is immortal; men may come and men may go, but money goes on for ever. Hee!

hee! money is the honey-pot, and men are the flies; and some get their fill and some stick their wings, but the honey is always there, so never mind the flies. No, never mind me either; you go and look after the honey, Edward. Money—honey, honey—money, they rhyme, don't they? And look here, by the way, if you get a chance—and the world is full of chances to men who have plenty of money—mind you don't forget to pay out that half-pay Colonel—what's his name?—Quaritch. He played our family a dirty trick, and there's your poor Aunt Julia in a lunatic asylum to this moment and a constant source of expense to us."

And so Edward bade his estimable parent farewell and departed. Nor in truth did he require any admonition from Mr. Cossey, Senior, to make him anxious to do Colonel Quaritch an ill-turn if the opportunity should serve. Mrs. Quest, in her numerous affectionate letters, had more than once, possibly

for reasons of her own, given him a full and vivid *résumé* of the local gossip about the Colonel and Ida, who were, she said, according to common report, engaged to be married. Now, absence had not by any means cooled Edward's devotion to Miss de la Molle, which was a sincere one enough in its own way. On the contrary, the longer he was away from her the more his passion grew, and with it a vigorous undergrowth of jealousy. He had, it is true, Ida's implied promise that she would marry him if he chose to ask her, but on this he put no great reliance. Hence his hurry to return to Boisingham.

Leaving London by an afternoon train, he reached Boisingham about half-past six, and in pursuance of an arrangement already made, went to dine with the Quests. When he reached the house he found Belle alone in the drawing-room, for her husband, having come in late, was still dressing, but somewhat to his relief he had no oppor-

tunity of private conversation with her, for a servant was in the room, attending to the fire which would not burn. The dinner passed off quietly enough, though there was an ominous look about the lady's face which, being familiar with these signs of the feminine weather, he did not altogether like. After dinner, however, Mr. Quest excused himself, saying that he had promised to attend a local concert in aid of the funds for the restoration of the damaged pinnacle of the parish church, and he was left alone with the lady.

Then it was that all her pent-up passion broke out. She overwhelmed him with her affection, she told him that her life had been a blank while he was away, she reproached him with the scarcity and coldness of his letters, and generally went on in a way with which he was but too well accustomed, and, if the truth must be told, heartily tired. His mood was an irritable one, and to-night the whole thing wearied him beyond bearing.

“Come, Belle,” he said at last, “for goodness’ sake be a little more rational. You are getting too old for this sort of tom-foolery, you know.”

She sprang up and faced him, her eyes flashing and her breast heaving with jealous anger. “What do you mean?” she said. “Are you tired of me?”

“I did not say that,” he answered, “but as you have started the subject I must tell you that I think all this has gone far enough. Unless it is stopped I believe we shall both be ruined. I am sure that your husband is becoming suspicious, and as I have told you again and again, if once the business gets to my father’s ears he will disinherit me.”

Belle stood quite still till he had finished. She had assumed her favourite attitude and crossed her arms behind her back, and her sweet childish face was calm and very white.

“What is the good of making excuses and telling me what is not true, Edward?” she said. “One never hears a man who

loves a woman talk like that ; prudence comes with weariness, and men grow circumspect when there is nothing more to gain. You *are* tired of me. I have seen it a long time, but like a blind fool I have tried not to believe it. It is not a great reward to a woman who has given her whole life to a man, but perhaps it is as much as she can expect, for I do not want to be unjust to you. I am the most to blame, because we need never take a false step except of our own free will.”

“Well, well,” he said impatiently, “what of it?”

“Only this, Edward. I have still a little pride left, and as you are tired of me, why—*go*.”

He tried hard to prevent it, but do what he would, a look of relief struggled into his face. She saw it, and it stung her almost to madness.

“You need not look so happy, Edward ; it is scarcely decent ; and, besides, you

have not heard all that I have to say. I know what this arises from. You are in love with Ida de la Molle. Now *there* I draw the line. You may leave me if you like, but you shall not marry Ida while I am alive to prevent it. That is more than I can bear. Besides, like a wise woman, she wishes to marry Colonel Quaritch, who is worth two of you, Edward Cossey."

"I do not believe it," he answered; "and what right have you to say that I am in love with Miss de la Molle? And if I am in love with her, how can you prevent me from marrying her if I choose?"

"Try, and you will see," she answered, with a little laugh. "And now, as the curtain has dropped, and it is all over between us, why the best thing that we can do is to put out the lights and go to bed," and she laughed again and courtesied with much assumed playfulness. "Good-

night, Mr. Cossey; good-night, and good-bye."

He held out his hand. "Come, Belle," he said, "don't let us part like this."

She shook her head, and once more put her arms behind her. "No," she answered, "I will not take your hand. Of my own free will I shall never touch it again, for to me it is like the hand of the dead. Good-bye, once more; good-bye to you, Edward, and to all the happiness that I ever had. I built up my life upon my love for you, and you have shattered it like glass. I do not reproach you; you have followed after your nature and I must follow after mine, and in time all things will come right—in the grave. I shall not trouble you any more, provided that you do not try to marry Ida, for that I will not bear. And now go, for I am very tired," and turning, she rang the bell for the servant to show him out.

In another minute he was gone. She

listened till she heard the front door close behind him, and then gave way to her grief. Flinging herself upon the sofa, she covered her face with her hands and moaned bitterly, weeping for the past, and weeping, too, for the long desolate years that were to come. Poor woman! whatever was the measure of her sin it had assuredly found her out, as our sins always do find us out in the end. She had loved this man with a love which has no parallel in the hearts of well-ordered and well-brought-up women. She never really lived till this fatal passion took possession of her, and now that its object had deserted her, her heart felt as though it was dead within her. In that short half-hour she suffered more than many women do in their whole lives. But the paroxysm passed, and she rose pale and trembling, with set teeth and blazing eyes.

“He had better be careful,” she said

to herself; “he may go, but if he tries to marry Ida I will keep my word—yes, for her sake as well as his.”

When Edward Cossey came to consider the position, which he did seriously, on the following morning, he did not find it very satisfactory. To begin with, he was not altogether a heartless man, and such a scene as that which he had passed through on the previous evening was in itself quite enough to upset his nerves. At one time, at any rate, he had been much attached to Mrs. Quest; he had never borne her any violent affection; that had all been on her side, but still he had been fond of her, and if he could have done so, would probably have married her. Even now he was attached to her, and would have been glad to remain her friend if she would have allowed it. But then came the time when her heroics began to weary him, and he on his side began to fall in love with Ida de la

Molle, and as he drew back so she came forward, till at length he was worn out, and things culminated as has been described. He was sorry for her too, knowing how deeply she was attached to him, though it is probable that he did not in the least realise the extent to which she suffered, for neither men nor women who have intentionally or otherwise been the cause of intense mental anguish to one of the opposite sex ever do quite realise this. They, not unnaturally, measure the trouble by the depth of their own, and are therefore very apt to come to erroneous conclusions. Of course this is said of cases where all the real passion is on one side, and indifference or comparative indifference on the other; for where it is mutual, the grief will in natures of equal depth be mutual also.

At any rate, Edward Cossey was quite sensitive enough to acutely feel parting with Mrs. Quest, and perhaps he felt the

manner of it even more than the fact of the separation. Then came another consideration. He was, it is true, free from his entanglement, in itself an enormous relief, but the freedom was of a conditional nature. Belle had threatened trouble in the most decisive tones should he attempt to carry out his secret purpose of marrying Ida, which she had not been slow to divine. For some occult reason, at least to him it seemed occult, the idea of this alliance was peculiarly distasteful to her, though no doubt the true explanation was that she believed, and not inaccurately, that in order to bring it about he was bent upon deserting her. The question with him was, would she or would she not attempt to put her threat into execution? It certainly seemed to him difficult to imagine what steps she could take to that end, seeing that any such steps would necessarily involve her own exposure, and that too when there was nothing to gain, and when all hopes of thereby securing

him for herself had passed away. Nor did he seriously believe that she would attempt anything of the sort. It is one thing for a woman to make such threats in the acute agony of her jealousy, and quite another for her to carry them out in cold blood. Looking at the matter from a man's point of view, it seemed to him extremely improbable that when the occasion came she would attempt such a move. He forgot how much more violently, when once it has taken possession of her being, the storm of passion sweeps through such a woman's heart than through a man's, and how utterly reckless to all consequence the former sometimes becomes. For there are women with whom all things melt in that white heat of anguished jealousy—honour, duty, conscience, and the restraint of religion—and of these Belle Quest was one.

But of this he was not aware, and though he recognised a risk, he saw in it no suffi-

cient reason to make him stay his hand. For day by day the strong desire to make Ida his wife had grown upon him, till at last it possessed him body and soul. For a long while the intent had been smouldering in his breast, and the tale that he now heard, to the effect that Colonel Quaritch had been beforehand with him, had blown it to a flame. Ida was ever present in his thoughts; even at night he could not be rid of her, for when he slept her vision, dark-eyed and beautiful, came stealing down his dreams. She was his heaven, and if by any ladder known to man he might climb thereto, thither he would climb. And so he set his teeth and vowed that, Mrs. Quest or no Mrs. Quest, he would stake his fortune upon the hazard of the die, aye, and win, even if he loaded the dice.

While he was still thinking thus, standing at his window and gazing out on to the market-place of the quiet little town, he suddenly saw Ida herself driving in her

pony-carriage. It was a wet and windy day, the rain was on her cheek, and the wind tossed a little lock of her brown hair. The cob was pulling, and her proud face was set, as she concentrated her energies upon holding him. Never to Edward Cossey had she looked more beautiful. His heart beat fast at the sight of her, and whatever doubts might have lingered in his mind, vanished. Yes, he would claim her promise and marry her.

Presently the pony carriage pulled up at his door, and the boy who was sitting behind got down and rang the bell. He stepped back from the window, wondering what it could be.

“Will you please give that note to Mr. Cossey,” said Ida, as the door opened, “and ask him to send an answer?” and she was gone.

The note was from the Squire, sealed with his big seal (the Squire always sealed his letters in the old-fashioned way), and

contained an invitation to himself to shoot on the morrow. "George wants me to do a little partridge driving," it ended, "and to brush through one or two of the small coverts. There will only be Colonel Quaritch besides yourself and George, but I hope that you will have a fair rough day. If I don't hear from you I shall suppose that you are coming, so don't trouble to write."

"Oh yes, I will go," said Edward. "Confound that Quaritch. At any rate I can show him how to shoot, and what is more, I will have it out with him about my aunt."



CHAPTER VII.

THE COLONEL GOES OUT SHOOTING.

THE next morning was fine and still, one of those lovely autumn days of which we get four or five in the course of a season. After breakfast Harold Quaritch strolled down his garden, stood himself against a gate to the right of Dead Man's Mount, and looked at the scene. All about him, their foliage yellowing to its fall, rose the giant oaks, which were the pride of the country side, and so quiet was the air that not a leaf upon them stirred. The only sounds that reached his ears were the tappings of the nut-hatches as they sought their food in the rough crannies of the bark, and the occasional falling of a rich ripe acorn from its lofty place on to the frosted grass beneath. The sunshine shone bright,

but with a chastened heart, the squirrels scrambled up the oaks, and high in the blue air the rooks pursued their path. It was a beautiful morning, for summer is never more sweet than on its death-bed, and yet it filled him with solemn thoughts. How many autumns had those old trees seen, and how many would they still see, long after his eyes had lost their sight! And if they were old, how old was Dead Man's Mount there to his left! Old, indeed! for he had discovered it was mentioned in Doomsday Book and by that name. And what was it—a boundary hill, a natural formation, or, as its name implied, a funeral barrow? He had half a mind to dig one day and find out, that is if he could get anybody to dig with him, for the people about Honham were so firmly convinced that Dead Man's Mount was haunted, a reputation which it had owned from time immemorial, that nothing would have persuaded them to touch it.

He contemplated the great mound carefully without coming to any conclusion, and then looked at his watch. It was a quarter to ten, time for him to start for the Castle for his day's shooting. So he got his gun and cartridges, and in due course arrived at the Castle, to find George and several myrmidons, in the shape of beaters and boys, already standing in the yard.

"Please, Colonel, the Squire hopes you'll go in and have a glass of summut before you start," said George; so accordingly he went, not to "have a glass of summut," but on the chance of seeing Ida. In the vestibule he found the old gentleman busily engaged in writing an enormous letter.

"Hullo, Colonel," he holloaed, without getting up, "glad to see you. Excuse me for a few moments, will you, I want to get this off my mind. Ida! Ida! Ida!" he shouted, "here's Colonel Quaritch."

"Good gracious, father," said that young lady, arriving in a hurry, "you are bring-

ing the house down," and then she turned round and greeted Harold. It was the first time that they had met since the eventful evening described a chapter or two back, so the occasion might be considered a little awkward; at any rate he felt it so.

"How do you do, Colonel Quaritch?" she said quite simply, giving him her hand. There was nothing in the words, and yet he felt that he was very welcome. For when a woman really loves a man there is about her an atmosphere of softness and tender meaning which can scarcely be mistaken. Sometimes it is only perceptible to the favoured individual himself, but more generally is to be discerned by any person of ordinary shrewdness. A very short course of observation in general society will convince the reader of the justice of this observation, and when once he gets to know the signs of the weather he will probably light upon more affairs of the

heart than were ever meant for his investigation.

This softness, or atmospheric influence, or subdued glow of affection radiating from a light within, was clearly enough visible in Ida that morning, and certainly it made our friend the Colonel unspeakably happy to see it.

“Are you fond of shooting?” she asked presently.

“Yes, very, and have been all my life.”

“Are you a good shot?” she asked again.

“I call that a rude question,” he answered, smiling.

“Yes, it is, but I want to know.”

“Well,” said Harold, “I suppose that I am pretty fair, that is at rough shooting; I have never had much practice at driven birds and that kind of sport.”

“I am glad of it.”

“Why, it does not much matter. One goes out shooting for the sport of the thing.”

“Yes, I know, but Mr. Edward Cossey,” and she shrank visibly as she uttered the name, “is coming, and he is a *very* good shot and *very* conceited about it. I want you to beat him if you can—will you try?”

“Well,” said Harold, “I don’t at all like shooting against a man. It is not sportsmanlike, you know; and, besides, if Mr. Cossey is a crack shot, I daresay that I shall be nowhere; but I will shoot as well as I can.”

“Do you know, it is very feminine, but I would give anything to see you beat him?” and she nodded and laughed, whereupon Harold Quaritch vowed in his heart that if it in him lay he would not disappoint her.

At that moment Edward Cossey’s fast trotting horse drew up at the door with a prodigious crunching of gravel, and Edward himself entered, looking very handsome and rather pale. He was ad-

mirably dressed, that is to say, his shooting clothes were beautifully made and very new-looking, and so were his boots, and so was his hat, and so were his hammerless guns, of which he brought a pair. There exists a certain class of sportsmen who always appear to have just walked out of a sporting tailor's shop, and to this class Edward Cossey belonged. Everything about him was of the best and newest and most expensive kind possible; even his guns were just down from a famous maker, and the best that could be had for love or money, having cost exactly a hundred and forty guineas the pair. Indeed, he presented a curious contrast to his rival. The Colonel had certainly nothing new-looking about *him*; an old tweed coat, an old hat, with a piece of gut still twined round it, a sadly frayed bag full of brown cartridges, and, last of all, an old gun with the brown worn off the barrels, original cost, £17 10s. And yet there

was no possibility of making any mistake as to which of the two looked more of a gentleman, or, indeed, more of a sportsman.

Edward Cossey shook hands with Ida, but when the Colonel was advancing to give him his hand, he turned and spoke to the Squire, who had at length finished his letter, so that no greeting passed between them. At the time Harold did not know if this move was or was not accidental.

Presently they started, Edward Cossey attended by his man with the second gun.

“Hullo! Cossey,” sang out the Squire after him, “it isn’t any use your bringing two guns for this sort of work. I don’t preserve much here, you know, at least not now. You will only get a dozen cock pheasants and a few brace of partridges.”

‘Oh, thank you,’ he answered, “I always

like to have a second gun in case I should want it. It's no trouble, you know."

"All right," said the Squire. "Ida and I will come down with the luncheon to the grove. Good-bye."

After crossing the moat, Edward Cossey walked by himself, followed by his man and a very fine retriever, and the Colonel talked to George, who was informing him that Mr. Cossey was a "pretty shot, he wore, but rather snappy over it," till they came to a field of white turnips.

"Now, gentlemen, if you please," said George, "we will walk through these here turnups. I put two coveys of birds in here myself, and it's rare good 'lay' for them; so I think that we had better see if they will let us come nigh them."

Accordingly they started down the field, the Colonel on the right, George in the middle and Edward Cossey on the left.

Before they had gone ten yards, an old

Frenchman got up in the front of one of the beaters and wheeled round past Edward, who cut him over in first-rate style.

From that one bird the Colonel could see that the man was a quick and clever shot. Presently, however, a leash of English birds rose rather awkwardly at about forty paces straight in front of Edward Cossey, and Harold noticed that he left them alone, never attempting to fire at them. In fact he was one of those shooters who never take a hard shot if they can avoid it, being always in terror lest they should miss it and so reduce their average.

Then George, who was a very fair shot of the "poking" order, fired both barrels and got a bird, and Edward Cossey got another. It was not till they were getting to the end of the last beat that Harold found a chance of letting off his gun. Suddenly, however, a brace of old birds sprang

up out of the turnips in front of him at about thirty yards, as swiftly as though they had been ejected from a mortar, and made off, one to the right and one to the left, both of them rising shots. He got the right-hand bird, and then turning killed the other also, when it was more than fifty yards away.

The Colonel felt satisfied, for the shots were very good. Mr. Cossey opened his eyes and wondered if it was a fluke, and George ejaculated, "Well, that's a master one!"

After this they pursued their course, picking up another two brace of birds on the way to the outlying cover, a wood of about twenty acres through which they were to brush. It was a good holding wood for pheasants, but lay on the outside of the Honham estate, where they were liable to be poached by the farmers whose land marched, so George enjoined them particularly not to let anything go.

Into the details of the sport that followed we need not enter, beyond saying that the Colonel, to his huge delight, never shot better in his life. Indeed, with the exception of one rabbit and a hen pheasant that flopped up right beneath his feet, he scarcely missed anything, though he took the shots as they came. Edward Cossey also shot well, and with one exception missed nothing, but then he never took a difficult shot if he could avoid it. The exception was a woodcock which rose in front of George, who was walking down an outside belt with the beaters. He loosed two barrels at it and missed, and on it came among the tree tops, past where Edward Cossey was standing, about half-way down the belt, giving him a difficult chance with the first barrel and a clear one with the second. Bang! bang! and on came the woodcock, now flying low, but at tremendous speed, straight at the Colonel's head, a most puzzling shot. However, he

fired, and to his joy (and what joy is there like to the joy of a sportsman who has just killed a woodcock which everybody has been popping at?) down it came with a thump almost at his feet.

This was their last beat before lunch, which was now to be seen approaching down a lane in a donkey cart convoyed by Ida and the Squire. The latter was advancing in stages of about ten paces, and at every stage he stopped to utter a most fearful roar by way of warning all and sundry that they were not to shoot in his direction. Edward gave his gun to his bearer and at once walked off to join them, but the Colonel went with George to look after two running cocks which he had down, for he was an old-fashioned sportsman, and hated not picking up his game. After some difficulty they found one of the cocks in the hedgerow, but the other they could not find, so reluctantly they gave up the search. When they got to the lane

they found the luncheon ready, while one of the beaters was laying out the game for the Squire to inspect. There were fourteen pheasants, four brace and a half of partridges, a hare, three rabbits, and a woodcock.

“Hullo,” said the Squire, “who shot the woodcock?”

“Well, sir,” said George, “we all had a pull at him, but the Colonel wiped our eyes.”

“Oh, Mr. Cossey,” said Ida, in affected surprise, “why, I thought you never missed *anything*.”

“Everybody misses sometimes,” answered that gentleman, looking uncommonly sulky. “I shall do better this afternoon when it comes to the driven partridges.”

“I don’t believe you will,” went on Ida, laughing maliciously. “I bet you a pair of gloves that Colonel Quaritch will shoot more driven partridges than you do.”

“Done,” said Edward Cossey sharply.

“Now, do you hear that, Colonel Quaritch?” went on Ida. “I have bet Mr. Cossey a pair of gloves that you will kill more partridges this afternoon than he will, so I hope you won’t make me lose them.”

“Goodness gracious,” said the Colonel, in much alarm. “Why, the last partridge-driving that I had was on the slopes of some mountains in Afghanistan. I dare say that I shan’t hit anything. Besides,” he said with some irritation, “I don’t like being set up to shoot against people.”

“Oh, of course,” said Edward loftily, “if Colonel Quaritch does not like to take it up, there’s an end of it.”

“Well,” said the Colonel, “if you put it in that way I don’t mind trying, but I have only one gun and you have two.”

“Oh, that will be all right,” said Ida to the Colonel. “You shall have George’s

gun; he never tries to shoot when they drive partridges, because he cannot hit them. He goes with the beaters. It is a very good gun."

The Colonel took up the gun and examined it. It was of about the same bend and length as his own, but of a better quality, having once been the property of James de la Molle.

"Yes," he said, "but then I haven't got a loader."

"Never mind. I'll do that, I know all about it. I often used to hold my brother's second gun when we drove partridges, because he said I was so much quicker than the men. Look," and she took the gun and rested one knee on the turf; "first position, second position, third position. We used to have regular drills at it," and she sighed.

The Colonel laughed heartily, for it was a curious thing to see this stately woman handling a gun with all the skill

and quickness of a practised shot. Besides, as the loader idea involved a whole afternoon of Ida's society he certainly was not inclined to negative it. But Edward Cossey did not smile; on the contrary he positively scowled with jealousy, and was about to make some remark when Ida held up her finger.

"Hush," she said, "here comes my father" (the Squire had been counting the game); "he hates bets, so you mustn't say anything about our match."

Luncheon went off pretty well, though Edward Cossey did not contribute much to the general conversation. When it was done the Squire announced that he was going to walk to the other end of the estate, whereon Ida said that she should stop and see something of the shooting, and the fun began.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END OF THE MATCH.

THEY began the afternoon with several small drives, but on the whole the birds did very badly. They broke back, went off to one side or the other, and generally misbehaved themselves. In the first drive the Colonel and Edward Cossey got a bird each. In the second drive the latter got three birds, firing five shots, and his antagonist only got a hare and a pheasant that jumped out of a ditch, neither of which, of course, counted anything. Only one brace of birds came his way at all, but if the truth must be told, he was talking to Ida at the moment and did not see them till too late.

Then came a longer drive, when the birds were pretty plentiful. The Colonel

got one, a low-flying Frenchman, which he killed as he topped the fence, and after that for the life of him he could not touch a feather. Every sportsman knows what a fatal thing it is to begin to miss and then get nervous, and that was what happened to the Colonel. Continually there came distant cries of "*Mark! mark over!*" followed by the apparition of half-a-dozen brown balls showing clearly against the grey autumn sky and sweeping down towards him like lightning. *Whizz* in front, overhead and behind; bang, bang; bang again with the second gun, and they were away—vanished, gone, leaving nothing but a memory behind them.

The Colonel swore beneath his breath, and Ida, kneeling at his side, sighed audibly; but it was of no use, and presently the drive was done, and there he was with one wretched French partridge to show for it.

Ida said nothing, but she looked volumes, and if ever a man felt humiliated, Harold

Quaritch was that man. She had set her heart upon his winning the match, and he was making an exhibition of himself that might have caused a schoolboy to blush.

Only Edward Cossey smiled grimly as he told his bearer to give the two and a half brace which he had shot to George.

“Last drive this next, gentlemen,” said that universal functionary as he surveyed the Colonel’s one Frenchman, and then glancing sadly at the tell-tale pile of empty cartridge cases, added, “You’ll hev to shoot up, Colonel, this time, if you are a-going to win them there gloves for Miss Ida. Mr. Cossey hev knocked up four brace and a half, and you hev only got a brace. Look you here, sir,” he went on in a portentous whisper, “keep forrard of them, well forrard, fire ahead, and down they’ll come of themselves like. You’re a better shot than he is a long way; you could give him ‘birds,’ sir, that you could and beat him,”

Harold said nothing. He was sorely tempted to make excuses, as any man would have been, and he might with truth have urged that he was not accustomed to partridge-driving, and that one of the guns was new to him. But he resisted manfully and said never a word.

George placed the two guns, and then went off to join the beaters. It was a capital spot for a drive, for on each side were young larch plantations, sloping down towards them like a V, the guns being at the narrow end and level with the points of the plantations, which were at this spot about a hundred and twenty yards apart. In front was a large stretch of open fields, lying in such a fashion that the birds were bound to fly straight over the guns and between the gap at the end of the V-shaped covers.

They had to wait a long while, for the beat was of considerable extent, and this they did in silence, till presently a couple

of single birds appeared coming down the wind like lightning, for a stiffish breeze had sprung up. One went to the left over Edward Cossey's head, and he shot it very neatly, but the other, catching sight of Harold's hat beneath the fence, which was not a high one, swerved and crossed, an almost impossible shot, nearer sixty than fifty yards from him.

"Now," said Ida, and he fired, and to his joy down came the bird with a thud, bounding full two feet into the air with the force of its impact, being indeed shot through the head.

'That's better,' said Ida, as she handed him the second gun.

Another moment and a covey came over, high up. He fired both barrels and got a right and left, and snatching the second gun sent another barrel after them, hitting a third bird, which did not fall. And then a noble enthusiasm and certainty possessed him, and he knew that he

should miss no more. Nor did he. With two almost impossible exceptions he dropped every bird that drive. But his crowning glory, a thing whereof he still often dreams, was yet to come.

He had killed four brace of partridge and fired eleven times, when at last the beaters made their appearance about two hundred yards away at the further end of rather dirty barley stubble.

"I think that is the lot," he said; "I'm afraid you have lost your gloves, Ida."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when there was a yell of "mark!" and a strong covey of birds appeared, swooping down the wind right on to him.

On they came, scattered and rather "stringy." Harold gripped his gun and drew a deep breath, while Ida, kneeling at his side, her lips apart, and her beautiful eyes wide open, watched their advent through a space in the hedge. Lovely enough she looked to charm the

heart of any man, if a man out partridge-driving could descend to such frivolity, which we hold to be impossible.

Now is the moment. The leading brace are something over fifty yards away, and he knows full well that if there is to be a chance left for the second gun he must shoot before they are five yards nearer.

“Bang!” down comes the old cock bird; “bang!” and his mate follows him, falling with a smash into the fence.

Quick as light Ida takes the empty gun with one hand, and as he swings round passes him the cocked and loaded one with the other. “Bang!” Another bird topples head first out of the thinned covey. They are nearly sixty yards away now. “Bang!” again, and oh, joy and wonder! the last bird turns right over backwards, and falls dead as a stone some seventy paces from the muzzle of the gun.

He had killed four birds out of a single driven covey, which as shooters well know

is a feat not often done even by the best driving shots.

“Bravo!” said Ida, “I was sure that you could shoot if you chose.”

“Yes,” he answered, “it was pretty good work;” and he commenced collecting the birds, for by this time the beaters were across the field. They were all dead, not a runner in the lot, and there were exactly six brace of them. Just as he picked up the last, George arrived, followed by Edward Cossey.

“Well I niver,” said the former, while something resembling a smile stole over his melancholy countenance, “if that bean’t the masterest bit of shooting that ever I did see. Lord Walsingham couldn’t hardly beat that hisself—fifteen empty cases and twelve birds picked up. Why,” and he turned to Edward, “bless me, sir, if I don’t believe the Colonel has won them gloves for Miss Ida after all. Let’s see, sir, you got two brace this last drive and

one the first, and a leash the second, and two brace and a half the third, six and a half brace in all. And the Colonel, yes, he hev seven brace, one bird to the good."

"There, Mr. Cossey," said Ida, smiling sweetly, "I have won my gloves. Mind you don't forget to pay them."

"Oh, I will not forget, Miss de la Molle," said he, smiling also, but not too prettily. "I suppose," he said, addressing the Colonel, "that the last covey twisted up and you browned them."

"No," he answered quietly, "all four were clear shots."

Mr. Cossey smiled again, as he turned away to hide his vexation, an incredulous smile, which somehow sent Harold Quaritch's blood leaping through his veins more quickly than was good for him. Edward Cossey would rather have lost a thousand pounds than that his adversary should have got that extra bird, for not only was he a jealous shot, but he knew perfectly well that

Ida was anxious that he should lose, and desired above all things to see him humiliated. And then he, the smartest shot within ten miles round, to be beaten by a middle-aged soldier shooting with a strange gun, and totally unaccustomed to driven birds! Why, the story would be told over the county; George would see to that. His anger was so great when he thought of it, that afraid of making himself ridiculous, he set off with his bearer towards the Castle without another word, leaving the others to follow.

Ida looked after him and smiled. "He is so conceited," she said; "he cannot bear to be beaten at anything."

"I think that you are rather hard on him," said the Colonel, for the joke had an unpleasant side which jarred upon his taste.

"At any rate," she answered, with a little stamp, "it is not for you to say so. If you disliked him as much as I do you would be hard on him, too. Besides, I daresay that his turn is coming."

The Colonel winced, as well he might, but looking at her handsome face, set just now like steel at the thought of what the future might bring forth, he reflected that if Edward Cossey's turn did come he was by no means sure that the ultimate triumph would rest with him. Ida de la Molle, to whatever extent her sense of honour and money indebtedness might carry her, was no butterfly to be broken on a wheel, but a woman whose dislike and anger, or, worse still, whose cold, unvarying disdain, was a thing from which the boldest-hearted man might shrink aghast.

Nothing more was said on the subject, and they began to talk, though somewhat constrainedly, about indifferent matters. They were both aware that it was a farce, and that they were playing a part, for beneath the external ice of formalities the river of their devotion ran strong—whither they knew not. All that had been made clear a few nights back. But what will you

have? Necessity over-riding their desires, compelled them along the path of self-denial, and, like wise folk, they recognised the fact: for there is nothing more painful in the world than the outburst of hopeless affection.

And so they talked about painting and shooting and what not, till they reached the grey old Castle towers. Here Harold wanted to bid her good-bye, but she persuaded him to come in and have some tea, saying that her father would like to say good-night to him.

Accordingly he went into the vestibule, where there was a light, for it was getting dusk; and here he found the Squire and Mr. Cossey. As soon as he entered, Edward Cossey rose, said good-night to the Squire and Ida, and then passed towards the door, where the Colonel was standing, rubbing the mud off his shooting boots. As he came, Harold, being slightly ashamed of the business of the shooting

match, and very sorry to have humiliated a man who prided himself so much upon his skill in a particular branch of sport, held out his hand and said in a friendly tone :

“Good-night, Mr. Cossey. Next time that we are out shooting together I expect I shall be nowhere. It was an awful fluke of mine killing those four birds.”

Edward Cossey took no notice of the friendly words or outstretched hand, but came straight on as though he intended to walk past him.

The Colonel was wondering what it was best to do, for he could not mistake the meaning of the oversight, when the Squire, who was sometimes very quick to notice things, spoke in a loud and decided tone.

“Mr. Cossey,” he said, “Colonel Quaritch is offering you his hand.”

“I observe that he is,” he answered, setting his handsome face, “but I do not wish to take Colonel Quaritch’s hand.”

Then came a moment's silence, which the Squire again broke.

“When a gentleman in my house refuses to take the hand of another gentleman,” he said very quietly, “I think that I have a right to ask the reason for his conduct, which, unless that reason is a very sufficient one, is almost as much a slight upon me as upon him.”

“I think that Colonel Quaritch must know the reason, and will not press me to explain,” said Edward Cossey.

“I know of no reason,” replied the Colonel sternly, “unless indeed it is that I have been so unfortunate as to get the best of Mr. Cossey in a friendly shooting match.”

“Colonel Quaritch must know well that this is not the reason to which I allude,” said Edward. “If he consults his conscience he will probably discover a better one.”

Ida and her father looked at each other

in surprise, while the Colonel by a half involuntary movement stepped between his accuser and the door; and Ida noticed that his face was white with anger.

“You have made a very serious implication against me, Mr. Cossey,” he said in a cold clear voice. “Before you leave this room you will be so good as to explain it in the presence of those before whom it has been made.”

“Certainly, if you wish it,” he answered, with something like a sneer. “The reason why I refused to take your hand, Colonel Quaritch, is that you have been guilty of conduct which proves to me that you are not a gentleman, and, therefore, not a person with whom I desire to be on friendly terms. Shall I go on?”

“Most certainly you will go on,” answered the Colonel.

“Very well. The conduct to which I refer is that you were once engaged to my aunt, Julia Heston; that within three days

of the time of the marriage you deserted and jilted her in a most cruel way, as a consequence of which she went mad, and is to this moment an inmate of an asylum."

Ida gave an exclamation of astonishment, and the Colonel started, while the Squire, looking at him curiously, waited to hear what he had to say.

"It is perfectly true, Mr. Cossey," he answered, "that I was engaged twenty years ago to be married to Miss Julia Heston, though I now for the first time learn that she was your aunt. It is also quite true that that engagement was broken off, under most painful circumstances, within three days of the time fixed for the marriage. What those circumstances were I am not at liberty to say, for the simple reason that I gave my word not to do so; but this I will say, that they were not to my discredit, though you may not be aware of that fact. But as you are one of the family, Mr. Cossey, my tongue is not tied,

and I will do myself the honour of calling upon you to-morrow and explaining them to you. After that," he added significantly, "I shall require you to apologise to me as publicly as you have accused me."

"You may require, but whether I shall comply is another matter," said Edward Cossey, and he passed out.

"I am very sorry, Mr. de la Molle," said the Colonel, as soon as he had gone, "more sorry than I can say, that I should have been the cause of this most unpleasant scene. I also feel that I am placed in a very false position, and until I produce Mr. Cossey's written apology, that position must to some extent continue. If I fail to obtain that apology, I shall have to consider what course to take. In the meanwhile I can only ask you to suspend your judgment."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLOW FALLS.

ON the following morning, about ten o'clock, while Edward Cossey was still at breakfast, a dog-cart drew up at his door and out of it stepped Colonel Quaritch.

"Now for the row," said he to himself. "I hope that the governor was right in his tale, that's all. Perhaps it would have been wiser to say nothing till I had made sure," and he poured out some more tea a little nervously, for in the Colonel he had, he felt, an adversary not to be despised.

Presently the door opened, and "Colonel Quaritch" was announced. He rose and bowed a salutation, which the Colonel, whose face bore a particularly grim expression, did not return.

“Will you take a chair?” he said, as soon as the servant had left, and without speaking Harold took one—and presently began the conversation.

“Last night, Mr. Cossey,” he said, “you thought proper to publicly bring a charge against me, which if it were true would go a long way towards showing that I was not a fit person to associate with those before whom it was brought.”

“Yes,” said Edward coolly.

“Before making any remarks on your conduct in bringing such a charge, which I give you credit for believing to be true, I propose to show to you that it is a false charge,” went on the Colonel quietly.

“The story is a very simple one, and so sad that nothing short of necessity would force me to tell it. I was, when quite young, engaged to your aunt, Miss Heston, to whom I was much attached, and who was then twenty years of age. Though I had little besides my profession, she had

money, and we were going to be married. The circumstances under which the marriage was broken off were as follow:—Three days before the wedding was to take place I went unexpectedly to the house, and was told by the servant that Miss Heston was upstairs in her sitting-room. I went upstairs to the room, which I knew well, knocked and got no answer. Then I walked into the room, and this is what I saw. Your aunt was lying on the sofa in her wedding dress (that is, in half of it, for she had only the skirt on), as I first thought, asleep. I went up to her, and saw that by her side was a brandy bottle, half empty. In her hand also was a glass containing raw brandy. While I was wondering what it could mean, she woke up, got off the sofa, and I saw that she was intoxicated.”

“It’s a lie!” said Edward excitedly.

“Be careful what you say, sir,” answered

the Colonel, "and wait to say it till I have done."

"As soon as I realised what was the matter, I left the room again, and going down to your grandfather's study, where he was engaged in writing a sermon, I asked him to come upstairs, as I feared that his daughter was not well. He came and saw, and the sight threw him off his balance, for he broke out into a torrent of explanations and excuses, from which in time I extracted the following facts:— It appeared that ever since she was a child, Miss Heston had been addicted to drinking fits, and that it was on account of this constitutional weakness, which was of course concealed from me, that she had been allowed to engage herself to a penniless subaltern. It appeared, too, that the habit was hereditary, for her mother had died from the effects of drink, and one of her aunts had become mad from it.

"I went away and thought the matter

over, and came to the conclusion that under these circumstances it would be impossible for me, much as I was attached to your aunt, to marry her, because even if I were willing to do so, I had no right to run the risk of bringing children into the world who might inherit the curse. Having come to this determination, which it cost me much to do, I wrote and communicated it to your grandfather, and the marriage was broken off."

"I do not believe it, I do not believe a word of it," said Edward, jumping up. "You jilted her and drove her mad, and now you are trying to shelter yourself behind a tissue of falsehood."

"Are you acquainted with your grandfather's handwriting?" asked the Colonel quietly.

"Yes."

"Is that it?" he went on, producing a yellow-looking letter and showing it to him.

“I believe so—at least it looks like it.”

“Then read the letter.”

Edward obeyed. It was one written in answer to that of Harold Quaritch to his betrothed's father, and admitted in the clearest terms the justice of the step that he had taken. Further, it begged him, for the sake of Julia and the family at large, never to mention the cause of his defection to any one outside the family.

“Are you satisfied, Mr. Cossey? I have other letters, if you wish to see them.”

Edward made no reply, and the Colonel went on:—“I gave the promise your grandfather asked for, and in spite of the remarks that were freely made upon my behaviour, I kept it, as it was my duty to do. You, Mr. Cossey, are the first person to whom the story has been told. And now that you have thought fit to make accusations against me, which are without founda-

tion, I must ask you to retract them as fully as you made them. I have prepared a letter which you will be so good as to sign," and he handed him a note addressed to the Squire. It ran:

"DEAR MR. DE LA MOLLE,—

"I beg in the fullest and most ample manner possible to retract the charges which I made yesterday evening against Colonel Quaritch, in the presence of yourself and Miss de la Molle. I find that those charges were unfounded, and I hereby apologise to Colonel Quaritch for having made them."

"And supposing that I refuse to sign," said Edward sulkily.

"I do not think," answered the Colonel, "that you will refuse."

Edward looked at Colonel Quaritch, and the Colonel looked at Edward.

"Well," said the Colonel, "please understand I mean that you should sign this letter, and, indeed, seeing how absolutely

you are in the wrong, I do not think that you can hesitate to do so."

Then very slowly and unwillingly, Edward Cossey took up a pen, affixed his signature to the letter, blotted it, and pushed it from him.

The Colonel folded it up, placed it in an envelope which he had ready, and put it in his pocket.

"Now, Mr. Cossey," he said, "I will wish you good morning. Another time I should recommend you to be more careful, both of your facts and the manner of your accusations," and with a slight bow he left the room.

"Curse the fellow," thought Edward to himself as the front door closed, "he had me there—I was forced to sign. Well, I will be even with him about Ida, at any rate. I will propose to her this very day, Belle or no Belle, and if she won't have me, I will call the money in and smash the whole thing up"—and his handsome

face bore a very evil look, as he thought of it.

That very afternoon he started, in pursuance of this design, to pay a visit at the Castle. The Squire was out, but Miss de la Molle was at home. He was ushered into the drawing-room, where Ida was working, for it was a wet and windy afternoon.

She rose to greet him coldly enough, and he sat down, and then came a pause which she did not seem inclined to break.

At last he spoke. "Did the Squire get my letter, Miss de la Molle?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, rather icily. "Colonel Quaritch sent it up."

"I am very sorry," he added confusedly, "that I should have put myself in such a false position. I hope that you will give me credit for having believed my accusation when I made it."

“Such accusations should not be lightly made, Mr. Cossey,” was her answer, and, as though to turn the subject, she rose and rang the bell for tea.

It came, and the bustle connected with it prevented any further conversation for a while. At length, however, it subsided, and once more Edward found himself alone with Ida. He looked at her and felt afraid. The woman was of a different clay to himself, and he knew it—he loved her, but he did not understand her in the least. However, if the thing was to be done at all it must be done now, so, with a desperate effort, he brought himself up to the point.

“Miss de la Molle,” he said, and Ida, knowing full surely what was coming, felt her heart jump within her bosom and then stand still.

“Miss de la Molle,” he repeated, “perhaps you will remember a conversation that passed between us some weeks ago in the conservatory?”

“Yes,” she said, “I remember—about the money.”

“About the money and other things,” he said, gathering courage. “I hinted to you then that I hoped in certain contingencies to be allowed to make my addresses to you, and I think that you understood me.”

“I understood you perfectly,” answered Ida, her pale face set like ice, “and I gave you to understand that in the event of your lending my father the money, I should hold myself bound to—to listen to what you had to say.”

“Oh, never mind the money,” broke in Edward. “It is not a question of money with me, Ida, it is not, indeed. I love you with all my heart. I have loved you ever since I saw you. It was because I was jealous of him that I made a fool of myself last night with Colonel Quaritch. I should have asked you to marry me long ago only there were obstacles in the

way. I love you, Ida; there never was a woman like you—never.”

She listened with the same set face. Obviously he was in earnest, but his earnestness did not move her; it scarcely even flattered her pride. She disliked the man intensely, and nothing that he could say or do would lessen that dislike by one jot—probably, indeed, it would only intensify it.

Presently he stopped, his breast heaving and his face broken with emotion, and tried to take her hand.

She withdrew it sharply.

“I do not think that there is any need for all this,” she said coldly. “I gave a conditional promise. You have fulfilled your share of the bargain, and I am prepared to fulfil mine in due course.”

So far as her words went, Edward could find no fault with their meaning, and yet he felt more like a man who has been

abruptly and finally refused than one declared chosen. He stood still and looked at her.

“I think it right to tell you, however,” she went on in the same measured tones, “that if I marry you it will be from motives of duty, and not from motives of affection. I have no love to give you and I do not wish for yours. I do not know if you will be satisfied with this. If you are not, you had better give up the idea,” and for the first time she looked up at him with more anxiety in her face than she would have cared to show.

But if she hoped that her coldness would repel him, she was destined to be disappointed. On the contrary, like water thrown on burning oil, it only inflamed him the more.

“The love will come, Ida,” he said, and once more he tried to take her hand.

“No, Mr. Cossey,” she said, in a voice that checked him. “I am sorry to have to

“speak so plainly, but till I marry I am my own mistress. Pray understand me.”

“As you like,” he said, drawing back from her sulkily. “I am so fond of you that I will marry you on any terms, and that is the truth. I have, however, one thing to ask of you, Ida, and it is that you will keep our engagement secret for the present, and get your father (I suppose I must speak to him) to do the same. I have reasons,” he went on by way of explanation, “for not wishing it to become known.”

“I do not see why I should keep it secret,” she said; “but it does not matter to me.”

“The fact is,” he explained, “my father is a very curious man, and I doubt if he would like my engagement, because he thinks I ought to marry a great deal of money.”

“Oh, indeed,” answered Ida. She had believed, as was indeed the case, that there

were other reasons, not unconnected with Mrs. Quest, on account of which he was anxious to keep the engagement secret. "By the way," she went on, "I am sorry to have to talk of business, but this is a business matter, is it not? I suppose it is understood that, in the event of our marriage, the mortgage you hold over this place will not be enforced against my father."

"Of course not," he answered. "Look here, Ida, I will give you those mortgage bonds as a wedding present, and you can put them in the fire; and I will make a good settlement on you."

"Thank you," she said, "but I do not require any settlement on myself; I had rather none was made; but I consent to the engagement only on the express condition that the mortgages shall be cancelled before marriage, and as the property will ultimately come to me, this is not much to ask. And now one more thing, Mr.

Cossey; I should like to know when you would wish this marriage to take place; not yet, I presume?"

"I should wish it to take place to-morrow," he said with an attempt at a laugh; "but I suppose that between one thing and another it can't come off at once. Shall we say this time six months, that will be in May?"

"Very good," said Ida; "this day six months I shall be prepared to become your wife, Mr. Cossey. I believe," she added with a flash of bitter sarcasm, "it is the time usually allowed for the redemption of a mortgage."

"You say very hard things," he answered, wincing.

"Do I? I daresay. I am hard by nature. I wonder that you can wish to marry me."

"I wish it beyond everything in the world," he answered earnestly. "You can never know how much. By the way, I know I was foolish about Colonel Quaritch;

but, Ida, I cannot bear to see that man near you. I hope that you will now drop his acquaintance as much as possible.”

Once more Ida's face set like a flint. “I am not your wife yet, Mr. Cossey,” she said; “when I am you will have a right to dictate to me as to whom I shall associate with. At present you have no such right, and if it pleases me to associate with Colonel Quaritch, I shall do so. If you disapprove of my conduct, the remedy is simple—you can break off the engagement.”

He rose absolutely crushed, for Ida was by far the stronger of the two, and besides, his passion gave her an unfair advantage over him. Without attempting a reply he held out his hand and said good-night, for he was afraid to venture on any demonstration of affection, adding that he would come to see her father in the morning.

She touched his outstretched hand with

her fingers, and then fearing lest he should change his mind, promptly rang the bell.

In another minute the door had closed behind him and she was left alone.



CHAPTER X.

“GOOD-BYE, MY DEAR, GOOD-BYE!”

WHEN Edward Cossey had gone, Ida rose and put her hands to her head. So the blow had fallen, the deed was done, and she was engaged to be married to Edward Cossey. And Harold Quaritch! Well, there must be an end to that. It was hard, too—only a woman could know how hard. Ida was not a person with a long record of love affairs. Once, when she was twenty, she had received a proposal which she had refused, and that was all. So it happened that when she became attached to Colonel Quaritch she had found her heart for the first time, and for a woman, somewhat late in life. Consequently her feelings were all the more profound, and so indeed was her grief at being forced not

only to put them away, but to give herself to another man who was not agreeable to her. She was not a violent or ill-regulated woman like Mrs. Quest. She looked facts in the face, recognised their meaning and bowed before their inexorable logic. It seemed to her almost impossible that she could hope to avoid this marriage, and if that proved to be so, she might be relied upon to make the best of it. Scandal would, under any circumstances, never find a word to say against Ida, for she was not a person who could attempt to console herself for an unhappy marriage. But it was bitter, bitter as gall, to be thus forced to turn aside from her happiness—for she well knew that with Harold Quaritch her life would be very happy—and fit her shoulders to this heavy yoke. Well, she had saved the place to her father, and also to her descendants, if she had any, and that was all that could be said.

She thought and thought, wishing in the

bitterness of her heart that she had never been born to come to such a heavy day, till at last she could think no more. The air of the room seemed to stifle her, though it was by no means overheated. She went to the window and looked out. It was a wild wet evening, and the wind drove the rain before it in sheets. In the west the lurid rays of the sinking sun stained the clouds blood red, and broke in arrows of ominous light upon the driving storm.

But bad as was the weather, it attracted Ida. When the heart is heavy and torn by conflicting passions, it seems to answer to the calling of the storm, and to long to lose its petty troubling in the turmoil of the rushing world. Nature has many moods of which our own are but the echo and reflection, and she can be companionable when all human sympathy must fail. For she is our mother from whom we come, to whom we go, and her arms are ever open to clasp the children who can

hear her voices. Drawn thereto by an impulse which she could not have analysed, Ida went upstairs, put on a thick pair of boots, a macintosh and an old hat. Then she sallied out into the wind and wet. It was blowing big guns, and as the rain whirled down, the drops struck upon her face like spray. She crossed the moat bridge, and went out into the parkland beyond. The air was full of dead leaves, and the grass rustled with them as though it were alive, for this was the first wind since the frost. The great boughs of the oaks rattled and groaned above her, and high overhead, among the sullen clouds, a flight of rooks were being blown this way and that.

Ida bent her tall form against the rain and gale, and fought her way through them. At first she had no clear idea as to where she was going, but presently, perhaps from custom, she took the path that ran across the fields to Honham Church. It was a beautiful old church, particularly as regards

the tower, one of the finest in the county, which had been partially blown down and rebuilt about the time of Charles I. The church itself had originally been founded by the Boissey family, and considerably enlarged by the widow of a de la Molle, whose husband had fallen at Agincourt, "as a memorial for ever." There, upon the porch, were carved the "hawks" of the de la Molles, wreathed round with palms of victory; and there, too, within the chancel, hung the warrior's helmet and his dented shield.

Nor was he alone, for all around lay the dust of his kindred, come after the toil and struggle of their stormy lives to rest within the walls of that old church. Some of them had monuments of alabaster, whereon they lay in effigy, their heads pillowed upon that of a conquered Saracen; some had monuments of oak and brass, and some had no monuments at all, for the Puritans had ruthlessly destroyed them. But they were nearly all

there, nearly twenty generations of the bearers of an ancient name, for even those of them who perished on the scaffold had been borne here for burial. The place was eloquent of the dead and of the mournful lesson of mortality. From century to century the bearers of that name had walked in these fields, and lived in yonder Castle, and looked upon the familiar swell of yonder ground and the silver flash of yonder river, and now their ashes were gathered here and all the forgotten turmoil of their lives was lost in the silence of those narrow tombs.

Ida loved the spot, hallowed to her not only by the altar of her faith, but also by the human associations that clung around and clothed it as the ivy clothed its walls. Here she had been christened, and here among her ancestors she hoped to be buried also. Here as a girl, when the full moon was up, she had crept in awed silence with her brother James to

look through the window at the white and solemn figures stretched within. Here, too, she had sat on Sunday after Sunday for more than twenty years, and stared at the quaint Latin inscriptions cut on marble slabs, recording the almost superhuman virtues of departed de la Molles of the eighteenth century, her own immediate ancestors. The place was familiar to her whole life; she had scarcely a recollection with which it was not in some way connected. It was not wonderful, therefore, that she loved it, and that in the trouble of her mind her feet shaped their course towards it.

Presently she was in the churchyard. Taking her stand under the shelter of a line of Scotch firs, through which the gale sobbed and sang, she leant against a side gate and looked. The scene was desolate enough. Rain dropped from the roof on to the sodden graves beneath, and ran in thin sheets down

the flint facing of the tower; the dead leaves whirled and rattled about the empty porch, and over all shot one red and angry arrow from the sinking sun. She stood in the storm and rain, gazing at the old church that had seen the end of so many sorrows more bitter than her own, and the wreck of so many summers, till the darkness began to close round her like a pall, while the wind sung the requiem of her hopes. Ida was not of a desponding or pessimistic character, but in that bitter hour she found it in her heart, as most people have at one time or another in their lives, to wish the tragedy over and the curtain down, and that she lay beneath those dripping sods without sight or hearing, without hope or dread. It seemed to her that the Hereafter must indeed be terrible if it outweighs the sorrows of the Here.

And then, poor woman, she thought of the long years between her and rest, and

leaning her head against the gate-post, began to cry bitterly in the gloom.

Presently she ceased crying and with a start looked up, feeling that she was no longer alone. Her instincts had not deceived her, for in the shadow of the fir trees, not more than two paces from her, was the figure of a man. Just then he took a step to the left, which brought his outline against the sky, and Ida's heart stood still, for now she knew him. It was Harold Quaritch, the man over whose loss she had been weeping.

"It's very odd," she heard him say, for she was to leeward of him, "but I could have sworn that I heard somebody sobbing; I suppose it was the wind."

Ida's first idea was flight, and she made a movement for that purpose, but in doing so tripped over a stick and nearly fell.

In a minute he was by her side. She was caught, and perhaps she was not alto-

gether sorry, especially as she had tried to get away.

"Who is it? what's the matter?" said the Colonel, lighting a fusee under her eyes. It was one of those flaming fusees and burnt with a blue light, showing Ida's tall figure and beautiful face, all stained with grief and tears, showing her wet macintosh, and the gate-post against which she had been leaning—showing everything.

"Why, Ida," he said, in amaze, "what are you doing here, crying too?"

"I'm not crying," she said, with a sob; "it's the rain that has made my face wet."

Just then the light burnt out and he dropped it.

"What is it, dear, what is it?" he said in great distress, for the sight of her alone in the wet and dark, and in tears, moved him beyond himself. Indeed he would have been no man if it had not.

She tried to answer, but she could not

and in another minute, to tell the honest truth, she had exchanged the gate-post for Harold's broad shoulder, and was finishing her "cry" there.

Now, to see a young and pretty woman weeping (more especially if she happens to be weeping on your shoulder) is a very trying thing. It is trying, even if you do not happen to be in love with her at all. But if you are in love with her, however little, it is dreadful; whereas, if, as in the present case, you happen to worship her, more, perhaps, than it is good to worship any fallible human creature, then the sight is positively overpowering. And so, indeed, it proved in the present instance. The Colonel could not bear it, but lifting her head from his shoulder, he kissed her sweet face again and again.

"What is it, darling?" he said, "what is the matter?"

"Leave go of me and I will tell you," she answered.

He obeyed, though with some unwillingness.

She hunted for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, and then at last she spoke: "I am engaged to be married," she said in a low voice, "I am engaged to Mr. Cossey."

Then, for about the first time in his life, Harold Quaritch swore violently in the presence of a lady.

"Oh, damn it all!" he said.

She took no notice of the strength of the language, perhaps indeed she re-echoed it in some feminine equivalent.

"It is true," she said with a sigh. "I knew that it would come, those dreadful things always do—and it was not my fault—I am sure you will always remember that. I had to do it—he advanced the money on the express condition, and even if I could pay back the money, I suppose that I should be bound to carry out the bargain. It is not the money which he wants but his bond."

“Curse him for a Shylock,” said Harold again, and groaned in his bitterness and jealousy.

“Is there nothing to be done?” he asked presently in a harsh voice, for he was very hard hit.

“Nothing,” she answered sadly. “I do not see what can help us, unless the man died,” she said; “and that is not likely. Harold,” she went on, addressing him for the first time in her life by his Christian name, for she felt that after crying upon a man’s shoulder it is ridiculous to scruple about calling him by his name; “Harold, there is no help for it. I did it myself, remember, because, as I told you, I do not think that any one woman has a right to place her individual happiness before the welfare of her family. And I am only sorry,” she added, her voice breaking a little, “that what I have done should bring suffering upon you.”

He groaned again, but said nothing.

"We must try to forget," she went on wildly. "Oh no! no! I feel it is not possible that we should forget. You won't forget me, Harold, will you? And though it must be all over between us, and we must never speak like this again—never—you will always know I have not forgotten you, will you not, but that I think of you always?"

"There is no fear of my forgetting," he said, "and I am selfish enough to hope that you will think of me at times, Ida."

"Yes, indeed I will. We all have our burdens to bear. It is a hard world, and we must bear them. And it will all be the same in the end, in just a few years. I daresay these dead people here have felt as we feel, and how quiet they are! And perhaps there may be something beyond, where things are not so. Who can say? You won't go away from this place, Harold, will you? Not until I am married, at

any rate ; perhaps you had better go then. Say that you won't go till then, and you will let me see you sometimes ; it is a comfort to see you."

"I should have gone, certainly," he said ; "to New Zealand probably, but if you wish it I will stop for the present."

"Thank you ; and now good-bye, my dear, good-bye ! No, don't come with me, I can find my own way home. And—why do you wait ? Good-bye, good-bye for ever in this way. Yes, kiss me once and swear that you will never forget me. Marry if you wish to ; but don't forget me, Harold. Forgive me for speaking so plainly, but I speak as one about to die to you, and I wish things to be clear."

"I shall never marry and I shall never forget you," he answered. "Good-bye, my love, good-bye !"

In another minute she had vanished into the storm and rain, out of his sight and out of his life, but not out of his heart.

He, too, turned and went his way into the wild and lonely night.

An hour afterwards Ida came down into the drawing-room dressed for dinner, looking rather pale but otherwise quite herself. Presently the Squire arrived. He had been at a magistrates' meeting, and had only just got home.

"Why, Ida," he said, "I could not find you anywhere. I met George as I was driving from Boisingham, and he told me that he saw you walking through the park."

"Did he?" she answered indifferently "Yes, I have been out. It was so stuffy indoors. Father," she went on, with a change of tone, "I have something to tell you. I am engaged to be married."

He looked at her curiously, and then said quietly—the Squire was always quiet in any matter of real emergency—"Indeed, my dear! That is a serious matter. However,

speaking off-hand, I think that notwithstanding the disparity of age, Quaritch——”

“No, no,” she said, wincing visibly, “I am not engaged to Colonel Quaritch, I am engaged to Mr. Cossey.”

“Oh,” he said, “oh, indeed! I thought from what I saw, that—that——”

At this moment the servant announced dinner.

“Well, never mind about it now, father,” she said; “I am tired, and want my dinner. Mr. Cossey is coming to see you to-morrow, and we can talk about it afterwards.”

And though the Squire thought a good deal, he made no further allusion to the subject that night.



CHAPTER XI.

THE SQUIRE GIVES HIS CONSENT.

EDWARD COSSEY did not come away from the scene of his engagement in a very happy or triumphant tone of mind. Ida's bitter words stung like whips, and he understood, as she clearly meant he should understand, that it was only in consideration of the money advanced that she had consented to become his wife. Now, however satisfactory it is to be rich enough to purchase your heart's desire in this fashion, it is not altogether soothing to the pride of a nineteenth century man to be continually haunted by the thought that he is a buyer in the market and nothing but a buyer. Of course, he saw clearly enough that there was an object in all this — he saw that Ida, by making

obvious her dislike, wished to disgust him with his bargain, and escape from an alliance of which the prospect was hateful to her. But he had no intention of being so easily discouraged. In the first place his passion for the woman was as a devouring flame, eating ever at his heart. In that at any rate he was sincere; he did love her so far as his nature was capable of love, or at any rate he had the keenest desire to make her his wife. A delicate-minded man would probably have shrunk from forcing himself upon a woman under parallel circumstances; but Edward Cossey did not happen to fall into that category. As a matter of fact such men are not as common as they might be.

Another thing which he took into count was that Ida would probably get over her dislike. He was a close observer of women, in a cynical and half contemptuous way, and he remarked, or thought that he remarked, a curious tendency among them

to submit with comparative complacency to the inevitable whenever it happened to coincide with their material advantage. Women, he argued, have not, as a class, outgrown the traditions of their primitive condition when their partners for life were chosen for them by lot or the chance of battle. They still recognise the claims of the wealthiest or strongest, and their love of luxury and ease is so keen that if the nest they lie in is only soft enough, they will not grieve long over the fact that it was not of their own choosing. Arguing from these untrustworthy premises, he came to the conclusion that Ida would soon get over her repugnance to marrying him, when she found how many comforts and good things marriage with so rich a man would place at her disposal, and would, if for no other reason, learn to look on him with affection and gratitude as the author of her gilded ease. And so indeed she might have done had she

been of another and more common stamp. But, unfortunately for his reasoning, there exist members of her sex who are by nature of an order of mind superior to these considerations, and who realise that they have but one life to live, and that the highest form of happiness is *not* dependent upon money or money's worth, but rather upon the indulgence of mental aspirations and those affections which, when genuine, draw nearer to holiness than anything else about us. Such a woman, more especially if she is already possessed with an affection for another man, does not easily become reconciled to a distasteful lot, however quietly she may endure it, and such a woman was Ida de la Molle.

Edward Cossey, when he reached Boisingham on the evening of his engagement, at once wrote and posted a note to the Squire, saying that he would call on the following morning about a matter of business. Accordingly, at half-past ten o'clock, he arrived

and was shown into the vestibule, where he found the old gentleman standing with his back to the fire and plunged in reflection.

“Well, Mr. de la Molle,” said Edward rather nervously, so soon as he had shaken hands, “I do not know if Ida has spoken to you about what took place between us yesterday.”

“Yes,” he said, “yes, she told me something to the effect that she had accepted a proposal of marriage from you, subject to my consent, of course ; but really the whole thing is so sudden that I have hardly had time to consider it.”

“It is very simple,” said Edward ; “I am deeply attached to your daughter, and I have been so fortunate as to be accepted by her. Should you give your consent to the marriage, I may as well say at once that I wish to carry out the most liberal money arrangements in my power. I will make Ida a present of the mortgage that

I hold over this property, and she may put it in the fire. Further, I will covenant on the death of my father, which cannot now be long delayed, to settle two hundred thousand pounds upon her absolutely. Also, I am prepared to agree that if we have a son, and he should wish to do so, he shall take the name of de la Molle."

"I am sure," said the Squire, turning round to hide his natural gratification at these proposals, "your offers on the subject of settlements are of a most liberal order, and of course so far as I am concerned, Ida will have this place, which may one day be again more valuable than it is now."

"I am glad that they meet with your approval," said Edward; "and now there is one more thing I want to ask you, Mr. de la Molle, and which I hope, if you give your consent to the marriage, you will not raise any objection to. It is that

our engagement should not be announced at present. The fact is," he went on hurriedly, "my father is a very peculiar man, and has a great idea of my marrying somebody with a large fortune. Also his state of health is so uncertain that there is no possibility of knowing how he will take anything. Indeed he is dying; the doctors told me that he might go off any day, and that he cannot last for another three months. If the engagement is announced to him now, at the best I shall have a great deal of trouble, and at the worst he might make me suffer in his will should he happen to take a fancy against it."

"Umph," said the Squire, "I don't quite like the idea of a projected marriage with my daughter, Miss de la Molle of Honham Castle, being hushed up as though there were something discreditable about it, but still there may be peculiar circumstances in the case which would justify me in consenting to that course. You are both old enough

to know your own minds, and the match would be as advantageous to you as it could be to us, for even now-a-days, family, and I may even say personal appearance, still go for something where matrimony is concerned. I have reason to know that your father is a peculiar man, very peculiar. Yes, on the whole, though I don't like hole and corner affairs, I shall have no objection to the engagement not being announced for the next month or two."

"Thank you for considering me so much," said Edward with a sigh of relief. "Then am I to understand that you give your consent to our engagement?"

The Squire reflected for a moment. Everything seemed quite straight, and yet he suspected crookedness. His latent distrust of the man, which had not been decreased by the scene of two nights before—for he never could bring himself to like Edward Cossey—arose in force and made him hesitate when there was no visible

ground for hesitation. He possessed, as has been said, an instinctive insight into character that was almost feminine in its intensity, and it was lifting a warning finger before him now.

“I don’t quite know what to say,” he replied at length. “The whole affair is so sudden—and to tell you the truth, I thought that Ida had bestowed her affections in another direction.”

Edward’s face darkened. “I thought so too,” he answered, “until yesterday, when I was so happy as to be undeceived. I ought to tell you, by the way,” he went on, running away from the covert falsehood in his last words as quickly as he could, “how much I regret I was the cause of that scene with Colonel Quaritch, more especially as I find that there is an explanation of the story against him. The fact is, I was foolish enough to be vexed because he beat me out shooting, and also because, well I—I was jealous of him.”

“Ah, yes,” said the Squire, rather coldly, “a most unfortunate affair. Of course, I don’t know what the particulars of the matter were, and it is no business of mine, but speaking generally, I should say never bring an accusation of that sort against a man at all unless you are driven to it, and if you do bring it be quite certain of your ground. However, that is neither here nor there. Well, about this engagement. Ida is old enough to judge for herself, and seems to have made up her mind, so as I know no reason to the contrary, and as the business arrangements proposed are all that I could wish, I cannot see that I have any ground for withholding my consent. So all I can say, sir, is that I hope that you will make my daughter a good husband, and that you will both be happy. Ida is a high-spirited woman, and in some ways a very peculiar woman; but in my opinion she is greatly above the average of her sex, as I have known it, and provided

you have her affection, and don't attempt to drive her, she will go through thick and thin for you. But I dare say you would like to see her. Oh, by the way, I forgot, she has got a headache this morning, and is stopping in bed. It isn't much in her line, but I daresay that she is a little upset. Perhaps you would like to come up to dinner to-night."

This proposition Edward, knowing full well that Ida's headache was a device to rid herself of the necessity of seeing him, accepted with gratitude and went.

As soon as he was gone, Ida herself came down.

"Well, my dear," said the Squire cheerfully, "I have just had the pleasure of seeing Edward Cossey, and I have told him that, as you seemed to wish it——"

Here Ida made a movement of impatience, but remembered herself and said nothing.

“That as you seemed to wish that things should be so, I had no ground of objection to your engagement. I may as well tell you that the proposals which he makes as regards settlements are of the most liberal nature.”

“Are they?” answered Ida indifferently. “Is Mr. Cossey coming here to dinner?”

“Yes, I asked him. I thought that you would like to see him.”

“Well, then, I wish you had not,” she answered with animation, “because there is nothing to eat except some cold beef. Really, father, it is very thoughtless of you;” and she stamped her foot and went off in a huff, leaving the Squire full of reflection.

“I wonder what it all means,” he said to himself. “She can’t care about the man much or she would not make that fuss about his being asked to dinner. Ida isn’t the sort of woman to be caught by the money, I should think. Well, I

know nothing about it; it is no affair of mine, and I can only take things as I find them."

And then he fell to reflecting that this marriage would be an extraordinary stroke of luck for the family. Here they were at the last gasp, mortgaged up to the eyes, when suddenly fortune, in the shape of an, on the whole, perfectly unobjectionable young man, appears, takes up the mortgages, proposes settlements to the tune of hundreds of thousands, and even offers to perpetuate the old family name in the person of his son, should he have one. Such a state of affairs could not but be gratifying to any man, however unworldly, and the Squire was not altogether unworldly. That is, he had a keen sense of the dignity of his social position and his family, and it had all his life been his chief and laudable desire to be sufficiently provided with the goods of this world to raise the de la Molles to the

position which they had occupied in former centuries. Hitherto, however, the tendency of events had been all the other way—the house was a sinking one, and but the other day its ancient roof had nearly fallen about their ears. But now the prospect changed as though by magic. On Ida's marriage all the mortgages, those heavy accumulations of years of growing expenditure and narrowing means, would roll off the back of the estate, and the de la Molles of Honham Castle would once more take the place in the county to which they were undoubtedly entitled.

It is not wonderful that the prospect proved a pleasing one to him, or that his head was filled with visions of splendours to come.

As it chanced, on that very morning it was necessary for Mr. Quest to pay the old gentleman a visit in order to obtain his signature to a lease of a bakery

in Boisingham, which, together with two or three other houses, belonged to the estate.

He arrived just as the Squire was in the full flow of his meditations, and it would not have needed a man of Mr. Quest's penetration and powers of observation to discover that he had something on his mind which he was longing for an opportunity to talk about.

The Squire signed the lease without paying the slightest attention to Mr. Quest's explanations, and then suddenly asked him when the first interest on the recently-effected mortgages came due.

The lawyer mentioned a certain date.

"Ah," said the Squire, "then it will have to be met; but it does not matter, it will be for the last time."

Mr. Quest pricked up his ears and looked at him.

"The fact is, Quest," he went on by way of explanation, "that there are—

well—family arrangements pending which will put an end to these embarrassments in a natural and a proper way.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Quest, “I am very glad to hear it.”

“Yes, yes,” said the Squire, “unfortunately I am under some restraints in speaking about the matter at present, or I should like to ask your opinion, for which as you know I have a great respect. Really, though, I do not know why I should not consult my lawyer on a matter of business; I only consented not to trumpet the thing about.”

“Lawyers are confidential agents,” said Mr. Quest quietly.

“Of course they are. Of course, and it is their business to hold their tongues. I may rely upon your discretion, may I not?”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Quest.

“Well, the matter is this: Mr. Edward Cossey is engaged to Miss de la Molle.

He has just been here to obtain my consent, which, of course, I have not withheld, as I know nothing against the young man—nothing at all. The only stipulation that he made is, as I think, a reasonable one under the circumstances, namely, that the engagement is to be kept quiet for a little while on account of the condition of his father's health. He says that he is an unreasonable man, and that he might take a prejudice against it."

During this announcement Mr. Quest had remained perfectly quiet, his face showing no signs of excitement, only his eyes shone with a curious light.

"Indeed," he said, "this is very interesting news."

"Yes," said the Squire. "That is what I meant by saying that there would be no necessity to make any arrangements as to the future payment of interest, for Cossey has informed me that he proposes to put

the mortgage bonds in the fire before his marriage."

"Indeed," said Mr. Quest; "well, he could hardly do less, could he? Altogether, I think you ought to be congratulated, Mr. de la Molle. It is not often that a man gets such a chance of clearing the encumbrances off a property. And now I am very sorry; but I must be getting home, as I promised my wife to be back for luncheon. As the thing is to be kept quiet, I suppose that it would be premature for me to offer my good wishes to Miss de la Molle."

"Yes, yes, don't say anything about it at present. Well, good-bye."



CHAPTER XII.

BELLE PAYS A VISIT.

MR. QUEST got into his dog-cart and drove homewards, full of feelings which it would be difficult to describe.

The hour of his revenge was come. He had played his cards and he had won the game, and fortune with it, for his enemy lay in the hollow of his hand. He looked behind him at the proud towers of the Castle, reflecting as he did so, that in all probability they would belong to him before another year was over his head. At one time he had earnestly longed to possess this place, but now this was not so much the object of his desire. What he wanted now was the money. With thirty thousand pounds in his hand he would, together with what he had, be a rich man,

and he had already laid his plans for the future. Of Edith he had heard nothing lately. She was cowed, but he well knew that it was only for a while. By-and-by her rapacity would get the better of her fear and she would recommence her persecutions. This being so, he came to a determination—he would put the world between them. Once let him have this money in his hand and he would start his life afresh in some new country; he was not too old for it, and he would be a rich man, and then perhaps he might get rid of the cares which had rendered so much of his existence valueless. If Belle would go with him, well and good—if not, he could not help it. If she did go, there must be a reconciliation first, for he could not any longer tolerate the life they lived.

In due course he reached the Oaks and went in. Luncheon was on the table, at which Belle was sitting. She was, as usual, dressed in black, and beautiful to

look on ; but her round babyish face was pale and pinched, and there were black lines beneath her eyes.

“I did not know that you were coming back to luncheon,” she said ; “I am afraid there is not much to eat.”

“Yes,” he said, “I finished my business up at the Castle, so I thought I might as well come home. By-the-way, Belle, I have a bit of news for you.”

“What is it?” she asked, looking up sharply, for something in his tone attracted her attention and awoke her fears.

“Your friend, Edward Cossey, is going to be married to Ida de la Molle.”

She blanched till she looked like death itself, and put her hands to her heart as though she had been stabbed

“The Squire told me so himself,” he went on, keeping his eyes remorselessly fixed upon her face.

She leaned forward and he thought that she was going to faint, but she did not.

By a supreme effort she recovered herself and drank a glass of sherry which was standing by her side.

"I expected it," she said in a low voice.

"You mean that you dreaded it," answered Mr. Quest quietly. He rose and locked the door and then came and stood close to her and spoke.

"Listen, Belle. I know all about your affair with Edward Cossey. I have proofs of it, but I have forborne to use them, because I saw that in the end he would weary of you and desert you for some other woman, and that would be my best revenge upon you. You have all along been nothing but his toy, the light woman with whom he amused his leisure hours."

She put her hands back over her heart but said no word and he went on.

"Belle, I did wrong to marry you when you did not want to marry me, but, being married, you have done wrong

to be unfaithful to your vows. I have been rewarded by your infidelity, and your infidelity has been rewarded by desertion. Now I have a proposal to make, and if you are wise you will accept it. Let us set the one wrong against the other; let both be forgotten. Forgive me, and I will forgive you, and let us make peace—if not now, then in a little while, when your heart is not so sore—and go right away from Edward Cossey and Ida de la Molle and Honham and Boisingham, into some new part of the world where we can begin life again and try to forget the past.”

She looked up at him and shook her head mournfully, and twice she tried to speak and twice she failed. The third time her words came.

“You do not understand me,” she said. “You are very kind and I am very grateful to you, but you do not understand me. I cannot get over things so easily as I

know most women can ; what I have done I never can undo. I do not blame him altogether, it was as much or more my fault than his, but having once loved him I cannot go back to you or any other man. If you like I will go on living with you as we live, and I will try to make you comfortable, but I can say no more."

"Think again, Belle," he said almost pleadingly ; "I daresay that you have never given me credit for much tenderness of heart, and I know that you have as much against me as I have against you. But I have always loved you, and I love you now, really and truly love you, and I will make you a good husband if you will let me."

"You are very good," she said, "but it cannot be. Get rid of me if you like and marry somebody else. I am ready to take the penalty of what I have done."

"Once more, Belle, I beg you to consider.

Do you know what kind of man this is for whom you are giving up your life? Not only has he deserted you, but do you know how he has got hold of Ida de la Molle? He has, as I know well, *bought* her. I tell you he has bought her as much as though he had gone into the open market and paid down a price for her. The other day Cossey and Son were going to foreclose upon the Honham estates, which would have ruined the old gentleman. Well, what did your young man do? He went to the girl—who hates him, by the way, and is in love with Colonel Quaritch—and said to her, ‘If you will promise to marry me when I ask you, I will find the thirty thousand pounds and take up the mortgages.’ And on those terms she agreed to marry him. And now he has got rid of you and he claims her promise. There is the history. I wonder that your pride will bear such a thing. By heaven, I would kill the man.”

She looked up at him curiously. "Would you?" she said. "It is not a bad idea. I dare say it is all true. He is worthless. Why does one fall in love with worthless people? Well, there is an end of it; or a beginning of the end. As I have sown, so must I reap;" and she got up, and unlocking the door left the room.

"Yes," he said aloud when she had gone, "there is a beginning of the end. Upon my word, what between one thing and another, unlucky devil as I am, I had rather stand in my own shoes than in Edward Cossey's."

Belle went to her room and sat thinking, or rather brooding, sullenly. Then she put on her bonnet and cloak and started out, taking the road that ran past Honham Castle. She had not gone a hundred yards before she found herself face to face with Edward Cossey himself. He was coming out of a gunsmith's shop, where he had been ordering some cartridges.

“How do you do, Belle?” he said, colouring and lifting his hat.

“How do you do, Mr. Cossey?” she answered, coming to a stop and looking him straight in the face.

“Where are you going?” he asked, not knowing what to say.

“I am going to walk up to the Castle to call on Miss de la Molle.”

“I don’t think that you will find her. She is in bed with a headache.”

“Oh! So you have been up there this morning?”

“Yes, I had to see the Squire about some business.”

“Indeed.” Then looking him in the eyes again, “Are you engaged to be married to Ida?”

He coloured once more, he could not prevent himself from doing so.

“No,” he answered; “what makes you ask such a question?”

“I don’t know,” she said, laughing a

little; "feminine curiosity I suppose. I thought that you might be. Good-bye," and she went on, leaving Edward Cossey to the enjoyment of a very peculiar set of sensations.

"What a coward!" said Belle to herself. "He does not even dare to tell me the truth."

Nearly an hour later she arrived at the Castle, and, asking for Ida, was shown into the drawing-room, where she found her sitting with a book in her hand.

Ida rose to greet her in friendly fashion, for the two women, although they were at the opposite poles of character, had a liking for each other. In a way they were both strong, and strength always recognises and respects strength.

"Have you walked up?" asked Ida.

"Yes, I came on the chance of finding you. I want to speak to you."

"Yes," said Ida, "what is it?"

“This. Forgive me, but are you engaged to be married to Edward Cossey?”

Ida looked at her in a slow, stately way, which seemed to ask by what right she came to question her. At least, so Belle read it.

“I know that I have no right to ask such a question,” she said, with humility, “and, of course, you need not answer it, but I have a reason for asking.”

“Well,” said Ida, “I was requested by Mr. Cossey to keep the matter secret, but he appears to have divulged it. Yes, I am engaged to be married to him.”

Belle’s beautiful face turned a shade paler, if that was possible, and her eyes hardened.

“Do you wonder why I ask you this?” she said. “I will tell you, though probably when I have done so you will never speak to me again. I am Edward Cossey’s discarded mistress,” and she laughed bitterly enough.

Ida shrank a little and coloured, as a pure

and high-minded woman naturally does when she is for the first time suddenly brought into actual contact with impurity and passion.

“ I know,” went on Belle, “ that I must seem a shameful thing to you ; but, Miss de la Molle, good and cold and stately as you are, pray God that you may never be thrown into temptation ; pray God that you may never be married almost by force to a man whom you hate, and then suddenly learn what a thing it is to fall in love, and for the first time feel your life awake.”

“ Hush,” said Ida gently, “ what right have I to judge you ? ”

“ I loved him,” went on Belle, “ I loved him passionately, and for a while it was as though heaven had opened its gates, for he used to care for me a little, and I think he would have taken me away and married me afterwards, but I would not hear of it, because I knew that it would ruin him. He offered to, once, and I refused, and

within three hours of that I believe he was bargaining for you. Well, and then it was the old story, he fell more and more in love with you and of course I had no hold upon him."

"Yes," said Ida, moving impatiently, "but why do you tell me all this? It is very painful and I had rather not hear it."

"Why do I tell you? I tell you because I do not wish you to marry Edward Cossey. I tell you because I wish *him* to feel a little of what *I* have to feel, and because I have said he should *not* marry you."

"I wish that you could prevent it," said Ida, with a sudden outburst. "I am sure you are quite welcome to Mr. Cossey so far as I am concerned, for I detest him, and I cannot imagine how any woman could ever have done otherwise."

"Thank you," said Belle; "but I have done with Mr. Cossey, and I think I hate him too. I know that I did hate him when

I met him in the street just now and he told me that he was not engaged to you. You say that you detest him, why then do you marry him—you are a free woman?"

"Do you want to know?" said Ida, wheeling round and looking her visitor full in the face. "I am going to marry him for the same reason that you say caused you to marry—because I *must*. I am going to marry him because he lent us money on condition that I promised to marry him, and as I have taken the money, I must give him his price, even if it breaks my heart. You think that you are wretched; how do you know that I am not fifty times as wretched? Your lot is to lose your lover, mine is to have one forced upon me and endure him all my life. The worst of your pain is over, all mine is to come."

"Why? why?" broke in Belle. "What is such a promise as that? He cannot force you to marry him, and it is better

for a woman to die than to marry a man she hates, especially," she added meaningly, "if she happens to care for somebody else. Be advised by me, I know what it is."

"Yes," said Ida, "perhaps it is better to die, but death is not so easy. As for the promise, you do not seem to understand that no gentleman or lady can break a promise in consideration of which money has been received. Whatever he has done and whatever he is, I *must* marry Mr. Cossey, so I do not think that we need discuss the subject any more."

Belle sat silent for a minute or more, and then rising said that she must go. "I have warned you," she added, "although to warn you I am forced to put myself at your mercy. You can tell the story and destroy me if you like. I do not much care if you do. Women such as I grow reckless."

"You must understand me very little

Mrs. Quest" (it had always been Belle before, and she winced at the changed name), "if you think me capable of such conduct. You have nothing to fear from me."

She held out her hand, but in her humility and shame, Belle went without taking it, and through the angry sunset light walked slowly back to Boisingham. And as she walked there was a look upon her face that Edward Cossey would scarcely have cared to see.



CHAPTER XIII.

MR. QUEST HAS HIS INNINGS.

ALL that afternoon and far into the evening Mr. Quest was employed in drafting, and with his own hand engrossing on parchment certain deeds, for the proper execution of which he seemed to find constant reference necessary to a tin box of papers labelled "Honham Castle Estates."

By eleven that night everything was finished, and having carefully collected and docketed his papers, he put the tin box away and went home to bed.

Next morning, about ten o'clock, Edward Cossey was sitting at breakfast in no happy frame of mind. He had gone up to the Castle to dinner on the previous evening, but it cannot be said that he had enjoyed himself. Ida was there, looking very hand-

some in her evening dress, but she was cold as a stone and unapproachable as a statue. She scarcely spoke to him, indeed, except in answer to some direct remark, reserving all her conversation for her father, who seemed to have caught the contagion of restraint, and was, for him, unusually silent and depressed.

But once or twice he found her looking at him, and then there was upon her face a mingled expression of contempt and irrepresible aversion which chilled him to the marrow.

These qualities were indeed so much more plainly developed towards himself than they had been before, that at last a conviction which he at first rejected as incredible forced itself into his mind. This conviction was, that Belle had disbelieved his denial of the engagement, and in her eagerness for revenge must have told Ida the whole story. The thought made him feel faint. Well, there was but one thing to be done—face it out.

Once when the Squire's back was turned he had ventured to attempt some little verbal tenderness in which the word "dear" occurred, but Ida did not seem to hear it and looked straight over his head into space. This he felt was trying. So trying did he find the whole entertainment indeed that about half-past nine he rose and came away, saying that he had received some bank papers which must be attended to that night.

Now most men would in all human probability have been dismayed by this state of affairs into relinquishing an attempt at matrimony which it was evident could only be carried through in the face of the quiet but none the less vigorous dislike and contempt of the other contracting party. But this was not so with Edward Cossey. Ida's coldness exercised upon his tenacious and obstinate mind much the same effect that may be supposed to be produced upon the benighted seeker for the North Pole by the

sight of a frozen ocean of icebergs. Like the explorer he was convinced that if once he could get over those cold heights he would find a smiling sunny land beyond and perchance many other delights, and like the explorer again, he was, metaphorically, ready to die in the effort. For he loved her more every day, till now his passion dominated his physical being and his mental judgment, so that whatever loss was entailed, and whatever obstacles arose, he was determined to endure and overcome them if by so doing he might gain his end.

He was reflecting upon all this on the morning in question when Mr. Quest, looking very cool, composed and gentleman-like, was shown into his room, much as Colonel Quaritch had been shown in two mornings before.

“How do you do, Quest?” he said, in a from high to low tone, which he was in the habit of adopting towards his

official subordinates. "Sit down. What is it?"

"It is some business, Mr. Cossey," the lawyer answered in his usual quiet tones.

"Honham Castle mortgages again, I suppose," he growled. "I only hope you don't want any more money on that account at present, that's all; because I can't raise another cent while my father lives. They don't entail cash and bank shares, you know, and though my credit's pretty good I am not far from the bottom of it."

"Well," said Mr. Quest, with a faint smile, "it has to do with the Honham Castle mortgages; but as I have a good deal to say, perhaps we had better wait till the things are cleared."

"All right. Just ring the bell, will you, and take a cigarette?"

Mr. Quest smiled again and rang the bell; but did not take the cigarette. When the breakfast things had been removed he took a chair, and placing it on the further

side of the table in such a position that the light, which was to his back, struck full upon Edward Cossey's face, began to deliberately untie and sort his bundle of papers. Presently he came to the one he wanted—a letter. It was not an original letter, but a copy. "Will you kindly read this, Mr. Cossey?" he said quietly, as he pushed the letter towards him across the table.

Edward finished lighting his cigarette, then took the letter up and glanced at it carelessly. At sight of the first line his expression changed to one of absolute horror; his face blanched, the perspiration sprang out upon his forehead, and the cigarette dropped from his fingers to the carpet, where it lay smouldering. Nor was this wonderful, for the letter was a copy of one of Belle's most passionate epistles to himself. He had never been able to restrain her from writing these compromising letters. Indeed, this one was the very same that

some little time before Mr. Quest had abstracted from the pocket of Mr. Cossey's lounging coat in the room in London.

He read on for a little way and then put the letter down upon the table. There was no need for him to go further, it was all in the same strain.

"You will observe, Mr. Cossey, that this is a copy," said Mr. Quest, "but if you like you can inspect the original document."

He made no answer.

"Now," went on Mr. Quest, handing him a second paper, "here is the copy of another letter, of which the original is in your handwriting."

Edward looked at it. It was an intercepted letter of his own, dated about a year before, and its contents, though not of so passionate a nature as the other, were still of a sufficiently incriminating character.

He put it down upon the table by the side of the first and waited for Mr. Quest to go on.

“I have other evidence,” said his visitor presently, “but you are probably sufficiently versed in such matters to know that these letters alone are almost enough for my purpose. That purpose is to commence a suit for divorce against my wife, in which you will, of course, in accordance with the provisions of the Act, be joined as co-respondent. Indeed, I have already drawn up a letter of instruction to my London agents directing them to take the preliminary steps,” and he pushed a third paper towards him.

Edward Cossey turned his back to his tormentor and resting his head upon his hand tried to think.

“Mr. Quest,” he said presently in a hoarse voice, “without admitting anything, there are reasons which would make it ruinous to me if such an action were commenced at present.”

“Yes,” he answered, “there are. In the first place there is no knowing in what light your father would look on the matter

and how his view of it would affect your future interests. In the second your engagement to Miss de la Molle, upon which you are so strongly set, would certainly be broken off."

"How do you know that I am engaged?" asked Edward in surprise.

"It does not matter how I know it," said the lawyer, "I do know it, so it will be useless for you to deny it. As you remark, this suit will probably be your ruin in every way, and therefore it is, as you will easily understand, a good moment for a man who wants his revenge to choose to bring it."

"Without admitting anything," answered Edward Cossey, "I wish to ask you a question. Is there no way out of this? Supposing that I have done you a wrong, wrong admits of compensation."

"Yes, it does, Mr. Cossey, and I have thought of that. Everybody has his price in this world and I have mine; but the

compensation for such a wrong must be a heavy one."

"At what price will you agree to stay the action for ever?" he asked.

"The price that I will take to stay the action is the transfer into my name of the mortgages you hold over the Honham Castle Estates," answered Mr. Quest quietly.

"Great heavens!" said Edward, "why that is a matter of thirty thousand pounds."

"I know it is, and I know also that it is worth your while to pay thirty thousand pounds to save yourself from the scandal, the chance of disinheritance, and the certainty of the loss of the woman whom you want to marry. So well do I know it that I have prepared the necessary deeds for your signature, and here they are. Listen, sir," he went on sternly; "refuse to accept my terms and by to-night's post I shall send this letter of instructions. Also I shall send to Mr. Cossey, Senior, and to Mr. de la Molle copies of these two precious

epistles," and he pointed to the incriminating documents, "together with a copy of the letter to my agents; and where will you be then? Consent, and I will bind myself not to proceed in any way or form. Now make your choice."

"But I cannot; even if I will, I cannot," said he, almost wringing his hands in his perplexity. "It was on condition of my taking up those mortgages that Ida consented to become engaged to me, and I have promised that I will cancel them on our wedding. Will you not take money instead?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Quest, "I would take money. A little time ago I would not have taken it because I wanted that property; now I have changed my ideas. But as you yourself said, your credit is strained to the utmost, and while your father is alive you will not find it possible to raise another thirty thousand pounds. Besides, if this matter is to be settled at all

it must be settled at once. I will not wait while you make attempts to raise the money."

"But about the mortgages? I promised to keep them. What shall I say to Ida?"

"Say? Say nothing. You can meet them if you choose after your father's death. Refuse if you like, but if you refuse you will be mad. Thirty thousand pounds will be nothing to you, but exposure will be ruin. Have you made up your mind? You must take my offer or leave it. Sign the documents and I will put the originals of those two letters into your hands; refuse and I will take my steps."

Edward Cossey thought for a moment and then said, "I will sign. Let me see the papers."

Mr. Quest turned aside to hide the expression of triumph which flitted across his face and then handed him the deeds. They were elaborately drawn, for he was a skilful legal draughtsman, quite as skilful

as many a leading Chancery conveyancer, but the substance of them was that the mortgages were transferred to him by the said Edward Cossey in and for the consideration that he, the said William M. Quest, consented to abandon for ever a pending action for divorce against his wife, Belle Quest, whereto the said Edward Cossey was to be joined as co-respondent.

“You will observe,” said Mr. Quest, “that if you attempt to contest the validity of this assignment, which you probably could not do with any prospect of success, the attempt must recoil upon your own head, because the whole scandal will then transpire. We shall require some witnesses, so with your permission I will ring the bell and ask the landlady and your servant to step up. They need know nothing of the contents of the papers,” and he did so.

“Stop,” said Edward presently. “Where are the original letters?”

“Here,” answered Mr. Quest, producing

them from an inner pocket, and showing them to him at a distance. "When the landlady comes up I will give them to her to hold in this envelope directing her to hand them to you when the deeds are signed and witnessed. She will think that it is part of the ceremony."

Presently the man-servant and the landlady arrived, and Mr. Quest, in his most matter of fact way, explained to them that they were required to witness some documents. At the same time he handed the letters to the woman, saying that she was to give them to Mr. Cossey when they had all done signing.

Then Edward Cossey signed, and placing his thumb on the familiar wafer delivered the various documents as his act and deed. The witnesses with much preparation and effort affixed their awkward signatures in the places pointed out to them, and in a few minutes the thing was done, leaving Mr. Quest a richer

man by thirty thousand pounds than when he had got up that morning.

“Now give Mr. Cossey the packet, Mrs. Jeffries,” he said, as he blotted the signatures, “and you can go.” She did so and went.

When the witnesses had gone Edward looked at the letters, and then with a savage oath flung them into the fire and watched them burn.

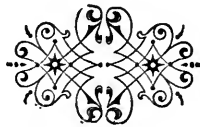
“Good-morning, Mr. Cossey,” said Mr. Quest as he prepared to depart with the deeds. “You have now bought your experience and had to pay dearly for it; but, upon my word, when I think of all you owe me, I wonder at myself for letting you off at so small a price.”

As soon as he had gone, Edward Cossey gave way to his feelings in language forcible rather than polite. For now, in addition to all the money that he had lost, and the painful exposure to which he had been subjected, he was face to face with a

new difficulty. Either he must make a clean breast of it to Ida about the mortgages being no longer in his hands or he must pretend that he still had them. In the first alternative, the consideration upon which she had agreed to marry him came to nothing. Moreover, Ida was thereby released from her promise, and he was well aware that under these circumstances she would probably break off the engagement. In the second, he would be acting a lie, and the lie would sooner or later be discovered, and what then? Well, if it was after marriage, what would it matter? To a woman of gentle birth there is only one thing more irretrievable than marriage, and that is death. Anyhow, he had suffered so much for the sake of this woman that he did not mean to give her up now. He must meet the mortgages after marriage, that was all.

Facilis est descensus Averni. When a man of the character of Edward Cossey, or

indeed of any character, allows his passions to lead him into a course of deceit, he does not find it easy to check his wild career. From dishonour to dishonour shall he go till at length, in due season, he reaps as he has sown.



CHAPTER XIV.

HOW GEORGE TREATED JOHNNIE.

SOME two or three days before the scene described in the last chapter the faithful George had suddenly announced his desire to visit London.

“What?” said the Squire in astonishment, for George had never been known to go out of his own county before. “Why, what on earth are you going to do in London?”

“Well, Squire,” answered his retainer, looking marvellously knowing, “I don’t rightly know, but there’s a cheap train goes up to this here Exhibition on the Tuesday morning and comes back on the Thursday evening. Ten shillings both ways, that’s the fare, and I see in the *Chronicle*, I du, that there’s a wonnerful show of these new-

fangled self-tying and delivering reapers, sich as they foreigners use over sea in America, and I'm rarely fell on seeing them and having a holiday look round Lunnon town. So as there ain't not northing particler a-doing, if you hain't got anything to say agin it, I think I'll go, Squire."

"All right," said the Squire; "are you going to take your wife with you?"

"Why no, Squire; I said as I wanted to go for a holiday, and that ain't no holiday to take the old missus too," and George chuckled in a manner which evidently meant volumes.

And so it came to pass that on the afternoon of the day of the transfer of the mortgages from Edward Cossey to Mr. Quest the great George found himself wandering vaguely about the vast expanse of the Colinderies, and not enjoying himself in the least. He had been recommended by some travelled individual in Boisingham to a certain lodging near Liverpool Street

Station, which he found with the help of a friendly porter. Thence he set out for the Exhibition, but, being of a prudent mind, thought that he would do well to save his money and walk the distance. So he walked and walked till he was tired, and then, after an earnest consultation with a policeman, he took a 'bus, which an hour later landed him—at the Royal Oak. His further adventures we need not pursue; suffice it to say that, having started from his lodging at three, it was past seven o'clock at night when he finally reached the Exhibition, more thoroughly wearied than though he had done a good day's harvesting.

Here he wandered for a while in continual dread of having his pocket picked, seeking reaping machines and discovering none, till at length he found himself in the gardens, where the electric light display was in full swing. Soon wearying of this, for it was a cold damp night, he made a difficult

path to a buffet inside the building, where he sat down at a little table, and devoured some very unpleasant-looking cold beef. Here slumber overcame him, for his weariness was great, and he dozed.

Presently through the muffled roar and hum of voices, which echoed in his sleep-dulled ears, he caught the sound of a familiar name, that woke him up "all of a heap," as he afterwards said. The name was "Quest." Without moving his body he opened his eyes. At the very next table to his own were seated two people, a man and a woman. He looked at the latter first. She was clad in yellow, and was very tall, thin and fierce-looking; so fierce-looking that George involuntarily jerked his head back, and brought it with painful force in contact with the wall. It was the Tiger herself, and her companion was the coarse, dreadful-looking man called Johnnie, whom she had sent away in the cab on the night of Mr. Quest's visit.

“Oh,” Johnnie was saying, “so Quest is his name, is it, and he lives in a city called Boisingham, does he? Is he an oof bird?” (rich)

“Rather,” answered the Tiger, “if only one can make the dollars run, but he’s a nasty mean boy, he is. Look here, not a cent, not a stiver have I got to bless myself with, and I daren’t ask him for any more not till January. And how am I going to live till January? I got the sack from the music hall last week because I was a bit jolly. And now I can’t get another billet any way, and there’s a bill of sale over the furniture, and I’ve sold all my jewels down to my ticker, or at least most of them, and there’s that brute,” and her voice rose to a subdued scream, “living like a fighting cock while his poor wife is left to starve.”

“‘Wife!’ Oh, yes, we know all about that,” said the gentleman called Johnnie

A look of doubt and cunning passed across the woman's face. Evidently she feared that she had said too much. "Well, it's as good a name as another," she said. "Oh, don't I wish that I could get a grip of him; I'd wring him," and she twisted her long bony hands as washerwomen do when they squeeze a cloth.

"I'd back you to," said Johnnie. "And now, adored Edithia, I've had enough of this blooming show, and I'm off. Perhaps I shall look in down Rupert Street way this evening. Ta-ta."

"Well, you may as well stand a drink first," said the adored one. "I'm pretty dry, I can tell you."

"Certainly, with pleasure; I will order one. Waiter, a brandy-and-soda for this lady—*six* of brandy, if you please; she's very delicate and wants support."

The waiter grinned and brought the drink and the man Johnnie turned round

as though to pay him, but really he went without doing so.

George watched him go, and then looked again at the lady, whose appearance seemed to fascinate him.

“Well, if that ain’t a master one,” he said to himself, “and she called herself his wife, she did, and then drew up like a slug’s horns. Hang me if I don’t stick to her till I find out a bit more of the tale.”

Thus ruminated George, who, be it observed, was no fool, and who had a hearty dislike and mistrust of Mr. Quest. While he was wondering how he was to go to work an unexpected opportunity occurred. The lady had finished her brandy-and-soda, and was preparing to leave, when the waiter swooped down upon her.

“Money please, miss,” he said.

“Money!” she said, “why, you’re paid.”

“Come, none of that,” said the waiter.

“ I want a shilling for the brandy-and-soda.”

“ A shilling, do you? Then you'll have to want, you cheating white-faced rascal you; my friend paid you before he went away.”

“ Oh, we've had too much of that game,” said the waiter, beckoning to a constable, to whom, in spite of the “ fair Edithia's ” very vigorous and pointed protestations, he went on to give her in charge, for it appeared that she had only twopence about her. This was George's opportunity, and he interfered.

“ I think, marm,” he said, “ that the fat gent with you was a-playing of a little game. He only pretended to pay the waiter.”

“ Playing a little game, was he?” gasped the infuriated Tiger. “ If I don't play a little game on him when I get a chance my name is not Edith d'Aubigné, the nasty mean beast—the——”

“Permit me, marm,” said George, putting a shilling on the table, which the waiter took and went away. “I can’t bear to see a real lady like you in difficulty.”

“Well, you are a gentleman, you are,” she said.

“Not at all, marm. That’s my way. And now, marm, won’t you have another?”

No objection was raised by the lady, who had another, with the result that she became if not exactly tipsy at any rate not far off it.

Shortly after this the building was cleared, and George found himself standing in Exhibition Road with the woman on his arm.

“You’re going to give me a lift home, ain’t you?” she said.

“Yes, marm, for sure I am,” said George, sighing as he thought of the cab fare.

Accordingly they got into a hansom, and Mrs. d’Aubigné having given the

address in Pimlico, of which George instantly made a mental note, they started.

“Come in and have a drink,” she said when they arrived, and accordingly he paid the cab—half-a-crown it cost him—and was ushered by the woman with a simper into the gilded drawing-room.

Here the Tiger had another brandy-and-soda, after which George thought that she was about in a fit state for him to prosecute his inquiries.

“Wonderful place this Lunnon, marm; I niver was up here afore and had no idea that I should find folks so friendly. As I was a saying to my friend Laryer Quest down at Boisingham yesterday——”

“Hullo, what’s that?” she said. “Do you know the old man?”

“If you means Laryer Quest, why in course I do, and Mrs. Quest too. Ah! she’s a pretty one, she is.”

Here the lady burst into a flood of incoherent abuse which tired her so much

that she had a fourth brandy-and-soda ; George mixed it for her and he mixed it strong.

“Is he rich?” she asked as she put down the glass.

“What! Laryer Quest? Well I should say that he is about the warmest man in our part of the county.”

“And here am I starving,” burst out the horrible woman with a flood of drunken tears. “Starving without a shilling to pay for a cab or a drink while my wedded husband lives in luxury with another woman. You tell him that I won’t stand it; you tell him that if he don’t find a ‘thou.’ pretty quick I’ll let him know the reason why.”

“I don’t quite understand, marm,” said George; “there’s a lady down in Boisingham as is the real Mrs. Quest.”

“It’s a lie!” she shrieked, “it’s a lie! He married me before he married her. I could have him in the dock to-morrow, and

I would, too, if I wasn't afraid of him, and that's a fact."

"Come, marm, come," said George, "draw it mild from that tap."

"You won't believe me, won't you?" said the woman, on whom the liquor was now beginning to take its full effect; "then I'll show you," and she staggered to a desk, unlocked it and took from it a folded paper, which she opened.

It was a properly certified copy of a marriage certificate, or purported so to be; but George, who was not too quick at his reading, had only time to note the name Quest, and the church, St. Bartholomew's, Hackney, when she snatched it away from him and locked it up again.

"There," she said, "it isn't any business of yours. What right have you to come prying into the affairs of a poor lone woman?" And she sat down upon the sofa beside him, threw her long arm round him, rested her painted face upon his

shoulder and began to weep the tears of intoxication.

“Well, blow me!” said George to himself, “if this ain’t a master one! I wonder what my old missus would say if she saw me in this fix. I say, marm——”

But at that moment the door opened, and in came Johnnie, who had evidently also been employing the interval in refreshing himself, for he rolled like a ship in a sea.

“Well,” he said, “and who the deuce are you? Come get out of this, you Methody parson-faced clodhopper, you. Fairest Edithia, what means this?”

By this time the fairest Edithia had realised who her visitor was, and the trick whereby he had left her to pay for the brandy-and-soda recurring to her mind she sprang up and began to express her opinion of Johnnie in violent and libellous language. He replied in appropriate terms, as according to the newspaper reports

people whose healths are proposed always do, and fast and furious grew the fun. At length, however, it seemed to occur to Johnnie that he, George, was in some way responsible for this state of affairs, for without word or warning he hit him on the nose. This proved too much for George's Christian forbearance.

"You would, you lubber! would you?" he said, and sprang at him.

Now Johnnie was big and fat, but Johnnie was rather drunk, and George was tough and exceedingly strong. In almost less time than it takes to write it he grasped the abominable Johnnie by the scruff of the neck and had with a mighty jerk hauled him over the sofa so that he lay face downwards thereon. By the door quite convenient to his hand stood George's ground ash stick, a peculiarly good and well-grown one which he had cut himself in Honham wood. He seized it. "Now, boär," he said, "I'll

teach you how we do the trick where I come from," and he laid on without mercy. *Whack! whack! whack!* came the ground ash on Johnnie's tight clothes. He yelled, swore and struggled in the grip of the sturdy countryman, but it was of no use, the ash came down like fate; never was a Johnnie so bastinadoed before.

"Give it the brute, give it him," shrilled the fair Edithia, bethinking her of her wrongs, and he did till he was tired.

"Now, Johnnie boär," he panted at last, "I'm thinking I've pretty nigh whacked you to dead. Perhaps you'll larn to be more careful how you handles your betters by-and-by." Then seizing his hat he ran down the stairs without seeing anybody, and slipping into the street crossed over and listened.

They were at it again. Seeing her enemy prostrate the Tiger had fallen on him, with the fire-irons to judge from the noise.

Just then a policeman hurried up,

“I say, master,” said George, “the folk in that there house with the red pillars do fare to be a murdering of each other.”

The policeman listened to the din and then made for the house. Profiting by his absence George retreated as fast as he could, his melancholy countenance shining with sober satisfaction.

On the following morning, before he returned to Honham, George paid a visit to St. Bartholomew’s Church, Hackney. Here he made certain investigations in the registers, the results of which were not unsatisfactory to him.



CHAPTER XV.

EDWARD COSSEY MEETS WITH AN ACCIDENT.

AT the best of times this is not a gay world, though no doubt we ought to pretend that humanity at large is as happy as it is represented to be in, let us say, the Christmas number of an illustrated paper. How well we can imagine the thoughtful inhabitant of this country Anno Domini 7500 or thereabouts disinterring from the crumbling remains of a fireproof safe a Christmas number of the *Illustrated London News* or the *Graphic*. The archaic letters would perhaps be unintelligible to him, but he would look at the pictures with much the same interest that we regard bushmen's drawings or the primitive clay figures of Peru, and though his whole artistic seventy-sixth century soul would

be revolted at the crudeness of the colouring, surely he would moralise thus: "Oh, happy race of primitive men, how I, the child of light and civilisation, envy you your long-forgotten days! Here in these rude drawings, which in themselves reveal the extraordinary capacity for pleasure possessed by the early races, who could look upon them and gather gratification from the sight, may we trace your joyous career from the cradle to the grave. Here you figure as a babe, at whose appearance everybody seems delighted, even those of your race whose inheritance will be thereby diminished—and here a merry lad you revel in the school which the youth of our age finds so wearisome. There, grown more old, you stand at the altar of a beautiful lost faith, a faith that told of hope and peace beyond the grave, and by you stands your blushing bride. No hard fate, no considerations of means, no worldly-mindedness, come to snatch

you from her arms as now they daily do. With her you spend your peaceful days, and here at last we see you old but surrounded by love and tender kindness, and almost looking forward to that grave which you believed would be but the gate of glory. Oh, happy race of simple-minded men, what a commentary upon our fevered, avaricious, pleasure-seeking age is this rude scroll of primitive and infantile art !”

So will some unborn *laudator temporis acti* speak in some dim century to be, when our sorrows have faded and are not.

And yet, though we do not put a record of them in our Christmas numbers, troubles are as troubles have been and will continually be, for however apparently happy the lot of individuals, it is not altogether a cheerful world in which we have been called to live. At any rate so thought Harold Quaritch on that night of the farewell scene with Ida in the churchyard,

and so he continued to think for some time to come. A man's life is always more or less of a struggle; he is a swimmer upon an adverse sea, and to live at all he must keep his limbs in motion. If he grows faint-hearted or weary and no longer strives, for a little while he floats, and then at last, morally or physically, he vanishes. We struggle for our livelihoods, and for all that makes life worth living in the material sense, and not the less are we called upon to struggle with an army of spiritual woes and fears, which now we vanquish and now are vanquished by. Every man of refinement, and many women, will be able to recall periods in his or her existence when life has seemed not only valueless but hateful, when our small successes, such as they are, dwindled away and vanished in the gulf of our many failures, when our hopes and aspirations faded like a little sunset cloud, and we were surrounded by black and

lonely mental night, from which even the star of Faith had passed. Such a time had come to Harold Quaritch now. His days had not, on the whole, been happy days; but he was a good and earnest man, with that touching faith in Providence which is given to some among us, and which had brought with it the reward of an even thankful spirit. And then, out of the dusk of his contentment a hope of happiness had arisen like the Angel of the Dawn, and suddenly life was aflame with the light of love, and became beautiful in his eyes. And now the hope had passed: the woman whom he deeply loved, and who loved him back again, had gone from his reach and left him desolate—gone from his reach, not into the grave, but towards the arms of another man.

Our race is called upon to face many troubles; sickness, poverty and death, but it is doubtful if Evil holds another arrow so sharp as that which pierced him now.

He was no longer young, it is true, and therefore did not feel that intense agony of disappointed passion, that sickening sense of utter loss which in such circumstances sometimes settle on the young. But if in youth we feel more sharply and with a keener sympathy of the imagination, we have at least more strength to bear, and hope does not altogether die. For we know that we shall live it down, or if we do not know it then, we *do* live it down. Very likely, indeed, there comes a time when we look back upon our sorrow and he or she who caused it with wonder, yes even with scorn and bitter laughter. But it is not so when the blow falls in later life. It may not hurt so much at the time, it may seem to have been struck with the bludgeon of Fate rather than with her keen dividing sword, but the effect is more lasting, and for the rest of our days we are numb, and cold, for Time has no salve to heal us.

These things Harold realised most clearly in the heavy days which followed that churchyard separation.

He took his punishment like a brave man indeed, and went about his daily occupations with a steadfast face, but his bold behaviour did not lessen its weight. He had promised not to go away till Ida was married and he would keep the promise, but in his heart he wondered how he should bear the sight of her. What would it be to see her, to touch her hand, to hear the rustle of her dress and the music of her beloved voice, and to realise again and yet again that all these things were not for him, that they had passed from him into the ownership of another man?

On the day following that upon which Edward Cossey had been terrified into transferring the Honham mortgages to Mr. Quest the Colonel went out shooting. He had lately become the possessor of a new hammerless gun by a well-known

London maker, of which he stood in considerable need. Harold had treated himself to this gun when he came into his aunt's little fortune, but it was only just completed. The weapon was a beautiful one, and at any other time it would have filled his sportsman's heart with joy. Even as it was, when he put it together and balanced it and took imaginary shots at blackbirds in the garden, for a little while he forgot his sorrows, for the woe must indeed be heavy which a new hammerless gun by such a maker cannot do something towards lightening. So on the next morning he took this gun and went to the marshes by the river—where, he was credibly informed, several wisps of snipe had been seen—to attempt to shoot some of them and put the new weapon to the test.

It was on this same morning that Edward Cossey got a letter which disturbed him not a little. It was from Belle Quest, and ran thus :

“DEAR MR. COSSEY,—Will you come over and see me this afternoon about three o'clock? I shall *expect* you, so I am sure you will not disappoint me.—B. Q.”

For a long while he hesitated what to do. Belle Quest was at the present juncture the very last person whom he wished to see. His nerves were shaken and he feared a scene, but on the other hand he did not know what danger might threaten him if he refused to go. Quest had got his price, and he knew that he had nothing more to fear from him; but a jealous woman has no price, and if he did not humour her it might, he felt, be at a risk which he could not estimate. Also he was nervously anxious to give no further cause for gossip. A sudden outward and visible cessation of his intimacy with the Quests might, he thought, give rise to surmises and suspicion in a little country town like Boisingham, where all his movements were known. So, albeit with a faint heart, he determined to go.

Accordingly, at three o'clock precisely, he was shown into the drawing-room at the Oaks. Mrs. Quest was not there; indeed he waited for ten minutes before she came in. She was pale, so pale that the blue veins on her forehead showed distinctly through her ivory skin, and there was a curious intensity about her manner which frightened him. She was very quiet also, unnaturally so, indeed; but her quiet was of the ominous nature of the silence before the storm, and when she spoke her words were keen, and quick, and vivid.

She did not shake hands with him, but sat down and looked at him, slowly fanning herself with a painted ivory fan which she took up from the table.

"You sent for me, Belle, and here I am," he said, breaking the silence.

Then she spoke. "You told me the other day," she said, "that you were not engaged to be married to Ida de la

Molle. It is not true. You are engaged to be married to her."

"Who said so?" he asked defiantly. "Quest, I suppose?"

"I have it on a better authority," she answered. "I have it from Miss de la Molle herself. Now listen, Edward Cossey. When I let you go, I made a condition, and that condition was that you should *not* marry Ida de la Molle. Do you still intend to marry her?"

"You had it from Ida," he said, disregarding her question; "then you must have spoken to Ida—you must have told her everything. I suspected as much from her manner the other night. You——"

"Then it is true," she broke in coldly. "It is true, and in addition to your other failings, Edward, you are a coward and—a liar."

"What is it to you what I am or what I am not?" he answered savagely. "What business is it of yours? You have no

hold over me, and no claim upon me. As it is I have suffered enough at your hands and at those of your accursed husband. I have had to pay him thirty thousand pounds, do you know that? But of course you know it. No doubt the whole thing is a plant, and you will share the spoil."

"*Ah!*" she said, drawing a long breath.

"And now look here," he went on. "Once and for all, I will not be interfered with by you. I *am* engaged to marry Ida de la Molle, and whether you wish it or no I shall marry her. And one more thing. I will not allow you to associate with Ida. Do you understand me? I will not allow it."

She had been holding the fan before her face while he spoke. Now she lowered it and looked at him. Her face was paler than ever, paler than death, if that be possible, but in her eyes there shone a light like the light of a flame.

“Why not?” she said quietly.

“Why not?” he answered savagely. “I wonder that you think it necessary to ask such a question, but as you do I will tell you why. Because Ida is the lady whom I am going to marry, and I do not choose that she should associate with a woman who is what you are.”

“*Ah!*” she said again, “I understand now.”

At that moment a diversion occurred. The drawing-room looked on to the garden, and at the end of the garden was a door which opened into another street.

Through this door had come Colonel Quaritch, accompanied by Mr. Quest, the former with his gun under his arm. They walked up the garden and were almost at the French window when Edward Cossey saw them. “Control yourself,” he said in a low voice, “here is your husband.”

Mr. Quest advanced and knocked at the

window, which his wife opened. When he saw Edward Cossey he hesitated a little, then nodded to him, while the Colonel came forward, and placing his gun by the wall entered the room, shook hands with Mrs. Quest, and bowed coldly to Edward Cossey.

“I met the Colonel, Belle,” said Mr. Quest, “coming here with the benevolent intention of giving you some snipe, so I brought him up by the short way.”

“That is very kind of you, Colonel Quaritch,” said she with a sweet smile (for she had the sweetest smile imaginable).

He looked at her. There was something about her face which attracted his attention, something unusual.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“You,” he said bluntly, for they were out of hearing of the other two. “If I were poetically minded I should say that you looked like the Tragic Muse.”

“Do I?” she answered, laughing. “Well,

that is curious, because I feel like Comedy herself."

"There's something wrong with that woman," thought the Colonel to himself as he extracted two couple of snipe from his capacious coat tails. "I wonder what it is."

Just then Mr. Quest and Edward Cossey passed out into the garden talking.

"Here are the snipe, Mrs. Quest," he said. "I have had rather good luck. I killed four couple and missed two couple more; but then I had a new gun, and one can never shoot so well with a new gun."

"Oh, thank you," she said, "do pull out the 'painters' for me. I like to put them in my riding hat, and I can never find them myself."

"Very well," he answered, "but I must go into the garden to do it; there is not light enough here. It gets dark so soon now."

Accordingly he stepped out through the

window, and began to hunt for the pretty little feathers which are to be found at the angle of a snipe's wing.

"Is that the new gun, Colonel Quaritch?" said Mrs. Quest presently; "what a beautiful one!"

"Be careful," he said, "I haven't taken the cartridges out."

If he had been looking at her, which at the moment he was not, Harold would have seen her stagger and catch at the wall for support. Then he would have seen an awful and malevolent light of sudden determination pass across her face.

"All right," she said, "I know about guns. My father used to shoot and I often cleaned his gun," and she took the weapon up and began to examine the engraving on the locks.

"What is this?" she said, pointing to a little slide above the locks on which the word "safe" was engraved in gold letters.

"Oh, that's the safety bolt," he said.

“When you see the word ‘safe,’ the locks are barred and the gun won’t go off. You have to push the bolt forward before you can fire.”

“So?” she said carelessly, and suiting the action to the word.

“Yes, so, but please be careful, the gun is loaded.”

“Yes, I’ll be careful,” she answered. “Well, it is a very pretty gun, and so light that I believe I could shoot with it myself.”

Meanwhile Edward Cossey and Mr. Quest, who were walking up the garden, had separated, Mr. Quest going to the right across the lawn to pick up a glove which had dropped upon the grass, while Edward Cossey slowly sauntered towards them. When he was about nine paces off he too halted and, stooping a little, looked abstractedly at a white Japanese chrysanthemum which was still in bloom. Mrs. Quest turned, as the Colonel thought, to

put the gun back against the wall. He would have offered to take it from her but at the moment both his hands were occupied in extracting one of the "painters" from a snipe. The next thing he was aware of was a loud explosion, followed by an exclamation or rather a cry from Mrs. Quest. He dropped the snipe and looked up, just in time to see the gun, which had leapt from her hands with the recoil, strike against the wall of the house and fall to the ground. Instantly, whether by instinct or by chance he never knew, he glanced towards the place where Edward Cossey stood, and saw that his face was streaming with blood and that his right arm hung helpless by his side. Even as he looked, he saw him put his uninjured hand to his head and, without a word or a sound, sink down on the gravel path.

For a second there was silence, and the blue smoke from the gun hung heavily upon the damp autumn air. In the midst

of it stood Belle Quest like one transfixed, her lips apart, her blue eyes opened wide, and the stamp of terror—or was it guilt?—upon her pallid face.

All this he saw in a flash, and then ran to the bleeding heap upon the gravel.

He reached it almost simultaneously with Mr. Quest, and together they turned the body over. But still Belle stood there enveloped in the heavy smoke.

Presently, however, her trance left her and she ran up, flung herself upon her knees, and looked at her former lover, whose face and head were now a mass of blood.

“He is dead,” she wailed; “he is dead, and I have killed him! Oh, Edward! Edward!”

Mr. Quest turned on her savagely; so savagely that one might almost have thought he feared lest in her agony she should say something further.

“Stop that,” he said, seizing her arm,

“and go for the doctor, for if he is not dead he will soon bleed to death.”

With an effort she rose, put her hand to her forehead, and then ran like the wind down the garden and through the little door.

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