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COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C. BY H. R. HAGGARD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE.

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD,
AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
1889.

I DEDICATE

THIS TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE

TO

MY FRIEND AND FELLOW-SPORTSMAN,

CHARLES J. LONGMAN.

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OF VOLUME I.

COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

HAROLD QUARITCH MEDITATES.

THERE are things and there are faces which, when felt or seen for the first time, stamp themselves upon the mind like a sun image on a sensitized plate and there remain unalterably fixed. To take the instance of a face—we may never see it again, or it may become the companion of our life, but there the picture is just as we *first* knew it, the same smile or frown, the same look, unvarying and unvariable, reminding us in the midst of change of the indestructible nature of every experience, act, and aspect of our days. For that which has been, is, since the past knows no corruption, but lives eternally in its frozen and completed self.

These are somewhat large thoughts to be born of a small matter, but they rose up spontaneously in the mind of a soldierly-looking man who, on the particular evening when this history opens, was leaning over a gate in an Eastern county lane, staring vacantly at a field of ripe corn.

He was a peculiar and rather battered looking individual, apparently over forty years of age, and yet bearing upon him that unmistakable stamp of dignity and self-respect which, if it does not exclusively belong to, is still one of the distinguishing attributes of the English gentleman. In face he was ugly, no other word can express it. Here were not the long mustachios, the almond eyes, the aristocratic air of the Colonel of fiction—for our dreamer was a Colonel. These were—alas! that the truth should be so plain — represented by somewhat scrubby, sandy-coloured whiskers, small but kindly blue eyes, a low broad forehead, with a deep line running across it from side to side, something like that to be seen upon the busts of Julius Cæsar, and a long thin nose. One good feature, however, he did possess, a mouth of such sweetness and beauty that set, as it was, above a very square and manly-looking chin, it had the air of being ludicrously out of place. "Umph," said his old aunt, Mrs.

Massey (who had just died and left him what she possessed), on the occasion of her first introduction to him five-and-thirty years before, "Umph! Nature meant to make a pretty girl of you, and changed her mind after she had finished the mouth. Well, never mind, better be a plain man than a pretty woman. There, go along, boy!—I like your ugly face."

Nor was the old lady peculiar in this respect, for plain as the countenance of Colonel Harold Quaritch undoubtedly was, people found something very taking about it, when once they became accustomed to its rugged air and stern regulated expression. What that something was it would be hard to define, but perhaps the nearest approach to the truth would be to describe it as a light of purity which, notwithstanding the popular idea to the contrary, is quite as often to be found upon the faces of men as upon those of women. Any person of discernment looking on Colonel Quaritch must have felt that he was in the presence of a good man—not a prig or a milksop, but a man who had attained to virtue by thought and struggle that had left their marks upon him; a man whom it would not be well to tamper with, one to be respected by all, and feared of evildoers. Men felt this, and he was popular among those who knew

him in his service, though not in any hail-fellow-well-met kind of way. But among women he was not popular. As a rule they both feared and disliked him. His presence jarred upon the frivolity of the lighter members of their sex, who dimly realised that his nature was antagonistic, and the more solid ones could not understand him. Perhaps this was the reason why Colonel Quaritch had never married, had never even had a love affair since he was five-and-twenty.

And yet it was of a woman that he was thinking as he leant over the gate, and looked at the field of yellowing corn, undulating like a golden sea beneath the pressure of the wind.

Colonel Quaritch had twice before been at Honham, once ten, and once four years ago. Now he was come to abide there for good. His old aunt, Mrs. Massey, had owned a place in the village—a very small place—called Honham Cottage, or Molehill, and on those two occasions he visited her. Mrs. Massey was dead and buried. She had left him the property, and with some reluctance he had given up his profession, in which he saw no further prospects, and come to live upon it. This was his first evening in the place, for he had arrived by the last train on the previous night. All day he had been

busy trying to get the house a little straight, and now, thoroughly tired, he was refreshing himself by leaning over a gate. It is, though a great many people will not believe it, one of the most delightful, and certainly one of the cheapest, refreshments in the world.

And then it was, as he leant over the gate, that the image of a woman's face rose before his mind as it had continually risen during the last five years. Five years had gone since he saw it, and those five years he spent in India and Egypt, that is with the exception of six months which he passed in hospital—the upshot of an Arab spear thrust in the thigh.

It had risen before him in all sorts of places and at all sorts of times; in his sleep, in his waking moments, at mess, out shooting, and even once in the hot rush of battle. He remembered it well—it was at El Teb. It happened that stern necessity forced him to shoot a man with his pistol. The bullet cut through his enemy, and with a few convulsions he died. He watched him die, he could not help doing so, there was some fascination in following the act of his own hand to its dreadful conclusion, and indeed conclusion and commencement were very near together. The terror of the

sight, the terror of what in defence of his own life he was forced to do, revolted him even in the heat of the fight, and even then, over that ghastly and distorted face, another face spread itself like a mask, blotting it out from view—that woman's face. And now again it re-arose, inspiring him with the rather recondite reflections as to the immutability of things and impressions with which this domestic record opens.

Five years is a good stretch in a man's journey through the world. Many things happen to us in that time. If a thoughtful person were to set to work to record all the impressions which impinge upon his mind during that period, he would fill a library with volumes, the mere tale of its events would furnish a shelf. And yet how small they are to look back upon. It seemed but the other day that he was leaning over this very gate, and had turned to see a young girl dressed in black, who, with a spray of honeysuckle thrust in her girdle, and carrying a stick in her hand, was walking leisurely down the lane.

There was something about the girl's air that had struck him while she was yet a long way off—a dignity, a grace, and a set of the shoulders. Then as she came nearer he saw the soft dark eyes and

the waving brown hair that contrasted so strangely and effectively with the pale and striking features. It was not a beautiful face, for the mouth was too large, and the nose was not as straight as it might have been, but there was a power about the broad brow, and a force and solid nobility stamped upon the features which had impressed him strangely. Just as she came opposite to where he was standing, a gust of wind, for there was a stiff breeze, blew the lady's hat off, taking it over the hedge, and he, as in duty bound, scrambled into the field and fetched it for her, and she had thanked him with a quick smile and a lighting up of the brown eyes, and then passed on with a bow.

Yes, with a little bow she had passed on, and he watched her walking down the long level drift, till her image melted into the stormy sunset light, and was gone. When he returned to the cottage he had described her to his old aunt, and asked who she might be, to learn that she was Ida de la Molle (which sounded like a name out of a novel), the only daughter of the old squire who lived at Honham Castle. Next day he had left for India, and saw Miss de la Molle no more.

And now he wondered what had become of her. Probably she was married; so striking a person would

be almost sure to attract the notice of men. And after all what could it matter to him? He was not a marrying man, and women as a class had little attraction for him; indeed he disliked them. It has been said that he had never married, and never even had a love affair since he was five-and-twenty. But though he was not married, he once—before he was five-and-twenty, very nearly took that step. It was twenty years ago now, and nobody quite knew the history, for in twenty years many things are fortunately forgotten. But there was a history, and a scandal, and the marriage was broken off almost on the day it should have taken place. And after that it leaked out in the neighbourhood that the young lady, who by the way was a considerable heiress, had gone off her head, presumably with grief, and been confined in an asylum, where she was believed still to remain.

Perhaps it was the thought of this one woman's face, the woman he had once seen walking down the drift, her figure limned out against the stormy sky, that led him to think of the other face, the face hidden in the madhouse. At any rate, with a sigh, or rather a groan, he swung himself round from the gate and began to walk homeward at a brisk pace.

The drift that he was following is known as the mile drift, and had in ancient times formed the approach to the gates of Honham Castle, the seat of the ancient and honourable family of de la Molle (sometimes written "Delamol" in history and old writings). Honham Castle was now nothing but a ruin, with a manor house built out of the wreck on one side of its square, and the broad way that led to it from the high road which ran from Boisingham,* the local country town, was a drift or grass lane.

Colonel Quaritch followed this drift till he came to the high road, and then turned. A few minutes' walk brought him to a drive opening out of the main road on the left as he faced towards Boisingham. This drive, which was some three hundred yards long, led up a rather sharp slope to his own place, Honham Cottage, or Molehill, as the villagers called it, a title calculated to give a keen impression of a neat spick and span red brick villa with a slate roof. In fact, however, it was nothing of the sort, being a building of the fifteenth century, as a glance

* Said to have been so named after the Boissey family, whose heiress a de la Molle married in the fourteenth century. As, however, the town of Boisingham is mentioned by one of the old chroniclers, this does not seem very probable. No doubt the family took their name from the town or hamlet, not the town from the family.

at its massive flint walls was sufficient to show. In ancient times there had been a large Abbey at Boisingham, two miles away, which, the records tell, suffered terribly from an outbreak of the plague in the fifteenth century. After this the monks obtained ten acres of land, known as Molehill, by grant from the de la Molle of the day, and so named either on account of their resemblance to a molehill (of which more presently), or after the family. On this elevated spot, which was supposed to be peculiarly healthy, they built the little house now called Honham Cottage, whereto to fly when next the plague should visit them.

And as they built it, so, with some slight additions, it had remained to this day, for in those ages men did not skimp their flint, and oak, and mortar. It was a beautiful little spot, situated upon the flat top of a swelling hill, which comprised the ten acres of grazing ground originally granted, and was, strange to say, still the most magnificently-timbered piece of ground in the country side. For on the ten acres of grass land there stood over fifty great oaks, some of them pollards of the most enormous antiquity, and others which had no doubt originally grown very close together, fine upstanding trees with a wonderful length and girth of bole. This place

Colonel Quaritch's aunt, old Mrs. Massey, had bought nearly thirty years before when she became a widow, and now, together with a modest income of two hundred a year, it had passed to him under her will.

Shaking himself clear of his sad thoughts, Harold Quaritch turned round at his own front door to contemplate the scene. The long, single-storied house stood, it has been said, at the top of the rising land, and to the south and west and east commanded as beautiful a view as is to be seen in the county. There, a mile or so away to the south, situated in the midst of grassy grazing grounds, and flanked on either side by still perfect towers, frowned the massive gateway of the old Norman castle. Then, to the west, almost at the foot of Molehill, the ground broke away in a deep bank clothed with timber, which led the eye down by slow descents into the beautiful valley of the Ell. Here the silver river wound its gentle way through lush and poplar-bordered marshes, where the cattle stand knee-deep in flowers; past quaint wooden mill-houses, through Boisingham Old Common, windy looking even now, and brightened here and there with a dash of golden gorse, till it was lost beneath the picturesque cluster of red-tiled roofs that marked the ancient

town. Look which way he would, the view was lovely, and equal to any to be found in the Eastern counties, where the scenery is fine enough in its own way, whatever people may choose to say to the contrary whose imaginations are so weak that they require a mountain and a torrent to excite them into activity.

Behind the house to the north there was no view, and for a good reason, for here in the very middle of the back garden rose a mound of large size and curious shape, which completely shut out the landscape. What this mound, which may perhaps have covered half an acre of ground, was, nobody had any idea. Some learned folk wrote it down a Saxon tumulus, a presumption to which its ancient name, "Dead Man's Mount," seemed to give colour. Other folk, however, yet more learned, declared it to be an ancient British dwelling, and pointed triumphantly to a hollow at the top, wherein the ancient Britishers were supposed to have moved, lived, and had their being—which must, urged the opposing party, have been a very damp one. Thereon the late Mrs. Massey, who was a British dwellingite, proceeded to show with much triumph *how* they had lived in the hole by building a huge mushroom-shaped roof over it, and thereby turning it into a

summer-house, which, owing to unexpected difficulties in the construction of the roof, cost a great deal of money. But as the roof was slated, and as it was found necessary to pave the hollow with tiles and cut surface drains in it, the result did not clearly prove its use as a dwelling-place before the Roman conquest. Nor did it make a very good summer-house. Indeed, it now served as a store place for the gardeners' tools and for rubbish generally.

CHAPTER II.

THE COLONEL MEETS THE SQUIRE.

As Colonel Quaritch was contemplating these various views and reflecting that on the whole he had done well to come and live at Honham Cottage, he was suddenly startled by a loud voice saluting him from about twenty yards distance with such peculiar vigour that he fairly jumped.

"Colonel Quaritch, I believe," said, or rather shouted, the voice from somewhere down the drive.

"Yes," answered the Colonel, mildly, "here I am."

"Ah, I thought it was you. Always tell a military man, you know. Excuse me, but I am resting for a minute, this last pull is an uncommonly stiff one. I always used to tell my dear old friend, Mrs. Massey, that she ought to have the hill cut away a bit just here. Well, here goes for it," and after a few heavy steps his visitor emerged from the shadow of the trees into the sunset light which was playing on the terrace before the house.

Colonel Quaritch glanced up curiously to see who the owner of the great voice might be, and his eyes lit upon as fine a specimen of humanity as he had seen for a long while. The man was old, as his white hair showed, seventy perhaps, but that was the only sign of decay about him. He was a splendid man, broad and thick and strong, with a keen, quick eye, and a face sharply chiselled, and clean shaved, of the stamp which in novels is generally known as aristocratic, a face, in fact, that showed both birth and breeding. Indeed, as clothed in loose tweed garments and a gigantic pair of top boots, his visitor stood, leaning on his long stick and resting himself after facing the hill, Harold Quaritch thought that he had never seen a more perfect specimen of the typical English country gentleman—as the English country gentleman used to be.

"How do you do, sir, how do you do—my name is de la Molle. My man George, who knows everybody's business except his own, told me that you had arrived here, so I thought I would walk round and do myself the honour of making your acquaintance."

"That is very kind of you," said the Colonel.

"Not at all. If you only knew how uncommonly

dull it is down in these parts you would not say that. The place isn't what it used to be when I was a boy. There are plenty of rich people about, but they are not the same stamp of people. It isn't what it used to be in more ways than one," and the old Squire gave something like a sigh, and thoughtfully removed his white hat, out of which a dinner napkin and two pocket-handkerchiefs fell to the ground, in a fashion that reminded Colonel Quaritch of the climax of a conjuring trick.

"You have dropped some—some linen," he said, stooping down to pick the mysterious articles up.

"Oh, yes, thank you," answered his visitor, "I find the sun a little hot at this time of the year. There is nothing like a few handkerchiefs or a towel to keep it off," and he rolled the mass of napery into a ball, and cramming it back into the crown, replaced the hat on his head in such a fashion that about eight inches of white napkin hung down behind. "You must have felt it in Egypt," he went on—"the sun I mean. It's a bad climate, that Egypt, as I have good reason to know," and he pointed again to his white hat, which Harold Quaritch now observed for the first time was encircled by a broad black band.

"Ah, I see," he said, "I suppose that you have had a loss."

"Yes, sir, a very heavy loss."

Now Colonel Quaritch had never heard that Mr. de la Molle had more than one child, Ida de la Molle, the young lady whose face remained so strongly fixed in his memory, although he had scarcely spoken to her on that one occasion five long years ago. Could it be possible that she had died in Egypt? The idea sent a tremor of fear through him, though of course there was no real reason why it should. Deaths are so common.

"Not—not Miss de la Molle?" he said nervously, adding, "I had the pleasure of seeing her once, a good many years ago, when I was stopping here for a few days with my aunt."

"Oh, no, not Ida, she is alive and well, thank God. Her brother James. He went all through that wretched war which we owe to Mr. Gladstone, as I say, though I don't know what your politics are, and then caught a fever, or as I think got touched by the sun, and died on his way home. Poor boy! He was a fine fellow, Colonel Quaritch, and my only son, but very reckless. Only a month or so before he died, I wrote to him to be careful always to put a towel in his helmet, and he an-

swered, in that flippant sort of way he had, that he was not going to turn himself into a dirty clothes bag, and that he rather liked the heat than otherwise. Well, he's gone, poor fellow, in the service of his country, like many of his ancestors before him, and there's an end of him."

And again the old man sighed, heavily this time.

"And now, Colonel Quaritch," he went on, shaking off his oppression with a curious rapidity, that was characteristic of him, "what do you say to coming up to the Castle for your dinner? You must be in a mess here, and I expect that old Mrs. Jobson, whom my man George tells me you have got to look after you, will be glad enough to be rid of you for to-night. What do you say?—take the place as you find it, you know. I believe that there is a leg of mutton for dinner if there is nothing else, because instead of minding his own business I saw George going off to Boisingham to fetch it this morning. At least, that is what he said he was going for; just an excuse to gossip and idle, I fancy."

"Well, really," said the Colonel, "you are very kind; but I don't think that my dress clothes are unpacked yet."

"Dress clothes! Oh, never mind your dress clothes. Ida will excuse you, I daresay. Besides, you have no time to dress. By Jove, it's nearly seven o'clock; we must be off if you are coming."

The Colonel hesitated. He had intended to dine at home, and being a methodical-minded man did not like altering his plans. Also, he was, like most military men, very punctilious about his dress and personal appearance, and objected to going out to dinner in a shooting coat. But all this notwithstanding, a feeling that he did not quite understand, and which it would have puzzled even an American novelist to analyse—something between restlessness and curiosity, with a dash of magnetic attraction thrown in—got the better of his scruples, and he accepted.

"Well, thank you," he said, "if you are sure that Miss de la Molle will not mind, I will come. Just allow me to tell Mrs. Jobson."

"That's right," halloaed the Squire after him, "I'll meet you at the back of the house. We had better go through the fields."

By the time that the Colonel, having informed his housekeeper that he should not want any dinner, and hastily brushed his not too luxuriant locks, had reached the garden which lay behind the house, the

Squire was nowhere to be seen. Presently, however, a loud halloa from the top of the tumulus-like hill announced his whereabouts.

Wondering what the old gentleman could be doing there, Harold Quaritch walked up the steps that led to the summit of the mound, and found him standing at the entrance to the mushroom-shaped summer-house, contemplating the view.

"There, Colonel," he said, "there's a perfect view for you. Talk about Scotland and the Alps! Give me a view of the valley of Ell from the top of Dead Man's Mount on an autumn evening, and I never want to see anything finer. I have always loved it from a boy, and always shall so long as I live—look at those oaks, too. There are no such trees in the country that I know of. The old lady, your aunt, was wonderfully fond of them. I hope—" he went on in a tone of anxiety—"I hope that you don't mean to cut any of them down."

"Oh no," said the Colonel, "I should never think of such a thing."

"That's right. Never cut down a good tree if you can help it. I'm sorry to say, however," he added after a pause, "that I have been forced to cut down a good many myself. Queer place this, isn't it," he continued, dropping the subject of the

trees, which was evidently a painful one to him. "Dead Man's Mount is what the people about here call it, and that is what they called it at the time of the Conquest, as I can prove to you from ancient writings. I always believed that it was a tumulus, but of late years a lot of these clever people have been taking their oath that it is an ancient British dwelling, as though Ancient Britons, or anyone else for that matter, could live in a kind of drain-hole. But they got on the soft side of your old aunt—who by the way, begging your pardon, was a wonderfully obstinate old lady when once she hammered an idea into her head—and so she set to work and built this slate mushroom over the place, and one way and another it cost her two hundred and fifty pounds. Dear me! I shall never forget her face when she saw the bill," and the old gentleman burst out into a Titanic laugh, such as Harold Quaritch had not heard for many a long day.

"Yes," he answered, "it is a queer spot. I think that I must have a dig at it one day."

"By Jove," said the Squire. "I never thought of that. It would be worth doing. Hulloa, it is twenty minutes past seven, and we dine at half past. I shall catch it from Ida. Come on, Colonel Quaritch; you don't know what it is to have a daughter—a

daughter when one is late for dinner is a serious thing for any man," and he started off down the hill in a hurry.

Very soon, however, he seemed to forget the terrors in store, and strolled along, stopping now and again to admire some particular oak or view; chatting all the while in a discursive manner, which, though somewhat aimless, was by no means without its charm. He made a capital companion for a silent man like Harold Quaritch, who liked to hear other people talk.

In this way they went down the slope, and crossing a couple of wheat fields came to a succession of broad meadows, somewhat sparsely timbered. Through these the footpath ran right up to the grim gateway of the ancient castle, which now loomed before them, outlined in red lines of fire against the ruddy background of the sunset sky.

"Ay, it's a fine old place, Colonel, isn't it?" said the Squire, catching the exclamation of admiration that broke from his companion's lips, as a sudden turn brought them into line with the Norman ruin. "History—that's what it is; history in stone and mortar; this is historic ground, every inch of it. Those old de la Molles, my ancestors, and the Boisseys before them, were great folk in their day, and

they kept up their position well. I will take you to see their tombs in the church yonder on Sunday. I always hoped to be buried beside them, but I can't manage it now, because of the Act. However, I mean to get as near to them as I can. I have a fancy for the companionship of those old Barons, though I expect that they were a roughish set in their lifetimes. Look how squarely those towers stand out against the sky. They always remind me of the men who built them — sturdy, overbearing fellows, setting their shoulders against the sea of circumstance and caring neither for man nor devil till the priests got hold of them at the last. Well, God rest them, they helped to make England, whatever their faults. Queer place to choose for a castle, though, wasn't it? right out in an open plain."

"I suppose that they trusted to their moat and walls, and the hagger at the bottom of the dry ditch," said the Colonel. "You see there is no eminence from which they could be commanded, and their archers could sweep all the plain from the battlements."

"Ah, yes, of course they could. It is easy to see that you are a soldier. They were no fools, those old crusaders. My word, we must be getting on. They are hauling down the Union Jack on the

west tower. I always have it hauled down at sunset," and he began walking briskly again.

In another three minutes they had crossed a narrow by-road, and were passing up the ancient drive that led to the castle gates. It was not much of a drive, but there were still some half-dozen of old pollard oaks that had no doubt stood there before the Norman Boissey, from whose family, centuries ago, the de la Molles had obtained the property by marriage with the heiress, had got his charter and cut the first sod of his moat.

Right before them was the gateway of the castle, flanked by two great towers, and these, with the exception of some ruins were, as a matter of fact, all that remained of the ancient building, which had been effectually demolished in the time of Cromwell. The space within, where the keep had once stood, was now laid out as a flower garden, while the house, which was of an unpretentious nature, and built in the Jacobean style, occupied the south side of the square, and was placed with its back to the moat.

"You see I have practically rebuilt those two towers," said the Squire, pausing underneath the Norman archway. "If I had not done it," he added, apologetically, "they would have been in ruins by now, but it cost a pretty penny, I can tell you. No-

body knows what stuff that old flint masonry is to deal with, till he tries it. Well, they will stand now for many a long day. And here we are"—and he pushed open a porch door and then passed up some steps and through a passage into an oak-panelled vestibule, which was hung with tapestry originally taken, no doubt, from the old castle, and decorated with coats of armour, spear heads, and ancient swords.

And here it was that Harold Quaritch once more beheld the face which had haunted his memory for so many months.

CHAPTER III.

THE TALE OF SIR JAMES DE LA MOLLE.

"Is that you, father?" said a voice, a very sweet voice, but one of which the tones betrayed the irritation natural to a healthy woman who has been kept waiting for her dinner. The voice came from the recesses of the dusky room in which the evening gloom had gathered deeply, and looking in its direction, Harold Quaritch could see the outline of a tall form sitting in an old oak chair with its hands crossed.

"Is that you, father? Really it is too bad to be so late for dinner—especially after you blew up that wretched Emma last night because she was five minutes after time. I have been waiting so long that I have almost been asleep."

"I am very sorry, my dear, very," said the old gentleman, apologetically, "but—hullo! I've knocked my head—here, Mary, bring me a light!"

"Here is a light," said the voice, and at the

same moment there was a sound of a match being struck.

In another moment the candle was burning, and the owner of the voice had turned, holding it in such a fashion that its rays surrounded her like an aureole—showing Harold Quaritch that face of which the memory had never left him. There were the same powerful broad brow, the same nobility of look, the same brown eyes and soft waving hair. But the girlhood had gone out of them, the face was now the face of a woman who knew what life meant, and had not found it too easy. It had lost some of its dreaminess, he thought, though it had gained in intellectual force. As for the figure, it was much more admirable than the face, which was strictly speaking not a beautiful one. The figure, however, was undoubtedly beautiful, indeed it is doubtful if many women could show a finer. Ida de la Molle was a large, strong woman, and there was about her a swing and a lissom grace which is very rare, and as attractive as it is rare. She was now nearly six-and-twenty years of age, and not having begun to wither in accordance with the fate which overtakes nearly all unmarried women after thirty, was at her very best. Harold Quaritch, glancing at her well-poised head, her perfect neck and arms (for she

was in evening dress) and her gracious form, thought to himself that he had never seen a nobler looking woman.

"Why, my dear father," she went on as she watched the candle burn up, "you made such a fuss this morning about the dinner being punctually at half-past seven, and now it is eight o'clock and you are not dressed. It is enough to ruin any cook," and she broke off for the first time, seeing that her father was not alone.

"Yes, my dear, yes," said the old gentleman, "I dare say I did. It is human to err, my dear, especially about dinner on a fine evening. Besides I have made amends and brought you a visitor, our new neighbour, Colonel Quaritch. Colonel Quaritch, let me introduce you to my daughter, Miss de la Molle."

"I think that we have met before," said Harold, in a somewhat nervous fashion, as he stretched out his hand.

"Yes," answered Ida, taking it, "I remember. It was in the long drift, five years ago, on a windy afternoon, when my hat blew over the hedge and you went to fetch it."

"You have a good memory, Miss de la Molle,"

said he, feeling not a little pleased that she should have recollected the incident.

"Evidently not better than your own, Colonel Quaritch," was her ready answer. "Besides, one sees so few strangers here that one naturally remembers them. It is a place where nothing happens —time passes, that is all."

Meanwhile the old Squire, who had been making a prodigious fuss with his hat and stick, which he managed to send clattering down the flight of stone steps, departed to get ready, saying in a kind of roar as he went that Ida was to order in the dinner, as he would be down in a minute.

Accordingly she rang the bell, and told the maid to bring in the soup in five minutes and to lay another place. Then turning to Harold she began to apologise to him.

"I don't know what sort of a dinner you will get, Colonel Quaritch," she said, "it is so provoking of my father; he never gives one the least warning when he is going to ask any one to dinner."

"Not at all—not at all," he answered hurriedly. "It is I who ought to apologise, coming down on you like—like——"

"A wolf on the fold," suggested Ida.

"Yes, exactly," he went on earnestly, looking at his coat, "but not in purple and gold."

"Well," she went on laughing, "you will get very little to eat for your pains, and I know that soldiers always like good dinners."

"How do you know that, Miss de la Molle?"

"Oh, because of poor James and his friends whom he used to bring here. By the way, Colonel Quaritch," she went on with a sudden softening of the voice, "you have been in Egypt, I know, because I have so often seen your name in the papers; did you ever meet my brother there?"

"I knew him slightly," he answered. "Only very slightly. I did not know that he was your brother, or indeed that you had a brother. He was a dashing officer."

What he did not say, however, was that he also knew him to have been one of the wildest and most extravagant young men in an extravagant regiment, and as such had to some extent shunned his society on the few occasions when he had been thrown in with him. Perhaps Ida, with a woman's quickness, divined from his tone that there was something behind his remark—at any rate she did not ask him for particulars of their slight acquaintance.

"He was my only brother," she continued; "there

never were but we two, and of course his loss was a great blow to me. My father cannot get over it at all, although——" and she broke off suddenly and rested her head upon her hand.

At this moment the Squire was heard advancing down the stairs, shouting to the servant as he came.

"A thousand pardons, my dear, a thousand pardons," he said, as he entered the room, "but well, if you will forgive particulars, I was quite unable to discover the whereabouts of a certain necessary portion of the male attire. Now, Colonel Quaritch, will you take my daughter? Stop, you don't know the way—perhaps I had better show it to you with the candle."

Accordingly he advanced out of the vestibule, and turning to the left, led the way down a long passage till he reached the dining-room. This apartment was like the vestibule, oak panelled, but the walls were decorated with family and other portraits, including a very curious painting of the Castle itself, as it was before its destruction in the time of Cromwell. This painting was executed on a massive slab of oak, and conceived in a most quaint and formal style, being relieved in the foreground with stags at gaze and woodeny horses, that must, according to any rule of proportion, have been about half as large

as the gateway towers. Evidently, also, it was of an older date than the present house, which is Jacobean, having probably been removed to its present position from the ruins of the Castle. Such as it was, however, it gave a very good idea of what the ancient seat of the Boisseys and de la Molles had been like before the Roundheads had made an end of its glory. The dining-room itself was commodious, though not large. It was lighted by three narrow windows which looked out upon the moat and bore a considerable air of solid comfort. The table, made of black oak, of extraordinary solidity and weight, was matched by a sideboard of the same material and apparently of the same date, both pieces of furniture being, as Mr. de la Molle informed his guest, relics of the Castle.

On this sideboard were placed several pieces of old and massive plate, each of which was rudely engraved with three falcons *or,* the arms of the de la Molle family. One piece, indeed, a very ancient salver, bore those of the Boisseys—a ragged oak, in an escutcheon of pretence—showing thereby that it dated from that de la Molle who in the time of Henry the Seventh had obtained the property by marriage with the Boissey heiress.

Conversation having turned that way as the

dinner, which was a simple one, went on, the old Squire had this piece of plate brought to Harold Quaritch for him to examine.

"It is very curious," he said; "have you much of this, Mr. de la Molle?"

"No indeed," he said; "I wish I had. It all vanished in the time of Charles the First."

"Melted down, I suppose," said the Colonel.

"No, that is the odd part of it. I don't think it was. It was hidden somewhere—I don't know where, or perhaps it was turned into money and the money hidden. But I will tell you the story if you like as soon as we have done dinner."

Accordingly, when the servant had removed the cloth, and after the old fashion placed the wine upon the naked wood, the Squire began his tale, of which the following is the substance.

"In the time of James I. the de la Molle family was at the height of its prosperity, that is, so far as money goes. For several generations previous the representatives of the family had withdrawn themselves from any active participation in public affairs, and living here at small expense upon their lands, which were at that time very large, had amassed a quantity of wealth that, for the age, might fairly be called enormous. Thus, Sir Stephen de la Molle,

the grandfather of the Sir James who lived in the time of James I., left to his son, also named Stephen, a sum of no less than twenty-three thousand pounds in gold. This Stephen was a great miser, and tradition says that he trebled the sum in his lifetime. Anyhow, he died rich as Crœsus, and abominated alike by his tenants and by the country side, as might be expected when a gentleman of his race and fame degraded himself, as this Sir Stephen undoubtedly did, to the practice of usury.

"With the next heir, Sir James, however, the old spirit of the de la Molles seems to have revived, although it is sufficiently clear that he was by no means a spendthrift, but on the contrary a careful man, though one who maintained his station and refused to soil his fingers with such base dealing as it had pleased his uncle to do. Going to court, he became, perhaps on account of his wealth, a considerable favourite with James I., to whom he was greatly attached and from whom he bought a baronetcy. Indeed, the best proof of his devotion is, that he on two occasions lent large sums of money to the King which were never repaid. On the accession of Charles I., however, Sir James left court under circumstances which were never quite cleared up. It is said that smarting under some slight

which was put upon him, he made a somewhat brusque demand for the money that he had lent to James. Thereon the King, with sarcastic wit, congratulated him on the fact that the spirit of his uncle, Sir Stephen de la Molle, whose name was still a byword in the land, evidently survived in the family. Sir James turned white with anger, bowed, and without a word left the court, nor did he ever return thither.

"Years passed, and the civil war was at its height. Sir James had as yet steadily refused to take any share in it. He had never forgiven the insult put upon him by the King, for like most of his race, of whom it was said that they never forgave an injury, and never forgot a kindness, he was a pertinacious man. Therefore he would not lift a finger in the King's cause. But still less would he help the Roundheads, whom he hated with a singular hatred. So time went, till at last, when he was sore pressed, Charles, knowing his great wealth and influence, brought himself to write a letter to this Sir James, appealing to him for support, and especially for money.

"'I hear,' said the King in his letter, 'that Sir James de la Molle, who was afore-tyme well affected to our person and more especially to the late King,

our sainted father, doth stand idle, watching the growing of this bloody struggle and lifting no hand. Such was not the way of the race from which he sprang, which, unless history doth greatly lie, hath in the past been ever found at the side of their kings striking for the right. It is told to me also, that Sir James de la Molle doth thus place himself aside, blowing neither hot nor cold, because of some sharp words which we spake in heedless jest many a year that's gone. We know not if this be true, doubting if a man's memory be so long, but if so it be, then hereby do we crave his pardon, and no more can we do. And now is our estate one of grievous peril, and sorely do we need the aid of God and man. Therefore, if the heart of our subject Sir James de la Molle be not rebellious against us, as we cannot readily credit it to be, we do implore his present aid in men and money, of which last it is said he hath large store, this letter being proof of our urgent need.'

"These were, as nearly as I can remember, the very words of the letter which was written with the king's own hand, and show pretty clearly how hardly he was pressed. It is said that when he read it, Sir James, forgetting his grievance, was much affected, and, taking paper, wrote hastily as follows, which

indeed he certainly did, for I have seen the letter in the Museum. 'My liege,—Of the past I will not speak. It is past. But since it hath graciously pleased your Majesty to ask mine aid against the rebels who would overthrow your throne, rest assured that all I have is at your Majesty's command, till such time as your enemies are discomfited. It hath pleased Providence to so prosper my fortunes that I have stored away in a safe place, till these times be past, a very great sum in gold, whereof I will at once place ten thousand pieces at the disposal of your Majesty, so soon as a safe means can be provided of conveying the same, seeing that I had sooner die than that these great moneys should fall into the hands of rebels to the furtherance of a wicked cause.'

"Then the letter went on to say that the writer would at once buckle to and raise a troop of horse among his tenantry, and that if other satisfactory arrangements could not be made for the conveyance of the moneys, he would bring them in person to the King.

"And now comes the climax of the story. The messenger was captured and Sir James's incautious letter taken from his boot, as a result of which within ten days' time he found himself closely be-

sieged by five hundred Roundheads under the command of one Colonel Playfair. The Castle was but ill-provisioned for a siege, and in the end Sir James was driven by sheer starvation to surrender. No sooner had he obtained an entry, than Colonel Playfair sent for his prisoner, and to his astonishment produced to Sir James's face his own letter to the King.

"'Now, Sir James,' he said, 'we have the hive, and I must ask you to lead us to the honey. Where be those great moneys whereof you talk herein? Fain would I be fingering these ten thousand pieces in gold, the which you have so snugly stored away.'

"'Ay,' answered old Sir James, 'you have the hive, but the secret of the honey you have not, nor shall you have it. The ten thousand pieces in gold is where it is, and with it is much more. Find it if you may, Colonel, and take it if you can.'

"'I shall find it by to-morrow's light, Sir James, or otherwise—or otherwise you die.'

"'I must die—all men do, Colonel, but if I die, the secret dies with me.'

"'This shall we see,' answered the Colonel grimly, and old Sir James was marched off to a cell, and there closely confined on bread and water. But

he did not die the next day, nor the next, nor for a week, indeed.

"Every day he was brought up before the Colonel, and under the threat of immediate death questioned as to where the treasure was, not being suffered meanwhile to communicate by word or sign with any one, save the officers of the rebels. Every day he refused, till at last his inquisitor's patience gave out, and he was told frankly that if he did not communicate the secret he would be shot at the following dawn.

"Old Sir James laughed, and said that shoot him they might, but that he consigned his soul to the Devil if he would enrich them with his treasures, and then asked that his Bible might be brought to him that he might read therein and prepare himself for death.

"They gave him the Bible and left him. Next morning at the dawn, a file of Roundheads marched him into the courtyard of the Castle, and here he found Colonel Playfair and his officers waiting.

"'Now, Sir James, for your last word,' said the Roundhead. 'Will you reveal where the treasure lies, or will you choose to die?'

"'I will not reveal,' answered the old man. 'Murder me if ye will. The deed is worthy of

holy Presbyters. I have spoken and my mind is fixed.'

"'Bethink you,' said the Colonel.

"'I have thought,' he answered, 'and I am ready. Slay me and seek the treasure. But one thing I ask. My young son is not here. In France hath he been these three years, and nought knows he of where I have hid this gold. Send to him this Bible when I am dead. Nay, search it from page to page. There is nought therein save what I have writ here upon this last sheet. It is all I have left to give.'

"'The book shall be searched,' answered the Colonel, 'and if nought is found therein it shall be sent. And now, in the name of God, I adjure you, Sir James, let not the love of lucre stand between you and your life. Here I make you one last offer. Discover but to us the ten thousand pounds whereof you speak in this writing,' and he held up the letter to the King, 'and you shall go free—refuse and you die.'

"'I refuse,' he answered.

"'Musqueteers, make ready,' shouted the Colonel, and the file of men stepped forward.

"But at that moment there came up so furious a squall of wind, and with it such dense and cutting

rain, that for a while the execution was delayed. Presently it passed, the wild light of the November morning swept out from the sky, and revealed the doomed man kneeling in prayer upon the sodden turf, the water running from his white hair and beard.

"They called to him to stand up, but he would not, and continued praying. So they shot him on his knees."

"Well," said Colonel Quaritch, "at any rate he died like a gallant gentleman."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and the servant came in.

"What is it?" asked the Squire.

"George is here, please, sir," said the girl, "and says that he would like to see you."

"Confound him," growled the old gentleman; "he is always here after something or other. I suppose it is about the Moat Farm. He was going to see Janter to-day. Will you excuse me, Quaritch? My daughter will tell you the end of the story if you care to hear any more. I will join you in the drawing-room."

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF THE TALE.

As soon as her father had gone, Ida rose and suggested that if Colonel Quaritch had done his wine they should go into the drawing-room, which they accordingly did. This room was much more modern than either the vestibule or the dining-room, and had an air and flavour of nineteenth century young lady about it. There were the little tables, the draperies, the photograph frames, and all the hundred and one knick-knacks and odds and ends by means of which a lady of taste makes a chamber lovely in the eyes of brutal man. It was a very pleasant place to look upon, this drawing-room at Honham Castle, with its irregular recesses, its somewhat faded colours illuminated by the soft light of a shaded lamp, and its general air of feminine dominion. Harold Quaritch was a man who had seen much of the world, but who had not seen very much of drawing-rooms, or, indeed, of ladies at large. They had not come in his way, or if they did come

in his way he had avoided them. Therefore, perhaps, was he the more susceptible to such influences when he was brought within their reach. Or perchance it was Ida's gracious presence which threw a charm upon the place that added to its natural attractiveness, as the china bowls of lavender and rose leaves added perfume to the air. Anyhow, it struck him that he had rarely before seen a room which conveyed to his mind such strong suggestions of refinement and gentle rest.

"What a charming room," he said, as he entered it.

"I am glad you think so," answered Ida; "because it is my own territory, and I arrange it."

"Yes," he said, "it is easy to see that."

"Well, would you like to hear the end of the story about Sir James and his treasure?"

"Certainly; it interests me very much."

"It positively *fascinates* me," said Ida with emphasis.

"Listen, and I will tell you. After they had shot old Sir James they took the Bible off him, but whether or no Colonel Playfair ever sent it to the son in France, is not clear.

"The story is all known historically, and it is certain that, as my father said, he asked that his

Bible might be sent, but nothing more. This son, Sir Edward, never lived to return to England. After his father's murder, the estates were seized by the Parliamentary party, and the old Castle, with the exception of the gate towers, razed to the ground, partly for military purposes and partly in the long and determined attempt that was made to discover old Sir James's treasure, which might, it was thought, have been concealed in some secret chamber in the walls. But it was all of no use, and Colonel Playfair found that in letting his temper get the better of him and shooting Sir James, he had done away with the only chance of finding the money that he was ever likely to have, for to all appearance the secret had died with its owner. There was a great noise about it at the time, and the Colonel was degraded from his rank in reward for what he had done. It was presumed that old Sir James must have had accomplices in the hiding of so great a mass of gold, and every means was taken, by way of threats and promises of reward—which at last grew to half of the total amount that should be discovered—to induce these to come forward if they existed, but without result. And so the matter went on, till after a few years the quest died away and was forgotten.

"Meanwhile the son, Sir Edward, who was the second and last baronet, led a wandering life abroad, fearing or not caring to return to England now that all his property had been seized. When he was two-and-twenty years of age, however, he contracted an imprudent marriage with his cousin, a lady of the name of Ida Dofferleigh, a girl of good blood and great beauty, but without means. Indeed, she was the sister of Geoffrey Dofferleigh, who was a first cousin and companion in exile of Sir Edward's, and as you will presently see, my lineal ancestor. Well, within a year of this marriage, poor Ida, my namesake, died with her baby of fever, chiefly brought on, they say, by want and anxiety of mind, and the shock seems to have turned her husband's brain. At any rate, within three or four months of her death, he committed suicide. But before he did so, he formally executed a rather elaborate will, by which he left all his estates in England, 'now unjustly withheld from me contrary to law and right by the rebel pretender Cromwell, together with the treasure hidden thereon or elsewhere by my late murdered father, Sir James de la Molle,' to John Geoffrey Dofferleigh, his cousin, and the brother of his late wife, and his heirs for ever, on condition only of his assuming the name and arms of the de

la Molle family, the direct line of which became extinct with himself. Of course, this will, when it was executed, was to all appearance so much waste paper, but within three years from that date Charles II. was King of England.

"Thereon Geoffrey Dofferleigh produced the document, and on assuming the name and arms of de la Molle actually succeeded in obtaining the remains of the Castle and a considerable portion of the landed property, though the baronetcy became extinct. His son it was who built this present house, and he is our direct ancestor, for though my father talks of them as though they were—it is a little weakness of his—the old de la Molles are not our direct male ancestors."

"Well," said Harold, "and did Dofferleigh find the treasure?"

"No, ah no, nor anybody else, the treasure has vanished. He hunted for it a great deal, and he did find those pieces of plate which you saw to-night, hidden away somewhere, I don't know where, but there was nothing else with them."

"Perhaps the whole thing was nonsense," said Harold reflectively.

"No," answered Ida shaking her head, "I am sure it was not, I am sure the treasure is hidden

away somewhere to this day. Listen, Colonel Quaritch —you have not heard quite all the story yet—*I* found something."

"You, what?"

"Wait a minute and I will show you," and going to a cabinet in the corner she unlocked it, and took out a despatch box, which she also unlocked.

"Here," she said, "I found this. It is the Bible that Sir James begged might be sent to his son, just before they shot him, you remember," and she handed him a small brown book. He took it and examined it carefully. It was bound in leather, and on the cover was written in large letters, "Sir James de la Molle. Honham Castle, 1611." Nor was this all. The first sheets of the Bible, which was one of the earliest copies of the authorised version, were torn out, and the top corner was also gone, having to all appearance been shot off by a bullet, a presumption that a dark stain of blood upon the cover and edges brought near to certainty.

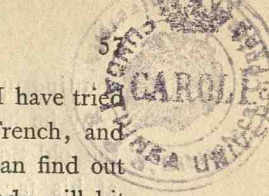
"Poor gentleman," said Harold, "he must have had it in his pocket when he was shot. Where did you find it?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Ida, "in fact I have no doubt of it. I found it when I was a child in an ancient oak chest in the basement of the western

tower, quite hidden up in dusty rubbish and bits of old iron. But look at the end and you will see what he wrote in it to his son, Edward. Here I will show you," and leaning over him she turned to the last page of the book. Between the bottom of the page and the conclusion of the final chapter of Revelations there had been a small blank space now densely covered with crabbed writing in faded ink, which she read aloud. It ran as follows:

"Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly done to death by rebel murderers, for nought happeneth but according to God's will. And now farewell, Edward, till we shall meet in heaven. My monies have I hid and on account thereof I die unto this world, knowing that not one piece shall Cromwell touch. To whom God shall appoint, shall all my treasure be, for nought can I communicate."

"There," said Ida triumphantly, "what do you think of that, Colonel Quaritch? The Bible, I think, was never sent to his son, but here it is, and in that writing, as I solemnly believe," and she laid her white finger upon the faded characters, "lies the key to wherever it is that the money is hidden, only I fear I shall never make it out. For years I have puzzled over it, thinking that it might be some form of



acrostic, but I can make nothing of it. I have tried it all ways. I have translated it into French, and had it translated into Latin, but still I can find out nothing—nothing. But some day somebody will hit upon it—at least I hope so."

Harold shook his head. "I am afraid," he said, "that what has remained undiscovered for so long will remain so till the end of the chapter. Perhaps old Sir James was hoaxing his enemies!"

"No," said Ida, "for if he was, what became of all the money? He was known to be one of the richest men of his day, and that he was rich, we can see from his letter to the King. There was nothing found after his death, except his lands, of course. Oh, it will be found some day, twenty centuries hence probably, much too late to be of any good to us," and she sighed deeply, while a pained and wearied expression spread itself over her handsome face.

"Well," said Harold in a doubtful voice, "there may be something in it. May I take copy of that writing?"

"Certainly," said Ida laughing, "and if you find the treasure we will go shares. Stop, I will dictate it to you."

Just as this process was finished and Harold was

shutting up his pocket-book, in which he put the fair copy he had executed on a half-sheet of note paper, the old Squire came into the room again. Looking at his face, his visitor saw that the interview with "George" had evidently been anything but satisfactory, for it bore an expression of exceedingly low spirits.

"Well, father, what is the matter?" asked his daughter.

"Oh, nothing, my dear, nothing," he answered in melancholy tones. "George has been here, that is all."

"Yes, and I wish he would keep away," she said with a little stamp of her foot, "for he always brings some bad news or other."

"It is the times, my dear, it is the times; it isn't George. I really don't know what has come to the country."

"What is it?" said Ida with a deepening expression of anxiety. "Something wrong about the Moat Farm?"

"Yes; Janter has thrown it up after all, and I am sure I don't know where I am to find another tenant."

"You see what the pleasures of landed property are, Colonel Quaritch," said Ida, turning towards

him with a smile which did not convey a great sense of cheerfulness.

"Yes," he said, "I know. Thank goodness I have only the ten acres that my dear old aunt left to me. And now," he added, "I think that I must be saying good-night. It is half-past ten, and I expect that old Mrs. Jobson is sitting up for me."

Ida looked up in remonstrance, and opened her lips to speak, and then for some reason that did not appear changed her mind and held out her hand. "Good-night, Colonel Quaritch," she said; "I am so pleased that we are going to have you as a neighbour. By-the-way, I have a few people coming to play lawn tennis here to-morrow afternoon, will you come too?"

"What," broke in the Squire, in a voice of irritation, "more lawn tennis parties, Ida? I think that you might have spared me for once—with all this business on my hands, too."

"Nonsense, father," said his daughter, with some acerbity. "How can a few people playing lawn tennnis hurt you? It is quite useless to shut oneself up and be miserable over things that one cannot help."

The old gentleman collapsed with an air of pious resignation, and meekly asked who was coming.

"Oh, nobody in particular. Mr. and Mrs. Jeffries —Mr. Jeffries is our clergyman, you know, Colonel Quaritch—and Dr. Bass and the two Miss Smiths, one of whom he is supposed to be in love with, and Mr. and Mrs. Quest, and Mr. Edward Cossey, and a few more."

"Mr. Edward Cossey," said the Squire, jumping off his chair; "really, Ida, you know I detest that young man, that I consider him an abominable young man; and I think you might have shown more consideration to me than to have asked him here."

"I could not help it, father," she answered, coolly. "He was with Mrs. Quest when I asked her, so I had to ask him too. Besides, I rather like Mr. Cossey, he is always so polite, and I don't see why you should take such a violent prejudice against him. Anyhow he is coming, and there is an end of it."

"Cossey, Cossey," said Harold, throwing himself into the breach, "I used to know that name." It seemed to Ida that he winced a little as he said it. "Is he one of the great banking family?"

"Yes," said Ida, "he is one of the sons. They say he will have half a million of money or more when his father, who is very infirm, dies. He is looking after the branch banks of his house in this part of the world, at least nominally. I fancy that

Mr. Quest really manages them; certainly he manages the Boisingham branch."

"Well, well," said the Squire, "if they are coming, I suppose they are coming. At any rate, I can go out. If you are going home, Quaritch, I will walk with you. I want a little air."

"Colonel Quaritch, you have not said if you will come to my party to-morrow, yet," said Ida, as he stretched out his hand to say good-bye.

"Oh, thank you, Miss de la Molle; yes, I think I can come, though I play tennis atrociously."

"Oh, we all do that. Well, good-night. I am so very pleased that you have come to live at Molehill; it will be so nice for my father to have a companion," she added as an afterthought.

"Yes," said the Colonel grimly, "we are almost of an age—good-night."

Ida watched the door close and then leant her arm on the mantelpiece, and reflected that she liked Colonel Quaritch very much, so much that even his not very beautiful physiognomy did not repel her, indeed rather attracted her than otherwise.

"Do you know," she said to herself, "I think that is the sort of man I should like to marry. Nonsense," she added, with an impatient shrug, "nonsense, you are nearly six-and-twenty, altogether too

old for that sort of thing. And now there is this new trouble about the Moat Farm. My poor old father! Well, it is a hard world, and I think that sleep is about the best thing in it."

And with a sigh she lighted her candle to go to bed, then changed her mind and sat down to await her father's return.

CHAPTER V.

THE SQUIRE EXPLAINS THE POSITION.

"I DON'T know what is coming to this country, I really don't; and that's a fact," said the Squire to his companion, after they had walked some paces in silence. "Here is this farm, the Moat Farm. It fetched twenty-five shillings an acre when I was a young man, and eight years ago it used to fetch thirty-five. Now I have reduced it and reduced it to fifteen, just in order to keep the tenant. And what is the end of it? Janter—he's the tenant—gave notice last Michaelmas; but that stupid owl, George, said it was all nothing, and that he would continue at fifteen shillings when the time came. And now to-night he comes to me with a face as long as a yard-arm, and says that Janter won't keep it at any price, and that he does not know where he is to find another tenant, not he. It's quite heart-breaking, that's what it is. Three hundred acres of good, sound, food-producing land, and no tenant for it at fifteen shillings an acre. What am I to do?"

"Can't you take it in hand and farm it yourself?" asked Harold.

"How can I take it in hand? I have one farm of a hundred and fifty acres in hand as it is. Do you know what it would cost to take over that farm?" and he stopped in his walk and struck his stick into the ground. "Ten pounds an acre, every farthing of it—and say a thousand for the covenants—about four thousand pounds in all. Now where am I to get four thousand pounds to speculate with in that way, for it is a speculation, and one which I am too old to look after myself, even if I had the knowledge. Well, there you are, and now I'll say good night, sir. It's getting chilly, and I have felt my chest for the last year or two. By the way, I suppose I shall see you to-morrow at this tennis party of Ida's. It's all very well for Ida to go in for her tennis parties, but how can I think of such things with all this worry on my hands? Well, good-night, Colonel Quaritch, good-night," and he turned and walked away through the moonlight.

Harold Quaritch watched him go and then stalked off home, reflecting, not without sadness, upon the drama which was opening up before him, that most common of dramas in these days of depression—the break up of an ancient family through

causes beyond control. It required far less acumen and knowledge of the world than he possessed to make it clear to him that the old race of de la Molle was doomed. This story of farms thrown up and money not forthcoming pointed its own moral, and a sad one it was. Even Ida's almost childish excitement about the legend of the buried treasure showed him how present to her mind must be the necessity of money; and he fell to thinking how pleasant it would be to be able to play the part of the Fairy Prince and step in with untold wealth between her and the ruin which threatened her family. How well that grand-looking open-minded old Squire would become a great station, fitted as he was by nature, descent, and tradition, to play the solid part of an English country gentleman of the good old-fashioned kind. It was pitiful to think of a man of his stamp forced by the vile exigencies of a narrow purse to scheme and fight against the advancing tide of destitution. And Ida, too,—Ida, who was equipped with every attribute that can make wealth and power what they should be—a frame to show off her worth and state. Well, it was the way of the world, and he could not mend it; but it was with a bitter sense of the unfitness of things that with some little difficulty—for he was not yet fully

accustomed to its twists and turns—he found his way past the swelling heap of Dead Man's Mount and round the house to his own front door.

He entered the house, and having told Mrs. Jobson that she could go to bed, sat down to smoke and think. Harold Quaritch, like many solitary men, was a great smoker, and never did he feel the need for the consolation of tobacco more than on this night. A few months ago, when he had retired from the army, he found himself in a great dilemma. There he was, a hale, active man of three-and-forty, of busy habits, and regular mind, suddenly thrown upon the world without occupation. What was he to do with himself? While he was asking this question and waiting blankly for an answer which did not come, his aunt, old Mrs. Massey, departed this life, leaving him heir to what she possessed, which might be three hundred a year in all. This, added to his pension and the little that he owned independently, put him beyond the necessity of seeking further employment. So he had made up his mind to come to reside at Molehill, and live the quiet, somewhat aimless, life of a small country gentleman. His reading, for he was a great reader, especially of scientific works, would, he thought, keep him employed. Moreover, he was a thorough sports-

man, and an ardent, though owing to the smallness of his means necessarily not a very extensive, collector of curiosities, and more particularly of coins.

At first, after he had come to his decision, a feeling of infinite rest and satisfaction had taken possession of him. The struggle of life was over for him. No longer would he be obliged to think, and contrive, and toil; henceforth his days would slope gently down towards the inevitable end. Trouble lay in the past, now rest and rest alone awaited him, rest that would gradually grow deeper and deeper as the swift years rolled by, till it was swallowed up in that almighty Peace to which, being a simple and religious man, he had looked forward from childhood as the end and object of his life.

Foolish man and vain imagining! Here, while we draw breath, there is no rest. We must go on continually, on from strength to strength, or weakness to weakness; we must always be troubled about this or that, and must ever have this to desire and that to regret. It is an inevitable law within whose attraction all must fall; yes, even the purest souls, cradled in their hope of heaven; and the most swinish, wallowing in the mud of their gratified desires.

And so our hero had already begun to find out. Here, before he had been forty-eight hours in Honham, a fresh cause of trouble had arisen. He had seen Ida de la Molle again, and after an interval of between five and six years had found her face yet more charming than it was before. In short he had fallen in love with it, and being a sensible man he did not conceal this fact from himself. Indeed the truth was that he had been in love with her for all these years, though he had never looked at the matter in that light. At the least the pile had been gathered and laid, and did but require a touch of the match to burn up merrily enough. And now this was supplied, and at the first glance of Ida's eyes the magic flame began to hiss and crackle, and he knew that nothing short of a convulsion or a deluge would put it out.

Men of the stamp of Harold Quaritch generally pass through three stages with reference to the other sex. They begin in their youth by making a goddess of one of them, and finding out their mistake. Then for many years they look upon woman as the essence and incarnation of evil and a thing no more to be trusted than a jaguar. Ultimately, however, this folly wears itself out, probably in proportion as the old affection fades and dies away, and

is replaced by contempt and regret that so much should have been wasted on that which was of so little worth. Then it is that the danger comes, for then a man puts forth his second venture, puts it forth with fear and trembling, and with no great hope of seeing a golden Argosy sailing into port. And if it sinks or is driven back by adverse winds and frowning skies, there is an end of his legitimate dealings with such frail merchandise.

And now he, Harold Quaritch, was about to put forth this second venture, not of his own desire or free will indeed, but because his reason and judgment were overmastered. In short, he had fallen in love with Ida de la Molle when he first saw her five years ago, and was now in the process of discovering the fact. There he sat in his chair in the old half-furnished room, which he proposed to turn into his dining-room, and groaned in spirit over this portentous discovery. What had become of his fair prospect of quiet years sloping gently downwards, and warm with the sweet drowsy light of afternoon? How was it that he had not known those things that belonged to his peace? And probably it would end in nothing. Was it likely that such a splendid young woman as Ida would care for a superannuated army officer, with nothing to recommend him beyond five

or six hundred a year and a Victoria Cross, which he never wore. Probably if she married at all she would try to marry someone who would assist to retrieve the fallen fortunes of her family, which it was absolutely beyond his power to do. Altogether the outlook did not please him, as he sat there far into the watches of the night, and pulled at his empty pipe. So little did it please him, indeed, that when at last he rose to find his way to bed up the old oak staircase, the only imposing thing in Molehill, he had almost made up his mind to give up the idea of living at Honham at all. He would sell the place and emigrate to Vancouver's Island or New Zealand, and thus place an impassable barrier between himself and that sweet, strong face, which seemed to have acquired a touch of sternness since last he looked upon it five years ago.

Ah, wise resolutions of the quiet night, whither do you go in the garish light of day? To heaven, perhaps, with the mist wreaths and the dew drops.

When the Squire got back to the Castle, he found his daughter still sitting in the drawing-room.

"What, not gone to bed, Ida?" he said.

"No, father, I was going, and then I thought

that I would wait to hear what all this is about Janter and the Moat Farm. It is best to get it over."

"Yes, yes, my dear—yes, but there is not much to tell you. Janter has thrown up the farm after all, and George says that there is not another tenant to be had for love or money. He tried one man, who said that he would not have it at five shillings an acre, as prices are."

"That is bad enough in all conscience," said Ida, pushing at the fireirons with her foot. "What is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" answered her father irritably. "How can I tell you what is to be done? I suppose that I must take the place in hand, that is all."

"Yes, but that costs money, does it not?"

"Of course it does, it costs about four thousand pounds."

"Well," said Ida, looking up, "and where is all that sum to come from? We have not got four thousand pounds in the world."

"Come from? Why I suppose that I must borrow it on the security of the land."

"Would it not be better to let the place go out of cultivation rather than risk so much money?" she answered.

"Go out of cultivation! Nonsense, Ida, how can you talk like that? Why that strong land would be ruined for a generation to come."

"Perhaps it would, but surely it would be better that the land should be ruined than that we should be. Father, dear," she said appealing, laying one hand upon his shoulder, "do be frank with me, and tell me what our position really is. I see you wearing yourself out about business from day to day, and I know that there is never any money for anything, scarcely enough to keep the house going; and yet you will not tell me what we really owe—and I think I have a right to know."

The Squire turned impatiently. "Girls have no head for these things," he said, "so what is the use of talking about it?"

"But I am not a girl; I am a woman of six-and-twenty; and putting other things aside, I am almost as much interested in your affairs as you are yourself," she said with determination. "I cannot bear this sort of thing any longer. I see that abominable man, Mr. Quest, continually hovering about here like a bird of ill-omen, and I cannot bear it; and I tell you what it is, father, if you don't tell me the whole truth at once I shall cry," and she looked as though she meant it.

Now the old Squire was no more impervious to a woman's tears than any other man, and of all Ida's moods, and they were many, he most greatly feared that rare one which took the form of tears. Besides, he loved his only daughter more dearly than anything in the world except one thing, Honham Castle, and could not bear to give her pain.

"Very well," he said, "of course if you wish to know about these things you have a right to. I have desired to spare you trouble, that is all; but as you are so very imperious, the best thing that I can do is to let you have your own way. Still, as it is rather late, if you have no objection I think that I had better put it off till to-morrow."

"No, no, father. By to-morrow you will have changed your mind. Let us have it now. I want to know how much we really owe, and what we have got to live on."

The old gentleman hummed and hawed a little, and after various indications of impatience at last began:

"Well, as you know, our family has for some generations depended upon the land. Your dear mother brought a small fortune with her, five or six thousand pounds, but that, with the sanction of her

trustees, was expended upon improvements to the farms and in paying off a small mortgage. Well, for many years the land brought in about two thousand a year, but somehow we always found it difficult to keep within that income. For instance, it was necessary to repair the gateway, and you have no idea of the expense in which those repairs landed me. Then your poor brother James cost a lot of money, and always would have the shooting kept up in such an extravagant way. Then he went into the army, and heaven only knows what he spent there. Your brother was very extravagant, my dear, and well, perhaps I was foolish; I never could say him no. And that was not all of it, for when the poor boy died he left fifteen hundred pounds of debt behind him, and I had to find the money, if it was only for the honour of the family. Of course you know that we cut the entail when he came of age. Well, and then these dreadful times have come upon the top of it all, and upon my word, at the present moment I don't know which way to turn," and he paused and drummed his fingers uneasily upon a book.

"Yes, father, but you have not told me yet what it is that we owe."

"Well, it is difficult to answer that all in a

minute, perhaps twenty-five thousand on mortgage, and a few floating debts."

"And what is the place worth?"

"It used to be worth between fifty and sixty thousand pounds. It is impossible to say what it would fetch now. Land is practically a drug in the market. But things will come round, my dear. It is only a question of holding on."

"Then if you borrow a fresh sum in order to take up this farm, you will owe about thirty thousand pounds, and if you give five per cent., as I suppose you do, you will have to pay fifteen hundred a year in interest. Now, father, you said that in the good times the land brought in two thousand a year, so, of course, it can't bring in so much now. Therefore, by the time that you have paid the interest, there will be nothing, or less than nothing, left for us to live on."

Her father winced at this cruel and convincing logic.

"No, no," he said, "it is not so bad as that. You jump to conclusions, but really, if you do not mind, I am very tired, and should like to go to bed."

"Father, what is the good of trying to shirk the thing just because it is disagreeable?" she asked

earnestly. "Do you suppose that it is more pleasant to me to talk about it than it is for you? I know that you are not to blame about it. I know that dear James was very thoughtless and extravagant, and that the times are crushing. But to go on like this is only to go to ruin. It would be better for us to live in a cottage on a couple of hundred a year than to try to keep our heads above water here, which we cannot do. Sooner or later these people, Quest, or whoever they are, will want their money back, and then, if they cannot have it, they will sell the place over our heads. I believe that man Quest wants to get it himself—that is what I believe—and set up as a country gentleman. Father, I know it is a dreadful thing to say, but we ought to leave Honham."

"Leave Honham!" said the old gentleman, jumping up in his agitation; "what nonsense you talk, Ida. How can I leave Honham? It would kill me at my age. How can I do it? And, besides, who is to look after the farms and all the business? No, no, we must hang on and trust to Providence. Things may come round, something may happen, one can never tell in this world."

"If we do not leave Honham, then Honham will leave us," answered his daughter, with conviction.

"I do not believe in chances. Chances always go the wrong way—against those who are looking for them. We shall be absolutely ruined, that is all."

"Well, perhaps you are right, perhaps you are right, my dear," said the old Squire wearily. "I only hope that my time may come first. I have lived here all my life, seventy years and more, and I know that I could not live anywhere else. But God's will be done. And now, my dear, go to bed."

She leant down and kissed him, and as she did so saw that his eyes were filled with tears. Not trusting herself to speak, for she felt for him too deeply to do so, she turned away and went, leaving the old man sitting there with his grey head bowed upon his breast.

CHAPTER VI.

LAWYER QUEST.

THE day following that of the conversation just described was one of those glorious autumn mornings which sometimes come as a faint compensation for the utter vileness and bitter disappointment of the season that in this country we dignify by the name of summer. Notwithstanding his vigils and melancholy of the night before, the Squire was up early, and Ida, who between one thing and another had not had the best of nights, heard his loud cheery voice shouting about the place for "George."

Looking out of her bedroom window, she soon perceived that functionary himself, a long, lean, powerful-looking man with a melancholy face and a twinkle in his little grey eyes, hanging about the front steps. Presently her father emerged in a brilliant but ancient dressing-gown, his white locks waving on the breeze.

"Here, George, where are you, George?"

"Here I be," sir."

"Ah, yes; then why don't you say so? I have been shouting myself hoarse for you."

"Yis, Squire," replied the imperturbable George, "I hev been a-standing here for the last ten minutes, and I heard you."

"You heard me, then why the dickens didn't you answer?"

"Because I didn't think as you wanted me, sir. I saw that you hadn't finished your letter."

"Well, then, you ought to. You know very well that my chest is weak, and yet I have to go hallooing all over the place after you. Now look here, have you got that fat pony of yours in the yard?"

"Yis, Squire, the pony is here, and if so be as it is fat it bean't for the want of movement."

"Very well, then, take this letter," and he handed him an epistle sealed with a tremendous seal, "take this letter to Mr. Quest at Boisingham, and wait for an answer. And look here, mind you are about the place at eleven o'clock, for I expect Mr. Quest to see me about the Moat Farm."

"Yis, Squire."

"I suppose that you have heard nothing more from Janter, have you?"

"No, Squire, nawthing. He means to git the place at his own price or chuck it."

"And what is his price?"

"Five shillings an acre. You see, sir, it's this way. That army gent, Major Boston, as is agent for all the College lands down the valley, he be a poor weak fule, and when all these tinants come to him and say that they must either hev the land at five shillings an acre or go, he gits scared, he du, and down goes the rent of some of the best meadow land in the country from thirty-five shillings to five. Of course it don't signify to him not a halfpenny, the College must pay him his salary all the same, and he don't know no more about farming, nor land, nor northing, than my old mare yinder. Well, and what comes of it? Of course every tinant on the place hears that those College lands be going for five shillings an acre, and they prick up their ears and say they must have their land at the same figger, and it's all owing to that Boston varmint, who ought to be kicked through every holl on the place and then drowned to dead in a dyke."

"Yes, you're right there, George, that silly man is a public enemy, and ought to be treated as such, but the times are very bad, with corn down to twenty-nine, very bad."

"I'm not a-saying that they ain't bad, Squire," said his retainer, his long face lighting up; "they

are bad, cruel bad, bad for iverybody. And I'm not denying that they is bad for the tinants, but if they is bad for the tinants they is wus for the landlord. It all comes on his shoulders in the long run. If men find that they can get land at five shillings an acre that's worth twenty, why it isn't in human natur to pay twenty, and if they find that the landlord must go as they drive him, of course they'll lay on the whip. Why, bless you, sir, when a tinant comes and says that he is very sorry but he finds he can't pay his rent, in nine cases out of ten, if you could just look at that man's bank book, you'd find that the bank was paid, the tradesmen were paid, the doctor's paid, iverybody's paid before he thinks about his rent. Let the landlord suffer, because he can't help hisself; but Lord bless us, if a hundred pounds were overdue to the bank it would have the innards out of him in no time, and he knows it. Now as for that varmint, Janter, to tell me that he can't pay fifteen shillings an acre for the Moat Farm, is nonsense. I only wish I had the capital to take it at the price, that I du."

"Well, George," said the Squire, "I think that if it can be managed I shall borrow the money and take the farm on hand. I am not going to let Janter have it at five shillings an acre."

"Ah, sir, that's the best way. Bad as times be, it will go hard if I can't make the interest and the rent out of it too. Besides, Squire, if you give way about this here farm, all the others will come down on you. I'm not saying a word agin your tinants, but where there's money to be made you can't trust not no man."

"Well, well," said the Squire, "perhaps you are right and perhaps you ain't. Right or wrong, you always talk like Solomon in all his glory. Anyway, be off with that note and let me have the answer as soon as you get back. Mind you don't go loafing and jawing about down in Boisingham, because I want my answer."

"So he means to borrow the money if he can get it," said Ida to herself as she sat, an invisible auditor, doing her hair by the open window. "George can do more with him in five minutes than I can in a week, and I know that he hates Janter. I believe Janter threw up the farm because of his quarrelling with George. Well, I suppose that we must take our chance."

Meanwhile George had mounted his cart and departed upon the road to Boisingham, urging his fat pony along as though he meant to be there in twenty minutes. But so soon as he was well out of reach

of the Squire's shouts and sight of the Castle gates, he deliberately turned up a bye lane and jogged along for a mile or more to a farm, where he had a long confabulation with a man about thatching some ricks. Thence he quietly made his way to his own little place, where he proceeded to comfortably get his breakfast, remarking to his wife that he was of opinion that there was no hurry about the Squire's letter, as "laryers" wasn't in the habit of coming to office at eight in the morning.

Breakfast over, the philosophic George got into his cart, the fat pony having been tied up outside, and leisurely drove into the picturesque old town which lay at the head of the valley. All along the main street he met many acquaintances, and with each he found it necessary to stop and have a talk, indeed with two he had a modest half-pint. At length, however, his labour o'er, he arrived at Mr. Quest's office, that, as all the Boisingham world knows, was just opposite the church, of which Mr. Quest was one of the church-wardens, and which but two years before was beautifully restored, mainly owing to his efforts and generous contributions. Driving up to the small and quiet-looking doorway of a very unpretentious building, George descended and knocked. Thereon a clerk opened the door,

and in answer to his inquiries informed him that he believed Mr. Quest had just come over to the office.

In another minute he was shown into an inner room of the ordinary country lawyer's office stamp, and there at the table sat Mr. Quest himself.

Mr. Quest was a man of about forty years of age, rather under than over, with a pale ascetic cast of face, and a quiet and pleasant, though somewhat reserved, manner. His features were in no way remarkable, with the exception of his eyes, which seemed to have been set in his head owing to some curious error of nature. For whereas his general tone was dark, his hair in particular being jet black, these eyes were grey, and jarred extraordinarily upon their companion features. For the rest, he was a man of some presence and with the manners of a gentleman.

"Well, George," he said, "what is it that brings you to Boisingham? A letter from the Squire. Thank you. Take a seat, will you, while I look through it? Umph, wants me to come and see him at eleven o'clock. I am very sorry, but I can't manage that anyway. Ah, I see, about the Moat Farm. Janter told me that he was going to throw it up, and I advised him to do nothing of the sort, but he is a

dissatisfied sort of a fellow, Janter is, and Major Boston has upset the whole country side by his very ill-advised action about the College lands."

"Janter is a warmint and Major Boston, begging his pardon for the language, is an ass, sir. Anyway there it is, Janter has thrown up, and where I am to find a tinant between now and Michaelmas I don't know; in fact, with the College lands going at five shillings an acre there ain't no chance."

"Then what does the Squire propose to do—take the land in hand?"

"Yis, sir, that's it; and that's what he wants to see you about."

"More money, I suppose," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, yis, sir. You see there will be the covenants to meet, and then the farm is three hundred acres, and to stock it proper as it should be means nine pounds an acre quite, on this here heavy land."

"Yes, yes, I know, a matter of four thousand more or less, but where is it to come from, that's the question? Cossey's do not like land now, any more than other banks do. However, I'll see my principal about it. But, George, I can't possibly get up to the Castle at eleven. I have got a church-

wardens' meeting at a quarter to, about that west pinnacle, you know. It is in a most dangerous condition, and by-the-way, before you go I should like to have your opinion, as a practical man, as to the best way to deal with it. To rebuild it would cost a hundred and twenty pounds, and that is more than we see our way to at present, though I can promise fifty if they can scrape up the rest. But about the Squire. I think that the best thing I can do will be to come up to the Castle to lunch, and then I can talk over matters with him. Stay, I will just write him a note. By-the-way, you would like a glass of wine, wouldn't you, George? Nonsense man, here it is in the cupboard, a glass of wine is a good friend to have handy sometimes."

George, who like most men of his stamp could put away his share of liquor and feel thankful for it, drank his glass of wine while Mr. Quest was engaged in writing the note, wondering meanwhile what made the lawyer so civil to him. For George did not like Mr. Quest. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that he hated him. But this was a feeling which he never allowed to appear; he was too much afraid of the man for that, and in his queer way too much devoted to the old Squire's interests to run the risk of imperilling them by the

exhibition of any aversion to Mr. Quest. He knew more of his master's affairs than anybody living, unless perhaps it was Mr. Quest himself, and was aware that the lawyer held the old gentleman in a bondage that could not be broken. Now, George was a man with faults. He was somewhat sly, and, perhaps within certain lines, at times capable of giving the word honesty a liberal interpretation. But amongst many others he had one conspicuous virtue: he loved the old Squire as a Highlandman loves his chief, and would almost, if not quite, have died to serve him. His billet was no easy one, for Mr. de la Molle's temper was none of the best at times, and when things went wrong, as they pretty frequently did, he was exceedingly apt to visit his wrath on the head of the devoted George, saying things to him which he should not have said. But his retainer took it all in the day's work, and never bore malice, continuing in his own cadging pig-headed sort of way to labour early and late to prop up his master's broken fortunes. "Lord, sir," as he once said to Harold Quaritch when the Colonel condoled with him after a violent and unjust onslaught made by the Squire in his presence, "Lord, sir, that ain't nawthing, that ain't. I don't pay no manner of heed to that. Folk du say how as I

wor made for he, like a safety walve for a traction engine."

Indeed, had it not been for George's contrivings and procrastinations, Honham Castle and its owner would have parted company long before.

CHAPTER VII.

EDWARD COSSEY, ESQUIRE.

After George had drunk his glass of wine and given his opinion as to the best way to deal with the dangerous pinnacle on the Boisingham Church, he took the note, untied the fat pony, and ambled off to Honham, leaving the lawyer alone. As soon as he was gone, Mr. Quest threw himself back in his chair—an old oak one, by-the-way, for he had a very pretty taste in old oak and a positive mania for collecting it—and plunged into a brown study.

Presently he leant forward, unlocked the top drawer of his writing table, and extracted from it a letter addressed to himself which he had received that very morning. It was from the principals of the great banking firm of Cossey and Sons, and dated from their head office in Mincing Lane. This letter ran as follows:

"Private and confidential.

"DEAR SIR,—

"We have considered your report as to the extensive mortgages which we hold upon the Honham Castle estates, and have allowed due weight to your arguments as to the advisability of allowing Mr. de la Molle time to give things a chance of righting. But we must tell you that we can see no prospect of any such solution of the matter, at any rate for some years to come. All the information that we are able to gather points to a further decrease in the value of land rather than to a recovery. The interest on the mortgages in question is moreover a year in arrear, probably owing to the non-receipt of rents by Mr. de la Molle. Under these circumstances, much as it grieves us to take action against Mr. de la Molle, with whose family we have had dealings for five generations, we can see no alternative to foreclosure, and hereby instruct you to take the necessary preliminary steps to bring it about in the usual manner. We are, presuming that Mr. de la Molle is not in a position to pay off the mortgages, quite aware of the risks of a forced sale, and shall not be astonished if, in the present unprecedented condition of the land market, such a sale should result in a loss, although the sum recoverable does

not amount to half the valuation of the estates, which was undertaken at our instance about twenty years ago on the occasion of the first advance. The only alternative, however, would be for us to enter into possession of the property or to buy it in. But this would be a course totally inconsistent with the usual practice of the bank, and what is more, our confidence in the stability of landed property is so utterly shattered by our recent experiences, that we cannot burden ourselves by such a course, preferring to run the risk of an immediate loss. This, however, we hope that the historical character of the property and its great natural advantages as a residential estate will avert, or at the least minimise.

"Be so good as to advise us by an early post of the steps you take in pursuance of these instructions.

"We are, dear sir,

"Your obedient servants,

"COSSEY & SON.

"W. Quest, Esq.

"P.S.—We have thought it better to address you direct in this matter, but of course you will communicate the contents of this letter to Mr. Edward

Cossey, and subject to our instructions, which are final, act in consultation with him."

"Well," said Mr. Quest to himself, as he folded up the sheet of paper, "that is about as straight as it can be put. And this is the time that the old gentleman chooses to ask for another four thousand. He may ask, but the answer will be more than he bargains for."

He rose from the chair and began to walk up and down the room in evident perplexity. "If only," he said, "I had twenty-five thousand, I would take up the mortgages myself and foreclose at my leisure. It would be a good investment at the figure, even as things are, and besides, I should like to have that place. Twenty-five thousand, only twenty-five thousand, and now when I want it I have not got it. And I should have had it if it had not been for that tiger, that devil Edith. She has had more than that out of me in the last ten years, and still she is threatening and crying for more, more, more. Tiger; yes, that is the name for her, her own name, too. She would coin one's vitals into money if she could. All Belle's fortune she has had, or nearly all, and most of my savings, and now she wants another five hundred, and she will have it too.

"Here we are," and he drew a letter from his pocket written in a bold but somewhat uneducated woman's hand.

"Dear Bill," it ran, "I've been unlucky again and dropped a pot. Shall want £500 by the 1st October. No shuffling, mind; money down; but I think that you know me too well to play any more larx. When can you tear yourself away and come and give your E—— a look? Bring some tin when you come, and we will have times.—Thine, THE TIGER."

"The Tiger, yes, the Tiger," he gasped, his face working with passion and his grey eyes glinting as he tore the epistle to fragments, threw them down and stamped on them. "Well, be careful that I don't one day cut your claws and paint your stripes. By heaven, if ever a man felt like murder, I do now. Five hundred more, and I haven't five thousand clear in the world. Truly we pay for the follies of our youth! It makes me mad to think of those fools Cossey and Son forcing that place into the market just now. There's a fortune in it at the price. In another year or two I might have recovered myself, that devil of a woman might be dead—and I have several irons in the fire, some of which are sure to turn up trumps. Surely there must be a way out of it somehow. There's a way

out of everything except Death if only one thinks enough, but the thing is to find it," and he stopped in his walk opposite to the window that looked upon the street, and put his hand to his head.

As he did so he caught sight of the figure of a tall gentleman strolling idly towards the office door. For a moment he stared at him blankly, as a man does when he is trying to catch the vague clue to a new idea. Then, as the figure passed out of his view, he brought his fist down heavily upon the sill.

"Edward Cossey, by George!" he said aloud. "There's the way out of it, if only I can work him, and unless I have made a strange mistake, I think I know the road."

A couple of minutes afterwards a tall, shapely young man, of about twenty-four or five years of age, came strolling into the office where Mr. Quest was sitting, to all appearance hard at work at his correspondence. He was dark in complexion and decidedly distinguished looking in feature, with large dark eyes, dark moustachios, and a pale, somewhat Spanish-looking skin. Young as the face was, it had, if observed closely, a somewhat worn and worried air, such as one would scarcely expect to see upon the countenance of a gentleman born to such brilliant fortunes, and so well fitted by nature

to do them justice, as was Mr. Edward Cossey. For it is not every young man with dark eyes and a good figure who is destined to be the future head of one of the most wealthy private banks in England, and to inherit in due course a sum of money in hard cash variously estimated at from half a million to a million sterling. This, however, was the prospect in life that opened out before Mr. Edward Cossey, who was now supposed by his old and eminently business-like father to be in process of acquiring a sound knowledge of the provincial affairs of the house by attending to the working of their branch establishments in the Eastern counties.

"How do you do, Quest?" said Edward Cossey, nodding somewhat coldly to the lawyer and sitting down. "Any business?"

"Well, yes, Mr. Cossey," answered the lawyer, rising respectfully, "there is some business, some very serious business."

"Indeed," said Edward indifferently, "what is it?"

"Well, it is this, the house has ordered a foreclosure on the Honham Castle estates—at least it comes to that——"

On hearing this intelligence Edward Cossey's whole demeanour underwent the most startling trans-

formation—his languor vanished, his eye brightened, and his form became instinct with active life and beauty.

"What the deuce," he said, and then paused. "I won't have it," he went on, jumping up, "I won't have it. I am not particularly fond of old de la Molle, perhaps because he is not particularly fond of me," he added rather drolly, "but it would be an infernal shame to break up that family and sell the house over them. Why they would be ruined! And then there's Ida—Miss de la Molle, I mean—what would become of her? And the old place too. After being in the family for all these centuries I suppose that it would be sold to some confounded counter-skipper or some retired thief of a lawyer. It must be prevented at any price—do you hear, Quest?"

The lawyer winced a little at his chief's contemptuous allusion, and then remarked with a smile, "I had no idea that you were so sentimental, Mr. Cossey, or that you took such a lively interest in Miss de la Molle," and he glanced up to observe the effect of his shot.

Edward Cossey coloured. "I did not mean that I took any particular interest in Miss de la Molle," he said, "I was referring to the family."

"Oh, quite so, though I am sure I don't know

why you shouldn't. Miss de la Molle is one of the most charming women that I ever met, I think the most charming, if I except my own wife Belle," and he again looked up suddenly at Edward Cossey who, for his part, coloured for the second time.

"It seems to me," went on the lawyer, "that a man in your position has a most splendid opportunity of playing knight errant to the lovely damsel in distress. Here is the lady with her aged father about to be sold up and turned out of the estates which have belonged to her family for generations —why don't you do the generous and graceful thing, like the hero in a novel, and take up the mortgages?"

Edward Cossey did not reject this suggestion with the contempt that might have been expected; on the contrary he appeared to be turning the matter over in his mind, for he drummed a little tune with his knuckles and stared out of the window.

"What is the sum?" he said presently.

"Five-and-twenty thousand, and he wants four more, say thirty thousand."

"And where am I going to find thirty thousand pounds to take up a bundle of mortgages which will probably never pay a farthing of interest? Why, I have not got three thousand that I can come at.

Besides," he added, recollecting himself, "why should I interfere?"

"I do not think," answered Mr. Quest, ignoring the latter part of the question, "that with your prospects you would find it difficult to get thirty thousand pounds. I know several who would consider it an honour to lend the money to a Cossey, if only for the sake of the introduction—that is, of course, provided the security was of a legal nature."

"Let me see the letter," said Edward.

Mr. Quest handed him the document conveying the commands of Cossey and Sons, and he read it through twice.

"The old man means business," he said, as he returned it; "that letter was written by him, and when he has once made up his mind it is useless to try and stir him. Did you say that you were going to see the Squire to-day?"

"No, I did not say so, but as a matter of fact I am. His man, George—a shrewd fellow, by the way, for one of these bumpkins—came with a letter asking me to go up to the Castle, so I shall get round there to lunch. It is about this fresh loan that the old gentleman wishes to negotiate. Of course I shall be obliged to tell him that instead of

giving a fresh loan we have orders to serve a notice on him."

"Don't do that just yet," said Edward with decision. "Write to the house and say that their instructions shall be attended to. There is no hurry about the notice, though I don't see how I am to help in the matter. Indeed there is no call upon me."

"Very well, Mr. Cossey. And now, by the way, are you going to the Castle this afternoon?"

"Yes. I believe so. Why?"

"Well, I want to get up there to luncheon, and I am in a fix. Mrs. Quest will want the trap to go there this afternoon. Can you lend me your dog-cart to drive up in? And then perhaps you would not mind if she gave you a lift this afternoon."

"Very well," answered Edward, "that is if it suits Mrs. Quest. Perhaps she may object to carting me about the country."

"I have not observed any such reluctance on her part," said the lawyer dryly, "but we can easily settle the question. I must go home to get some plans before I attend the vestry meeting about that pinnacle. Will you step across with me and we can ask her?"

"Oh yes," he answered. "I have nothing particular to do."

And accordingly, as soon as Mr. Quest had made some small arrangements and given particular directions to his clerks as to his whereabouts for the day, they set off together for the lawyer's private house.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. QUEST'S WIFE.

Mr. Quest lived in one of those ugly but comfortably-built old red brick houses which abound in almost every country town, and which give us the clearest possible idea of the want of taste and love of material comfort that characterised the age in which they were built. This house looked out on to the market place, and had a charming old walled garden at the back, famous for its nectarines, which, together with the lawn tennis court, was, as Mrs. Quest would say, almost enough to console her for living in a town. The front door, however, was only separated by a little flight of steps from the pavement upon which the house abutted.

Entering a large, cool-looking hall, Mr. Quest paused and asked a servant who was passing where her mistress was.

"In the drawing-room, sir," said the girl; and, followed by Edward Cossey, he walked down a long

panelled passage till he reached a door on the left. This he opened quickly and passed through into a charming, modern-looking room, handsomely and even luxuriously furnished, and lighted by French windows opening on to the walled garden.

A little lady dressed in some black material was standing at one of these windows, her arms crossed behind her back, and absently gazing out of it. At the sound of the opening door she turned swiftly, her whole delicate and lovely face lighting up like a flower in a ray of sunshine, the lips slightly parted, and a deep and happy light shining in her violet eyes. Then, all in an instant, it was instructive to observe *how* instantaneously, her glance fell upon her husband (for the lady was Mrs. Quest) and her entire expression changed to one of cold aversion, the light fading out of her face as it does from a November sky, and leaving it cold and hard.

Mr. Quest, who was a man who saw everything, saw this also, and smiled bitterly.

"Don't be alarmed, Belle," he said in a low voice; "I have brought Mr. Cossey with me."

She flushed up to the eyes, a great wave of colour, and her breast heaved; but before she could answer, Edward Cossey, who had stopped behind to wipe some mud off his shoes, entered the room, and

politely offered his hand to Mrs. Quest, who took it coldly enough.

"You are an early visitor, Mr. Cossey," she said.

"Yes," said her husband, "but the fault is mine. I have brought Mr. Cossey over to ask if you can give him a lift up to the Castle this afternoon. I have to go there to lunch, and have borrowed his dogcart."

"Oh yes, with pleasure. But why can't the dogcart come back for Mr. Cossey?"

"Well, you see," put in Edward, "there is a little difficulty; my groom is ill. But there is really no reason why you should be bothered. I have no doubt that a man can be found to bring it back."

"Oh no," she said, with a shrug, "it will be all right; only you had better lunch here, that's all, because I want to start early, and go to an old woman's at the other end of Honham about some fuchsia cuttings."

"I shall be very happy," said he.

"Very well, then, that is settled," said Mr. Quest, "and now I must get my plans and be off to the vestry meeting. I'm late as it is. With your permission, Mr. Cossey, I will order the dogcart as I pass your rooms."

"Certainly," said Edward, and in another moment the lawyer was gone.

Mrs. Quest watched the door close and then sat down in a low armchair, and resting her head upon the back, looked up with a steady, enquiring gaze, full into Edward Cossey's face.

And he too looked at her and thought what a beautiful woman she was, in her own way. She was very small, rounded in her figure almost to stoutness, and possessed the tiniest and most beautiful hands and feet. But her greatest charm lay in the face, which was almost infantile in its shape, and delicate as a moss rose. She was exquisitely fair in colouring—indeed, the darkest things about her were her violet eyes, which in some lights looked almost black by contrast with her white forehead and waving auburn hair.

Presently she spoke.

"Has my husband gone?" she said.

"I suppose so. Why do you ask?"

"Because from what I know of his habits I should think it very likely that he is listening behind the door," and she laughed faintly.

"You seem to have a good opinion of him."

"I have exactly the opinion of him which he deserves," she said bitterly; "and my opinion of

him is that he is one of the wickedest men in England."

"If he is behind the door he will enjoy that," said Edward Cossey. "Well, if he is all this, why did you marry him?"

"Why did I marry him?" she answered, with passion, "because I was forced into it, bullied into it, starved into it. What would you do if you were a defenceless, motherless girl of eighteen, with a drunken father who beat you—yes, beat you with a stick—apologised in the most gentlemanlike way next morning and then went and got drunk again? And what would you do if that father were in the hands of a man like my husband, body and soul in his hands, and if between them pressure was brought to bear, and brought to bear until at last—there, what is the good of going on with it—you can guess the rest."

"Well, and what did he marry you for—your pretty face?"

"I don't know; he said so; it may have had something to do with it. I think it was my ten thousand pounds, for once I had a whole ten thousand pounds of my own, my poor mother left it me, and it was tied up so that my father could not touch it. Well, of course, when I married, my hus-

band would not have any settlements, and so he took it, every farthing."

"And what did he do with it?"

"Spent it upon some other woman in London—most of it. I found him out; he gave her thousands of pounds at once."

"Well, I should not have thought that he was so generous," he said, with a laugh.

She paused a moment and covered her face with her hand, and then went on; "If you only knew, Edward, if you had the faintest idea what my life was till a year and a half ago, when I first saw you, you would pity me and understand why I am bad, and passionate, and jealous, and everything that I ought not to be. I never had any happiness as a girl—how could I in such a home as ours?—and then almost before I was a woman I was handed over to that man. Oh, how I hated him, and what I endured!"

"Yes, it can't have been very pleasant."

"Pleasant—but there, we have done with each other now—we don't even speak much except in public, that's my price for holding my tongue about the lady in London and one or two other little things—so what is the use of talking of it? It was a horrible nightmare, but it has gone. And then,"

she went on, fixing her beautiful eyes upon his face, "then I saw you, Edward, and for the first time in my life I learnt what love was, and I think that no woman ever loved like that before. Other women have had something to care for in their lives, I never had anything till I saw you. It may be wicked, but it's true."

He turned slightly away and said nothing.

"And yet, dear," she went on in a low voice, "I think it has been one of the hardest things of all—my love for you. For, Edward," and she rose and took his hand and looked into his face with her soft eyes full of tears, "I should have liked to be a blessing to you and not a curse, and—and—a cause of sin. Oh, Edward, I should have made you such a good wife, no man could have had a better, and I would have helped you too, for I am not such a fool as I seem, and now I shall do nothing but bring trouble upon you; I know I shall. And it was my fault too, at least most of it; don't ever think that I deceive myself, for I don't; I led you on, I know I did, I meant to—there! Think me as shameless as you like, I meant to from the first. And no good can come of it, I know that, although I would not have it undone. No good can ever come of what is wrong. I may be very wicked,

but I know that——" and she began to cry outright.

This was too much for Edward Cossey, who, as any man must, had been much touched by this unexpected outburst. "Look here, Belle," he blurted out on the impulse of the moment, "I am sick and tired of all this sort of thing. For more than a year my life has been nothing but a living lie, and I can't stand it, and that's a fact. I tell you what it is: I think we had better just take the train to Paris and go off at once, or else give it all up. It is impossible to go on living in this atmosphere of continual falsehood."

She stopped crying. "Do you really care for me enough for that, Edward?" she said.

"Yes, yes," he said, somewhat impatiently, "you can see I do or I should not make the offer. Say the word and I'll do it."

She thought for a moment, and then looked up again. "No," she said, "no, Edward."

"Why?" he asked. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid!" she answered, with a gesture of contempt, "what have I to be afraid of? Do you suppose that such women as I am have any care for consequences? We have got beyond that—that is, for ourselves. But we can still feel a little for

others. It would ruin you to do such a thing, socially and in every other way. You know you have often said that your father would cut you out of his will if you compromised yourself and him like that."

"Oh, yes, he would. I am sure of it. He would never forgive the scandal; he has a hatred of that sort of thing. But I could get a few thousands ready money, and we could change our names and go off to a colony or something."

"It is very good of you to say so," she said humbly. "I don't deserve it, and I will not take advantage of you. You will be sorry that you made the offer by to-morrow. Ah, yes, I know it is only because I cried. No, we must go on as we are until the end comes, and then you can discard me; for all the blame will follow me, and I shall deserve it, too. I am older than you, you know, and a woman; and my husband will make some money out of you, and then it will all be forgotten, and I shall have had my day and go my own way to oblivion, like thousands of other unfortunate women before me, and it will all be the same a hundred years hence, don't you see? But, Edward, remember one thing. Don't play me any tricks, for I am not of the sort to bear it. Have patience and wait for

the end; these things cannot last very long, and I shall never be a burden on you. Don't desert me or make me jealous, for I cannot bear it, I cannot, indeed, and I do not know what I might do—make a scandal or kill myself or you, I'm sure I can't say what. You nearly sent me wild the other day when you were carrying on with Miss de la Molle—ah, yes, I saw it all—I have suspected you for a long time, and sometimes I think that you are really in love with her. And now, sir, I tell you what it is, we have had enough of this melancholy talk to last me for a month. Why did you come here at all this morning, just when I wanted to get you out of my head for an hour or two and think about my garden? I suppose it was a trick of Mr. Quest's bringing you here. He has got some fresh scheme on, I am sure of it from his face. Well, it can't be helped, and since you are here, Mr. Edward Cossey, tell me how you like my new dress," and she posed herself and courtesied before him. "Black, you see, to match my sins and show off my complexion. Doesn't it fit well?"

"Charmingly," he said, laughing in spite of himself, for he felt in no laughing mood, "and now I tell you what it is, Belle, I am not going to stop here all the morning, and lunch, and that sort of

thing. It does not look well, to say the least of it. The probability is that half the old women in Boisingham have got their eyes fixed on the hall door to see how long I stay. I shall go down to the office and come back at half past two."

"A very nice excuse to get rid of me," she said, "but I daresay you are right, and I want to see about the garden. There, good-bye, and mind you are not late, for I want to have a nice drive round to the Castle. Not that there is much need to warn you to be in time when you are going to see Miss de la Molle, is there? Good-bye, good-bye."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHADOW OF RUIN.

MR. QUEST walked to his vestry meeting with a smile upon his thin, gentlemanly-looking face, and rage and bitterness in his heart.

"I caught her that time," he said to himself; "she can do a good deal in the way of deceit, but she can't keep the blood out of her cheeks when she hears that fellow's name. But she is a clever woman, Belle is—how well she managed that little business of the luncheon, and how well she fought her case when once she got me in a cleft stick about Edith and that money of hers, and made good terms too. Ah! that's the worst of it, she has the whip hand of me there; if I could ruin her she could ruin me, and it's no use cutting off one's nose to spite your face. Well! my fine lady," he went on with an ominous flash of his grey eyes, "I shall be even with you yet. Give you enough rope and you will hang yourself. You love this fellow, I know that, and it will go hard if I can't make him break

your heart for you. Bah! you don't know the sort of stuff men are made of. If only I did not happen to be in love with you myself I should not care. If—— Ah! here I am at the church."

The human animal is a very complicated machine, and can conduct the working of an extraordinary number of different interests and sets of ideas, almost, if not entirely, simultaneously. For instance, Mr. Quest—seated at the right hand of the rector in the vestry room of the beautiful old Boisingham Church, and engaged in an animated and even warm discussion with the senior curate on the details of fourteenth century Church work, in which he clearly took a lively interest and which he understood far better than did the curate—would have been exceedingly difficult to identify with the scheming vindictive creature whom we have just followed up the church path. But after all, that is the way of human nature, although it may not be the way of those who try to draw it and who love to paint the villain black as the Evil One and the virtuous heroine so radiant that we begin to fancy we can hear the whispering of her wings. Few people are altogether good or altogether bad; indeed it is probable that the vast majority are neither good nor bad—they have not the strength to be the one or the other. Here and

there, however, we do meet a spirit with sufficient will and originality to press the scale down this way or that, though even then the opposing force, be it good or evil, is constantly striving to bring the balance equal. Even the most wicked men have their redeeming points and their righteous instincts, nor are their thoughts continually fixed upon iniquity. Mr. Quest, for instance, one of the evil geniuses of this history, was, where his plots and passions were not immediately concerned, a man of eminently generous and refined tendencies. Many were the good turns, contradictory as it may seem, that he had done to his poorer neighbours; he had even been known to forego his bills of costs, which is about the highest and rarest exhibition of earthly virtue that can be expected from a lawyer. He was moreover eminently a cultured man, a reader of the classics, in translations if not in the originals, a man with a fine taste in fiction and poetry, and a really sound and ripe archæological knowledge, especially where sacred buildings were concerned. All his instincts, also, were towards respectability. His most burning ambition was to secure a high position in the county in which he lived, and to be classed among the resident gentry. He hated his lawyer's work, and longed to accumulate sufficient means to

be able to give it the good-bye and to indulge himself in an existence of luxurious and learned leisure. Such as he was he had made himself, for he was the son of a poor and inferior country dentist, and had begun life with a good education, it is true, which he chiefly owed to his own exertions, but with nothing else. Had his nature been a temperate nature, with a balance of good to its credit to draw upon, instead of a balance of evil, he was a man who might have gone very far indeed, for in addition to his natural ability he had a great power of work. But unfortunately this was not the case; his instincts on the whole were evil instincts, and his passions —whether of hate, or love, or greed, when they seized him did so with extraordinary violence, rendering him for the time being utterly callous to the rights or feelings of others, provided that he attained his end. In short, had he been born to a good position and large fortune, it is quite possible, providing always that his strong passions had not at some period of his life led him irremediably astray, that he would have lived virtuous and respected, and died in good odour, leaving behind him a happy memory. But fate had placed him in antagonism with the world, and yet had endowed him with a gnawing desire to be of the world, as it

appeared most desirable to him; and then, to complete his ruin circumstances had thrown him into temptations from which inexperience and the headlong strength of his passions gave him no opportunity to escape.

It may at first appear strange that a man so calculating and whose desires seemed to be fixed upon such a material end as the acquirement by artifice or even fraud of the wealth which he coveted, should also nourish in his heart so bitter a hatred and so keen a thirst for revenge upon a woman as Mr. Quest undoubtedly did towards his beautiful wife. It would have seemed more probable that he would have left heroics alone and attempted to turn his wife's folly into a means of wealth and self-advancement: and this would no doubt have been so had Mrs. Quest's estimate of his motives in marrying her been an entirely correct one. She had told Edward Cossey, it will be remembered, that her husband had married her for her money—the ten thousand pounds of which he stood so badly in need. Now this was the truth to a certain extent, and a certain extent only. He had wanted the ten thousand pounds, in fact at the moment money was necessary to him. But, and this his wife had never known or realised, he had been, and still was, also in love

with her. Possibly the ten thousand pounds would have proved a sufficient inducement to him without the love, but the love was none the less there. Their relations, however, had never been happy ones. She had detested him from the first, and had not spared to say so. No man with any refinement —and whatever he lacked Mr. Quest had refinement —could bear to be thus continually repulsed by a woman, and so it came to pass that their intercourse had always been of the most strained nature. Then when she at last had obtained the clue to the secret of his life, under threat of exposure she drove her bargain, of which the terms were complete separation in all but outward form, and virtual freedom of action for herself. This, considering the position, she was perhaps justified in doing, but her husband never forgave her for it. More than that, he determined, if by any means it were possible, to turn the passion which, although she did not know it, he was perfectly aware she bore towards his business superior, Edward Cossey, to a refined instrument of vengeance against her, with what success it will be one of the purposes of this history to show.

Such, put as briefly as possible, were the outlines of the character and aims of this remarkable and contradictory man.

Within an hour and a half of leaving his own house, "The Oaks," as it was called, although the trees from which it had been so named had long since vanished from the garden, Mr. Quest was bowling swiftly along behind Edward Cossey's powerful bay horse towards the towering gateway of Honham Castle. When he was within three hundred yards an idea struck him; he pulled the horse up sharply, for he was alone in the dogcart, and paused to admire the view.

"What a beautiful place!" he reflected to himself with enthusiasm, "and how grandly those old towers stand out against the sky. The Squire has restored them very well, too, there is no doubt about it; I could not have done it better myself. I wonder if that place will ever be mine. Things look black now, but they may come round, and I think I am beginning to see my way."

And then he started the horse on again, reflecting on the unpleasant nature of the business before him. Personally he both liked and respected the old Squire, and he certainly pitied him, though he would no more have dreamed of allowing his liking and pity to interfere with the prosecution of his schemes, than an ardent sportsman would dream of not shooting pheasants because he had happened to

take a friendly interest in their nurture. He had also a certain gentlemanlike distaste to being the bearer of crushing bad news, for Mr. Quest disliked scenes, possibly because he had such an intimate personal acquaintance with them. Whilst he was still wondering how he might best deal with the matter, he passed over the moat and through the ancient gateway which he admired so fervently, and found himself in front of the hall door. Here he pulled up, looking about for somebody to take his horse, when suddenly the Squire himself emerged upon him with a rush.

"Hullo, Quest, is that you?" he shouted, as though his visitor had been fifty yards off instead of five. "I have been looking out for you. Here, William! Willam!" (crescendo), "William!" (fortissimo), "where on earth is the boy? I expect that idle fellow, George, has been sending him on some of his errands instead of attending to them himself. Whenever he is wanted to take a horse he is nowhere to be found, and then it is 'Please, sir, Mr. George,' that's what he calls him, 'Please, sir, Mr. George sent me up to the Moat Farm or somewhere to see how many eggs the hens laid last week,' or something of the sort. That's a very nice horse you have got there, by the way, very nice indeed."

"It is not my horse, Mr. de la Molle," said the lawyer, with a faint smile, "it is Mr. Edward Cossey's."

"Oh! it's Mr. Edward Cossey's, is it?" answered the old gentleman, with a sudden change of voice. "Ah, Mr. Edward Cossey's? Well, it's a very good horse anyhow, and I suppose that Mr. Cossey can afford to buy good horses."

Just then a faint cry of "Coming, sir, coming," was heard, and a long hobble-de-hoy kind of youth, whose business it was to look after the not extensive Castle stables, emerged in a great heat from round the corner of the house.

"Now, where on earth have you been?" began the Squire, in a stentorian tone.

"If you please, sir, Mr. George——"

"There, what did I tell you?" broke in the Squire. "Have I not told you time after time that you are to mind your own business, and leave 'Mr. George' to mind his? Now take that horse round to the stables, and see that it is properly fed.

"Come in, Quest, come in. We have a quarter of an hour before luncheon, and can get our business over," and he led the way through the passage into the tapestried and panelled vestibule, where he took his stand before the empty fireplace.

Mr. Quest followed him, stopping, ostensibly to admire a particularly fine suit of armour which hung upon the wall, but really to gain another moment for reflection.

"A beautiful suit of the early Stuart period, Mr. de la Molle," he said; "I never saw a better."

"Yes, yes, that belonged to old Sir James, the one whom the Roundheads shot."

"What! the Sir James who hid the treasure?"

"Yes. I was telling that story to our new neighbour, Colonel Quaritch, last night—a very nice fellow, by the way; you should go and call upon him."

"I wonder what he did with it," said Mr. Quest.

"Ah, so do I, and so will many another, I dare say. I wish that I could find it, I'm sure. It's wanted badly enough now-a-days. But that reminds me, Quest. You will have gathered my difficulty from my note and what George told you. You see this man, Janter—thanks to that confounded fellow, Major Bolton, and his action about those college lands—has thrown up the Moat Farm, and George tells me that there is not another tenant to be had for love or money. In fact, you know what it is, one can't get tenants now-a-days, they simply are not to be had. Well, under these circumstances,

there is, of course, only one thing to be done that I know of, and that is to take the farm in hand and farm it myself. It is quite impossible to let the place fall out of cultivation—and that is what would happen otherwise, for if I were to lay it down in grass it would cost a considerable sum, and be seven or eight years before I got any return."

The Squire paused and Mr. Quest said nothing.

"Well," he went on, "that being so, the next thing to do is to obtain the necessary cash to pay Janter his valuation and stock the place—about four thousand would do it, or perhaps," he added, with an access of generous confidence, "we had better say five. There are about fifty acres of those low-lying meadows which want to be thoroughly bush drained—bushes are quite as good as pipes for that stiff land, if they put in the right sort of stuff, and it don't cost half so much—but still it can't be done for nothing, and then there is a new wagon shed wanted, and some odds and ends; yes, we had better say five thousand."

Still Mr. Quest made no answer, so once more the Squire went on.

"Well, you see, under these circumstances—not being able to lay hands upon the necessary capital from my private resources, of course I have made

up my mind to apply to Cossey and Son for the loan. Indeed, considering how long and intimate has been the connection between their house and the de la Molle family, I think it right and proper to do so; indeed, I should consider it very wrong of me if I neglected to give them the opportunity of the investment"—here a faint smile flickered for an instant on Mr. Quest's face and then went out —"of course they will, as a matter of business, require security, and very properly so, but as this estate is unentailed, there will fortunately be little difficulty about that. You can draw up the necessary deeds, and I think that under the circumstances the right thing to do would be to charge the Moat Farm specifically with the amount. Things are bad enough, no doubt, but I can hardly suppose it possible under any conceivable circumstances that the farm would not be good for five thousand pounds. However, they might perhaps prefer to have a general clause as well, and if it is so, although I consider it quite unnecessary, I shall raise no objection to that course."

Then at last Mr. Quest broke his somewhat ominous silence.

"I am very sorry to say, Mr. de la Molle," he said, gently, "that I can hold out no prospect of

Cossey and Son being induced, under any circumstances, to advance another pound upon the security of the Honham Castle estates. Their opinion of the value of landed property as security has received so severe a shock, that they are not at all comfortable as to the safety of the amount already invested."

Mr. de la Molle started when he heard this most unexpected bit of news, for which he was totally unprepared. He had always found it possible to borrow money, and it had never occurred to him that a time might perhaps come in this country, when the land, which he held in almost superstitious veneration, would be so valueless a form of property that lenders would refuse it as security.

"Why," he said, recovering himself, "the total encumbrances on the property do not amount to more than twenty-five thousand pounds, and when I succeeded to my father, forty years ago, it was valued at fifty, and the Castle and premises have been thoroughly repaired since then at a cost of five thousand, and most of the farm buildings also."

"Very possibly, Mr. de la Molle, but to be honest, I very much doubt if Honham Castle and the lands round it would now fetch twenty-five thousand pounds

on a forced sale. Competition and Radical agitation have brought estates down more than people realise, and land in Australia and New Zealand is now worth almost as much per acre as cultivated lands in England. Perhaps as a residential property and on account of its historical interest it might fetch more, but I doubt it. In short, Mr. de la Molle, so anxious are Cossey and Son in the matter, that I regret to have to tell you that so far from being willing to make a further advance, the firm have formally instructed me to serve the usual six months' notice on you, calling in the money already advanced on mortgage, together with the interest, which I must remind you is nearly a year overdue, and this step I propose to take to-morrow."

The old gentleman staggered for a moment, and caught at the mantelpiece, for the blow was a heavy one, and as unexpected as it was heavy. But he recovered himself in an instant, for it was one of the peculiarities of his character that his spirits always seemed to rise to the occasion in the face of urgent adversity—in short, he possessed an extraordinary share of moral courage.

"Indeed," he said indignantly, "indeed, it is a pity that you did not tell me that at once, Mr. Quest; it would have saved me from putting myself

in a false position by proposing a business arrangement which is not acceptable. As regards the interest, I admit that it is as you say, and I very much regret it. That stupid fellow George is always so dreadfully behindhand with his accounts that I can never get anything settled." (He did not state, and indeed did not know, that the reason that the unfortunate George was behindhand was that there were no accounts to make up, or rather that they were all on the wrong side of the ledger.) "I will have that matter seen to at once. Of course, business people are quite right to consider their due, and I do not blame Messrs. Cossey in the matter, not in the least. Still, I must say that, considering the long and intimate relationship that has for nearly two centuries existed between their house and my family, they might—well—have shown a little more consideration."

"Yes," said Mr Quest, "I daresay that the step strikes you as a harsh one. To be perfectly frank with you, Mr. de la Molle, it struck me as a very harsh one; but, of course, I am only a servant, and bound to carry out my instructions. I sympathise with you very much—very much indeed."

"Oh, don't do that," said the old gentleman. "Of course, other arrangements must be made; and,

much as it will pain me to terminate my connection with Messrs. Cossey, they shall be made."

"But I think," went on the lawyer without any notice of his interruption, "that you misunderstand the matter a little. Cossey and Son are only a trading corporation, whose object is to make money by lending it, or otherwise—at all hazards to make money. The kind of feeling that you allude to, and that might induce them, in consideration of long intimacy and close connection in the past, to forego the opportunity of so doing and even to run a risk of loss, is a thing which belongs to former generations. But the present is a strictly commercial age, and we are the most commercial of the trading nations. Cossey and Son move with the times, that is all, and they would rather sell up a dozen families who had dealt with them for two centuries than lose five hundred pounds, provided, of course, that they could do so without scandal and loss of public respect, which, where a banking house is concerned, also means a loss of custom. I am a great lover of the past myself, and believe that our ancestors' ways of doing business were, on the whole, better and more charitable than ours, but I have to make my living and take the world as I find it, Mr. de la Molle."

"Quite so, Quest; quite so," answered the Squire quietly. "I had no idea that you looked at these matters in such a light. Certainly the world has changed a good deal since I was a young man, and I do not think it has changed much for the better. But you will want your luncheon; it is hungry work talking about foreclosures." Mr. Quest had not used this unpleasant word, but the Squire had seen his drift. "Come into the next room," and he led the way to the drawing-room, where Ida was sitting reading the *Times*.

"Ida," he said, with an affectation of heartiness which did not, however, deceive his daughter, who knew how to read every change of her dear father's face, "here is Mr. Quest. Take him in to luncheon, my love. I will come presently. I want to finish a note."

Then he returned to the vestibule and sat down in his favourite old oak chair.

"Ruined," he said to himself. "I can never get the money as things are, and there will be a foreclosure. Well, I am an old man and I hope that I shall not live to see it. But there is Ida. Poor Ida! I cannot bear to think of it, and the old place too, after all these generations—after all these generations!"

CHAPTER X.

THE TENNIS PARTY.

IDA shook hands coldly enough with the lawyer, for whom she cherished a dislike not unmixed with fear. Many women are by nature gifted with an extraordinary power of intuition which fully makes up for their deficiency in reasoning force. They do not conclude from the premisses of their observation, they *know* that this man is to be feared and that trusted. In fact, they share with the rest of breathing creation that self-protective instinct of instantaneous and almost automatic judgment, given to guard it from the dangers with which it is continually threatened at the hands of man's overmastering strength and ordered intelligence. Ida was one of these. She knew nothing to Mr. Quest's disadvantage, indeed she always heard him spoken of with great respect, and curiously enough she liked his wife. But she could not bear the man, feeling in her heart that he was not only to be avoided on ac-

count of his own hidden qualities, but that he was moreover an active personal enemy.

They went into the dining-room, where the luncheon was set, and while Ida allowed Mr. Quest to cut her some cold boiled beef, an operation in which he did not seem to be very much at home, she came to a rapid conclusion in her own mind. She had seen clearly enough from her father's face that his interview with the lawyer had been of a most serious character, but she knew that the chances were that she would never be able to get its upshot out of him, for the old gentleman had a curious habit of keeping such unpleasant matters to himself until he was absolutely forced by circumstances to reveal them. She also knew that her father's affairs were in a most critical condition, for this she had extracted from him on the previous night, and that if any remedy was to be attempted it must be attempted at once, and on some heroic scale. Therefore, she made up her mind to ask her *bête noire,* Mr. Quest, what the truth might be.

"Mr. Quest," she said, with some trepidation, as he at last triumphantly handed her the beef, "I hope you will forgive me for asking you a plain question, and that, if you can, you will favour me with a plain answer. I know my father's affairs are very much

involved, and that he is now anxious to borrow some more money; but I do not know quite how matters stand, and I want to learn the exact truth."

"I am very glad to hear you speak so, Miss de la Molle," answered the lawyer, "because I was trying to make up my mind to broach the subject, which is a painful one to me. Frankly, then—forgive me for saying it, your father is absolutely ruined. The interest on the mortgages is a year in arrear, his largest farm has just been thrown upon his hands, and, to complete the tale, the mortgagees are going to call in their money or foreclose."

At this statement, which was almost brutal in its brief comprehensiveness, Ida turned pale as death, as well she might and dropped her fork with a clatter upon the plate.

"I did not realise that things were quite so bad," she murmured. "Then, I suppose that the place will be taken from us, and we shall—shall have to go away."

"Yes, certainly, unless money can be found to take up the mortgages, of which I see no chance. The place will be sold for what it will fetch, and that now-a-days will be no great sum."

"When will that be?" she asked.

"In about six or nine months' time."

Ida's lips trembled, and the sight of the food upon her plate became nauseous to her. A vision arose before her mind's eye of herself and her old father departing hand in hand from the Castle gates, behind and about which gleamed the hard wild lights of a March sunset, to seek a place to hide themselves. The vivid horror of the phantasy almost overcame her.

"Is there no way of escape?" she asked hoarsely. "To lose this place would kill my father. He loves it better than anything in the world; his whole life is wrapped up in it."

"I can quite understand that, Miss de la Molle; it is a most charming old place, especially to anybody interested in the past. But unfortunately mortgagees are no respecters of feelings. To them land is so much property and nothing more."

"I know all that," she said impatiently, "you do not answer my question;" and she leaned towards him, resting her hand upon the table. "Is there no way out of it?"

Mr. Quest drank a little claret before he answered. "Yes," he said, "I think that there is, if only you will take it."

"What way?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, though as I said just now, the mortgagees

of an estate as a body are merely a business corporation, and look at things from a business point of view only, you must remember that they are composed of individuals, and that individuals can be influenced if they can be got at. For instance, Cossey and Son are an abstraction and harshly disposed in their abstract capacity, but Mr. Edward Cossey is an individual, and I should say, so far as this particular matter is concerned, a benevolently disposed individual. Now Mr. Edward Cossey is not himself at the present moment actually one of the firm of Cossey and Son, but he is the heir of the head of the house, and of course has authority, and, what is better still, the command of money."

"I understand," said Ida. "You mean that my father should try to win over Mr. Edward Cossey. Unfortunately, to be frank, he dislikes him, and my father is not a man to keep his dislikes to himself."

"People generally do dislike those to whom they are crushingly indebted; your father dislikes Mr. Cossey because his name is Cossey, and for no other reason. But that is not quite what I meant—I do not think that the Squire is the right person to undertake a negotiation of the sort. He is a little too outspoken and incautious. No, Miss de la Molle, if

it is to be done at all *you* must do it. You must put the whole case before him at once—this very afternoon, there is no time for delay; you need not enter into details, he knows all about them—only ask him to avert this catastrophe. He can do so if he likes, how he does it is his own affair."

"But, Mr. Quest," said Ida, "how can I ask such a favour of any man? I shall be putting myself in a dreadfully false position."

"I do not pretend, Miss de la Molle, that it is a pleasant task for any young lady to undertake. I quite understand your shrinking from it. But sometimes one has to do unpleasant things and make compromises with one's self-respect. It is a question whether or no your family shall be utterly ruined and destroyed. There is, as I honestly believe, no prospect whatever of your father being able to get the money to pay off Cossey and Son, and if he did, it would not help him, because he could not pay the interest on it. Under these circumstances you have to choose between putting yourself in an equivocal position and letting events take their course. It would be useless for anybody else to undertake the task, and of course I cannot guarantee that even you will succeed, but I will not mince matters—as you doubtless know, any man would find it hard to

refuse a favour asked by such a suppliant. And now you must make up your own mind. I have shown you a path that may lead your family from a position of the most imminent peril. If you are the woman I take you for, you will not shrink from following it."

Ida made no reply, and in another moment the Squire came in to take a couple of glasses of sherry and a biscuit. But Mr. Quest, furtively watching her face, said to himself that she had taken the bait and that she would do it. Shortly after this a diversion occurred, for the clergyman, Mr. Jeffries, a pleasant little man, with a round and shining face and a most unclerical eyeglass, came up to consult the Squire upon some matter of parish business, and was shown into the dining-room. Ida took advantage of his appearance to effect a retreat to her own room, and there for the present we may leave her to her meditations.

No more business was discussed by the Squire that afternoon. Indeed it interested Mr. Quest, who was above all things a student of character, to observe how wonderfully the old gentleman threw off his trouble. To listen to him energetically arguing with the Rev. Mr. Jeffries as to whether or no it would be proper, as had hitherto been the custom,

to devote the proceeds of the harvest festival collection (£1 18s. 3d. and a brass button) to the county hospital, or whether it should be applied to the repair of the woodwork in the vestry, was under the circumstances most instructive. The Rev. Mr. Jeffries, who suffered severely from the condition of the vestry, at last gained his point by triumphantly showing that no patient from Honham had been admitted to the hospital for fifteen months, and that therefore the hospital had no claim on this particular year, whereas the draught in the vestry was enough to cut any clergyman in two.

"Well, well," said the old gentleman, "I will consent for this year, and this year only. I have been churchwarden of this parish for between forty and fifty years, and we have always given the harvest festival collection to the hospital, and although under these exceptional circumstances it may possibly be desirable to diverge from that custom, I cannot and will not consent to such a thing in a permanent way. So I shall write to the Secretary and explain the matter, and tell him that next year and in the future generally the collection will be devoted to its original purpose."

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Quest to himself. "And the man must know that in all human

probability the place will be sold over his head before he is a year older. I wonder if he puts it on or if he deceives himself. I suppose he has lived here so long that he cannot realise a condition of things under which he will cease to live here and the place will belong to somebody else. Or perhaps he is only brazening it out." And then he strolled away to the back of the house and had a look at the condition of the outhouses, reflecting that some of them would be sadly expensive to repair for whoever came into possession here. After that he crossed the moat and walked through the somewhat extensive plantations at the back of the house, wondering if it would not be possible to get enough timber out of them, if one went to work judiciously, to pay for putting the place in order. Presently he came to a hedgerow where a row of very fine timber oaks had stood, of which the Squire had been notoriously fond and of which he had himself taken particular and admiring notice in the course of the previous winter. The trees were gone. In the hedge where they had grown were a series of gaps like those in an old woman's jaw, and the ground was still littered with remains of bark and branches and of faggots that had been made up from the brushwood.

"Cut down this spring fell," was Mr. Quest's

ejaculation. "Poor old gentleman, he must have been pinched before he consented to part with those oaks."

Then he turned and went back to the house, just in time to see Ida's guests arriving for the lawn tennis party. Ida herself was standing on the lawn behind the house, which, bordered as it was by the moat and at the further end by a row of ruined arches, was one of the most picturesque in the country and a very effective setting to any young lady. As the people came they were shown through the house on to the lawn, and here she was receiving them. She was dressed in a plain, tight-fitting gown of blue flannel, which showed off her perfect figure to great advantage, and a broad-brimmed hat, that shaded her fine and dignified face. Mr. Quest sat down on a bench beneath the shade of an arbutus, watching her closely, and indeed, if the study of a perfect English lady of the noblest sort has any charms, he was not without his reward. There are some women—most of us know one or two—who are born to hold a great position, and to sail across the world like a swan through meaner fowl. It would be very hard to say to what their peculiar charm and dignity is owing. It is not to beauty only, for though they have presence, many of these

women are not beautiful, while some are even plain. Nor does it spring from native grace and tact alone; though these things must be present. Rather perhaps is it the reflection of a cultivated intellect acting upon a naturally pure and elevated temperament, which makes these ladies conspicuous and fashions them in such kind that all men, putting aside the mere charm of beauty and the natural softening of judgment in the atmosphere of sex, must recognise in them an equal mind, and a presence more noble than their own.

Such a woman was Ida de la Molle, and if any one doubted it, it was sufficient to compare her in her simplicity to the various human items by whom she was surrounded. They were a typical county society gathering, such as needs no description, and would not greatly interest if described; neither very good nor very bad, very handsome nor very plain, but moving religiously within the lines of custom and on the ground of commonplace.

It was no wonder, then, that a woman like Ida de la Molle was *facile princeps* among such company, or that Harold Quaritch, who was somewhat poetically inclined for a man of his age, at any rate where the lady in question was concerned, should in his heart have compared her to a queen. Even Belle

Quest, lovely as she undoubtedly was in her own way, paled and looked shop-girlish in face of that gentle dignity, a fact of which she was evidently aware, for although the two women were friendly, nothing would induce the latter to stand long near Ida in public. She would tell Edward Cossey that it made her look like a wax doll by a live child.

While Mr. Quest was still watching Ida with complete satisfaction, for she appealed to the artistic side of his nature, Colonel Quaritch arrived upon the scene, looking, Mr. Quest thought, particularly plain with his solid form, his long thin nose, light whiskers, and square massive chin. Also he looked particularly imposing in contrast to the youths and maidens and domesticated clergymen. There was a gravity, almost a solemnity, about his bronzed countenance and deliberate ordered conversation, which did not, however, favourably impress the aforesaid youths and maidens, if a judgment might be formed from such samples of conversational criticism as Mr. Quest heard going on on the further side of his arbutus.

CHAPTER XI.

IDA'S BARGAIN.

WHEN Ida saw the Colonel coming, she put on her sweetest smile and took his outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Colonel Quaritch?" she said. "It is very good of you to come, especially as you don't play tennis much—by the way I hope you have been studying that cypher, for I am sure it is a cypher."

"I studied it for half-an-hour before I went to bed last night, Miss de la Molle, and for the life of me I could not make anything out of it, and what's more, I don't think that there is anything to make out."

"Ah," she answered with a sigh, "I wish there was."

"Well, I'll have another try at it. What will you give me if I find it out?" he said with a smile which lighted up his rugged face most pleasantly.

"Anything you like to ask and that I can give," she answered in a tone of earnestness which struck

him as peculiar, for of course he did not know the news that she had just heard from Mr. Quest.

Then for the first time for many years, Harold Quaritch delivered himself of a speech that might have been capable of a tender and hidden meaning.

"I am afraid," he said, bowing, "that if I came to claim the reward, I should ask for more even than you would be inclined to give."

Ida blushed a little. "We can consider that when you do come, Colonel Quaritch—excuse me, but here are Mrs. Quest and Mr. Cossey, and I must go and say how do you do."

Harold Quaritch looked round, feeling unreasonably irritated at this interruption to his little advances, and for the first time saw Edward Cossey. He was coming along in the wake of Mrs. Quest, looking very handsome and rather languid, when their eyes met, and to speak the truth, the Colonel's first impression was not a complimentary one. Edward Cossey was in some ways not a bad fellow, but like a great many young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths, he had many airs and graces, one of which was the affectation of treating older and better men with an assumption of off-handedness and even of superiority that was rather obnoxious. Thus while Ida was greeting Mrs. Quest,

he was engaged in taking in the Colonel in a way which irritated that gentleman considerably.

Presently Ida turned and introduced Colonel Quaritch, first to Mrs. Quest and then to Mr. Cossey. Harold bowed to each, and then strolled off to meet the Squire, whom he noted advancing with his usual array of protective towels hanging out of his hat, and for a while saw neither of them any more.

Meanwhile Mr. Quest had emerged from the shelter of his arbutus, and going from one person to another, said some pleasant and appropriate word to each, till at last he reached the spot where his wife and Edward Cossey were standing. Nodding affectionately at the former, he asked her if she was not going to play tennis, and then drew Cossey aside.

"Well, Quest," said the latter, "have you told the old man?"

"Yes, I told him."

"How did he take it?"

"Oh, talked it off and said that of course other arrangements must be made. I spoke to Miss de la Molle too."

"Indeed," said Edward, in a changed tone, "and how did she take it?"

"Well," answerd the lawyer, putting on an air of deep concern (and as a matter of fact he really did

feel sorry for her), "I think it was the most painful professional experience that I ever had. The poor woman was utterly crushed. She said that it would kill her father."

"Poor girl!" said Mr. Cossey, in a voice that showed his sympathy to be of a very active order, "and how pluckily she is carrying it off too—look at her," and he pointed to where Ida was standing, a lawn tennis bat in her hand and laughingly arranging a "set" of married *versus* single.

"Yes, she is a spirited girl," answered Mr. Quest, "and what a splendid woman she looks, doesn't she? I never saw anybody who was so perfect a lady—there is nobody to touch her round here, unless," he added meditatively, "perhaps it is Belle."

"They are different types of beauty," answered Edward Cossey, flinching.

"Yes, but equally striking in their separate ways. Well, it can't be helped, but I feel sorry for that poor woman and the old gentleman too—ah, there he is."

As he was speaking the Squire, who was walking past with Colonel Quaritch, with the object of showing him the view from the end of the moat, suddenly came face to face with Edward Cossey. He at once

stepped forward to greet him, but to his surprise was met by a cold and most stately bow from Mr. de la Molle, who passed on without vouchsafing a single word.

"Old idiot!" ejaculated Mr. Quest to himself, "he will put Cossey's back up and spoil the game."

"Well," said Edward aloud and colouring almost to his eyes. "That old gentleman knows how to be insolent."

"You must not mind him, Mr. Cossey," answered Quest hastily. "The poor old boy has a very good idea of himself—he is dreadfully injured because Cossey and Son are calling in the mortgages after the family has dealt with them for so many generations; and he thinks that you have something to do with it."

"Well, if he does he might as well be civil. It does not particularly incline a fellow to go aside to pull him out of the ditch, just to be cut in that fashion—I have half a mind to order my trap and go."

"No, no, don't do that—you must make allowances, you must indeed—look, here is Miss de la Molle coming to ask you to play tennis."

At this moment Ida arrived and took off Edward

Cossey with her, not a little to the relief of Mr. Quest, who began to fear that the whole scheme was spoiled by the Squire's unfortunate magnificence of manner.

Edward played his game, having Ida herself as his partner. It cannot be said that the set was a pleasant one for the latter, who, poor woman, was doing her utmost to bring up her courage to the point necessary to the carrying out of the appeal *ad misericordiam*, which she had decided to make as soon as the game was over. However, chance put an opportunity in her way, for Edward Cossey, who had a curious weakness for flowers, asked her if she would show him her chrysanthemums, of which she was very proud. She consented readily enough. They crossed the lawn, and passing through some shrubbery reached the greenhouse, which was placed at the end of the Castle itself. Here for some minutes they looked at the flowers, just now bursting into bloom. Ida, who felt exceedingly nervous, was all the while wondering how on earth she could broach so delicate a subject, when fortunately Mr. Cossey himself gave her the necessary opening.

"I can't imagine, Miss de la Molle," he said, "what I have done to offend your father—he almost cut me just now."

"Are you sure that he saw you, Mr. Cossey; he is very absent-minded sometimes?"

"Oh yes, he saw me, but when I offered to shake hands with him he only bowed in rather a crushing way and passed on."

Ida broke off a Scarlet Turk from its stem, and nervously began to pick the bloom to pieces.

"The fact is, Mr. Cossey—the fact is, my father, and indeed I also, are in great trouble just now, about money matters you know, and my father is very apt to be prejudiced—in short, I rather believe that he thinks you may have something to do with his difficulties—but perhaps you know all about it."

"I know something, Miss de la Molle," said he gravely, "and I hope and trust you do not believe that I have anything to do with the action which Cossey and Son have thought fit to take."

"No, no," she said hastily. "I never thought anything of the sort—but I know that you have influence—and, well, to be plain, Mr. Cossey, I implore of you to use it. Perhaps you will understand that it is very humiliating for me to be obliged to ask this, though you can never guess *how* humiliating. Believe me, Mr. Cossey, I would never ask it for myself, but it is for my father—he loves this place better than his life; it would be much better he

should die than that he should be obliged to leave it; and if this money is called in, that is what must happen, because the place will be sold over us. I believe he would go mad, I do indeed," and she stopped speaking and stood before him, the fragment of the flower in her hand, her breast heaving with emotion.

"What do you suggest should be done, Miss de la Molle?" said Edward Cossey gently.

"I suggest that—that—if you will be so kind, you should persuade Cossey and Son to forego their intention of calling in the money."

"It is quite impossible," he answered. "My father has ordered the step himself, and he is a hard man. It is impossible to turn him if he thinks he will lose money by turning. You see he is a banker, and has been handling money all his life, till it has become a sort of god to him. Really I believe that he would rather beggar every friend he has than lose five thousand pounds."

"Then there is no more to be said. The place must go, that's all," replied Ida, turning away her head and affecting to busy herself in removing some dried leaves from a chrysanthemum plant. Edward, watching her however, saw her shoulders shake and a big tear fall like a raindrop on the pavement, and the sight, strongly attracted as he was and had for

some time been towards the young lady, was altogether too much for him. In an instant, moved by an overwhelming impulse, and something not unlike a gust of passion, he came to one of those determinations which so often change the whole course and tenour of men's lives.

"Miss de la Molle," he said rapidly, "there may be a way found out of it."

She looked up enquiringly, and there were the tear stains on her face.

"Somebody might take up the mortgages and pay off Cossey and Son."

"Can you find anyone who will?" she asked eagerly.

"No, not as an investment. I understand that thirty thousand pounds are required, and I tell you frankly that as times are I do not for one moment believe the place to be worth that amount. It is all very well for your father to talk about land recovering itself, but at present, at any rate, nobody can see the faintest chance of anything of the sort. The probabilities are, on the contrary, that as the American competition increases, land will gradually sink to something like a prairie value."

"Then how can the money be got if nobody will advance it?"

"I did not say that nobody would advance it; I said that nobody would advance it as an investment —a friend might advance it."

"And where is such a friend to be found? He must be a very disinterested friend who would advance thirty thousand pounds."

"Nobody in this world is quite disinterested, Miss de la Molle; or at any rate very few are. What would you give to such a friend?"

"I would give anything and everything over which I have control in the world, to save my father from seeing Honham sold over his head," she answered simply.

Edward Cossey laughed a little. "That is a large order," he said. "Miss de la Molle, *I* am disposed to try and find the money to take up these mortgages. I have not got it, and I shall have to borrow it, and what is more, I shall have to keep the fact that I have borrowed it a secret from my father."

"It is very good of you," said Ida faintly, "I don't know what to say."

For a moment he made no reply, and looking at him, Ida saw that his hand was trembling.

"Miss de la Molle," he said, "there is another matter of which I wish to speak to you. Men are

sometimes put into strange positions, partly through their own fault, partly by force of circumstances, and when in those positions are forced down paths that they would not follow. Supposing, Miss de la Molle, that mine were some such position, and supposing that owing to that position I could not say to you words which I should wish to say——"

Ida began to understand now and once more turned aside.

"Supposing, however, that at some future time the difficulties of that position of which I have spoken, were to fade away, and I were then to speak those words, can you, supposing all this—tell me how they would be received?"

Ida paused, and thought. She was a strong-natured and clear-headed woman, and she fully understood the position. On her answer would depend whether or no the thirty thousand pounds were forthcoming, and therefore, whether or no Honham Castle would pass from her father and her race.

"I said just now, Mr. Cossey," she answered coldly, "that I would give anything and everything over which I have control in the world, to save my father from seeing Honham sold over his head. I do not wish to retract those words, and I think

that in them you will find an answer to your question."

He coloured. "You put the matter in a very business-like way," he said.

"It is best put so, Mr. Cossey," she answered with a faint shade of bitterness in her tone; "it preserves me from feeling under an obligation—will you see my father about these mortgages?"

"Yes, to-morrow. And now I will say good-bye to you," and he took her hand, and with some little hesitation kissed it. She made no resistance and showed no emotion.

"Yes," she answered, "we have been here some time; Mrs. Quest will wonder what has become of you."

It was a random arrow, but it went straight home, and for the third time that day Edward Cossey reddened to the roots of his hair. Without answering a word he bowed and went.

When Ida saw this, she was sorry she had made the remark, for she had no wish to appear to Mr. Cossey (the conquest of whom gave her neither pride nor pleasure) in the light of a spiteful, or worse still, of a jealous woman. She had indeed heard some talk about him and Mrs. Quest, but not being of a scandal-loving disposition it had not in-

terested her, and she had almost forgotten it. Now however she learned that there was something in it.

"So that is the difficult position of which he talks," she said to herself; "he wants to marry me as soon as he can get Mrs. Quest off his hands. And I have consented to that, always provided that Mrs. Quest can be disposed of, in consideration of the receipt of a sum of thirty thousand pounds. And I do not like the man. It was not nice of him to make that bargain, though I brought it on myself. I wonder if my father will ever know what I have done for him, and if he will appreciate it when he does. Well, it is not a bad price—thirty thousand pounds—a good figure for any woman in the present state of the market." And with a hard and bitter laugh, and a prescience of sorrow to come lying at the heart, she threw down the remains of the Scarlet Turk and turned away.

CHAPTER XII.

GEORGE PROPHESIES.

IDA, for obvious reasons, said nothing to her father of her interview with Edward Cossey, and thus it came to pass that on the morning following the lawn tennis party, there was a very serious consultation between the faithful George and his master. It appeared to Ida, who was lying awake in her room, to commence somewhere about daybreak, and it certainly continued with short intervals for refreshment till eleven o'clock in the forenoon. First the Squire explained the whole question to George at great length, and with a most extraordinary multiplicity of detail, for he began at his first loan from the house of Cossey and Son, which he had contracted a great many years before. All this while George sat with a very long face, and tried to look as though he were following the thread of the argument, which was not possible, for his master had long ago lost it himself, and was mixing up the loan of 1863 with the loan of 1874, and the money

raised on the severance of the entail with both, in a way which would have driven anybody except George, who was used to this sort of thing, perfectly mad. However he sat it through, and when at last the account was finished, remarked that things "sartainly did look queer."

Thereupon the Squire called him a stupid owl, and having by means of some test questions discovered that he knew very little of the details which had just been explained to him at such portentous length, in spite of the protest of the wretched George, who urged that they "didn't seem to be gitting no forrader somehow," he began and went through every word of it again.

This brought them to breakfast time, and after breakfast, George's accounts were thoroughly gone into, with the result that confusion was soon worse confounded, for either George could not keep accounts or the Squire could not follow them. Ida, sitting in the drawing-room, could occasionally hear her father's ejaculatory outbursts after this kind:

"Why, you stupid donkey, you've added it up all wrong, it's nine hundred and fifty, not three hundred and fifty;" followed by a "No, no, Squire, you be a-looking on the wrong side—them there is the dibits," and so on till both parties were fairly

played out, and the only thing that remained clear was that the balance was considerably on the wrong side.

"Well," said the Squire at last, "there you are, you see. It appears to me that I am absolutely ruined, and upon my word I believe that it is a great deal owing to your stupidity. You have muddled and muddled and muddled till at last you have muddled us out of house and home."

"No, no, Squire, don't say that—don't you say that. It ain't none of my doing, for I've been a good sarvant to you if I haven't had much book larning. It's that there dratted borrowing, that's what it is, and the interest and all the rest on it, and though I says it as didn't ought, poor Mr. James, God rest him and his free-handed ways. Don't you say it's me, Squire."

"Well, well," answered his master, "it doesn't much matter whose fault it is, the result is the same, George; I'm ruined, and I suppose that the place will be sold if anybody can be found to buy it. The de la Molles have been here between four and five centuries, and they got it by marriage with the Boisseys, who got it from the Norman kings, and now it will go to the hammer and be bought by a picture dealer, or a manufacturer of brandy,

or someone of that sort. Well, everything has its end and God's will be done."

"No, no, Squire, don't you talk like that," answered George with emotion. "I can't bear to hear you talk like that. And what's more it ain't so."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the old gentleman sharply. "It *is* so, there's no getting over it unless you can find thirty thousand pounds or thereabouts, to take up these mortgages with. Nothing short of a miracle can save it. That's always your way. 'Oh, something will turn up, something will turn up.'"

"Thin there'll be a miricle," said George, bringing down a fist like a leg of mutton with a thud upon the table, "it ain't no use of your talking to me, Squire. I knaw it, I tell you I knaw it. There'll never be no other than a de la Molle up at the Castle while we're alive, no, nor while our childer is alive either. If the money's to be found, why drat it, it will be found. Don't you think that God Almighty is going to put none of them there counter jumpers into Honham Castle, where gentlefolk hev lived all these ginerations, because He ain't. There, and that's the truth, because I knaw it and so help me God—and if I'm wrong it's a master one."

The Squire, who was striding up and down the room in his irritation, stopped suddenly in his walk, and looked at his retainer with a sharp and searching gaze upon his noble features. Notwithstanding his prejudices, his simplicity and his occasional absurdities, he was in his own way an able man, and an excellent judge of human nature. Even his prejudices were as a rule founded upon some solid ground, only it was as a general rule impossible to get at it. Also he had a share of that marvellous instinct which, when it exists, registers the mental altitude of the minds of others with the accuracy of an aneroid. He could tell when a man's words rang true and when they rang false, and what is more when the conviction of the true, and the falsity of the false, rested upon a substantial basis of fact or error. Of course the instinct was a vague, and from its nature an indefinable one, but it existed, and in the present instance arose in strength. He looked at the ugly, melancholy countenance of the faithful George with that keen glance of his, and observed that for the moment it was almost beautiful—beautiful in the light of conviction which shone upon it. He looked, and it was borne in upon him that what George said was true, and that George knew it was true, although he did not know where

the light of truth came from, and as he looked half the load fell from his heart.

"Hullo, George, are you turning prophet in addition to your other occupations?" he said cheerfully, and as he did so Edward Cossey's splendid bay horse pulled up at the door and the bell rang.

"Well," he added as soon as he saw who his visitor was, "unless I am much mistaken, we shall soon know how much truth there is in your prophecies, for here comes Mr. Cossey himself."

Before George could sufficiently recover from his recent agitation to make any reply, Edward Cossey, looking particularly handsome and rather overpowering, was shown into the room.

The Squire shook hands with him this time, though coldly enough, and George touched his forelock and said, "Sarvant, sir," in the approved fashion. Thereon his master told him that he might retire, though he was to be sure not to go out of hearing, as he should want him again presently.

"Very well, sir," answered George, "I'll just step up to the Poplars. I told a man to be round there to-day, as I want to see if I can come to an onderstanding with him about this year's fell in the big wood."

"There," said the Squire with an expression of

infinite disgust, "there, that's just like your way, your horrid cadging way; the idea of telling a man to be 'round about the Poplars' sometime or other to-day, because you wanted to speak to him about a fell. Why didn't you write him a letter like an ordinary Christian and make an offer, instead of dodging him round a farm for half a day like a wild Indian? Besides, the Poplars is half a mile off, if it's a yard."

"Lord, sir," said George as he retired, "that ain't the way that folks in these parts like to do business, that ain't. Letter writing is all very well for Londoners and other furriners, but it don't do here. Besides, sir, I shall hear you well enough up there. Sarvant, sir!" this to Edward Cossey, and he was gone.

Edward burst out laughing, and the Squire looked after his retainer with a comical air.

"No wonder that the place has got into a mess with such a fellow as that to manage it," he said aloud. "The idea of hunting a man round the Poplars Farm like—like an Indian squaw! He's a regular cadger, that's what he is, and that's all he's fit for. However, it's his way of doing business and I shan't alter him. Well, Mr. Cossey," he went on, "this is a very sad state of affairs, at any rate so

far as I am concerned. I presume of course that you know of the steps which have been taken by Cossey and Son to force a foreclosure, for that is what it amounts to, though I have not as yet received the formal notice; indeed I suppose that those steps have been taken under your advice."

"Yes, Mr. de la Molle, I know all about it, and here is the notice calling in the loans," and he placed a folded paper on the table.

"Ah," said the Squire, "I see. As I remarked to your manager, Mr. Quest, yesterday, I think that considering the nature of the relationship which has existed for so many generations between our family and the business firm of which you are a member, considering too the peculiar circumstances in which the owners of land find themselves at this moment, and the ruinous loss—to put questions of sentiment aside—that must be inflicted by such sale upon the owner of property, more consideration might have been shown. However, it is useless to try to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, or to get blood from a stone, so I suppose that I must make the best of a bad job—and," with a most polite bow—"I really do not know that I have anything more to say to you, Mr. Cossey. I will forward the notice to my

lawyers; indeed I think that it might have been sent to them in the first instance."

Edward Cossey had all this while been sitting on an old oak chair, his eyes fixed upon the ground, and slowly swinging his hat between his legs. Suddenly he looked up and to the Squire's surprise said quietly:

"I quite agree with you. I don't think that you can say anything too bad about the behaviour of my people. A Shoreditch Jew could not have done worse. And look here, Mr. de la Molle, to come to the point and prevent misunderstanding, I may as well say at once that, with your permission, I am anxious to take up these mortgages myself, for two reasons: I regard them as a desirable investment even in the present condition of land, and also I wish to save Cossey and Son from the discredit of the step which they meditate."

For the second time that morning the Squire looked up with the sharp and searching gaze he occasionally assumed, and for the second time his instinct, for he was too heady a man to reason overmuch, came into play and warned him that in making this offer Edward Cossey had other motives than those which he had brought forward. He paused to consider what they might be. Was he

anxious to get the estate for himself? Was he put forward by somebody else? Quest, perhaps; or was it something to do with Ida? The first alternative seemed the most probable to him. But whatever the lender's object, the result to him was the same, it gave him a respite. For Mr. de la Molle well knew that he had no more chance of raising the money from an ordinary source than he had of altering the condition of agriculture.

"Hum," he said, "this is an important matter, a most important matter. I presume, Mr. Cossey, that before making this definite offer you have consulted a legal adviser."

"Oh yes, I have done all that and am quite satisfied with the security—an advance of thirty thousand charged on all the Honham Castle estates at four per cent. The question now is if you are prepared to consent to the transfer. In that case all the old charges on the property will be paid off, and Mr. Quest, who will act for me in the matter, will prepare a simple deed charging the estate for the round total."

"Ah yes, the plan seems a satisfactory one, but of course in so important a matter I should prefer to consult my legal adviser before giving a final answer, indeed I think that it would be better if the

whole affair were carried out in a proper and formal way."

"Surely, surely, Mr. de la Molle," said the younger man with some irritation, for the old gentleman's somewhat magnificent manner rather annoyed him, which, under the circumstances, was not unnatural. "Surely you do not want to consult a legal adviser to make up your mind as to whether or no you will allow a foreclosure. I offer you the money at four per cent. Cannot you let me have an answer now, yes or no?"

"I don't like being hurried. I can't bear to be hurried," said the Squire pettishly. "These important matters require consideration, a great deal of consideration. Still," he added, observing signs of increased irritation upon Cossey's face, and not having the slightest intention of throwing away the opportunity, though he would dearly have liked to prolong the negotiations for a week or two, if it was only to enjoy the illusory satisfaction of dabbling with such a large sum of money. "Still, as you are so pressing about it, I really, speaking off hand, can see no objection to your taking up the mortgages on the terms you mention."

"Very well, Mr. de la Molle. Now I have on my part one condition and one only to attach to

this offer of mine, which is that my name is not mentioned in connection with it. I do not wish Cossey and Son to know that I have taken up this investment on my own account. In fact so necessary to me is it that my name should not be mentioned, that if it does transpire before the affair is completed I shall withdraw my offer, and if it transpires afterwards I shall call the money in. The loan will be advanced by a client of Mr. Quest's. Is that understood between us?"

"Hum," said the Squire, "I don't quite like this secrecy about these matters of business, but still if you make a point of it, why of course I cannot object."

"Very good. Then I presume that you will write officially to Cossey and Son stating that the money will be forthcoming to meet their various charges and the overdue interest. And now I think that we have had about enough of this business for once, so with your permission I will pay my respects to Miss de la Molle before I go."

"Dear me," said the Squire, pressing his hand to his head, "you do hurry me so dreadfully—I really don't know where I am. Miss de la Molle is out; I saw her go out sketching myself. Sit down and we will talk this business over a little more."

"No, thank you, Mr. de la Molle, I have to talk about money every day of my life and I soon have enough of the subject. Quest will arrange all the details. Good-bye, don't bother to ring, I will find my horse." And with a shake of the hand he was gone.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman to himself when his visitor had departed, "he asked for Ida, so I suppose that is what he is after. But it is a queer sort of way to begin courting, and if she finds it out I should think that it would go against him. Ida is not the sort of woman to be won by a money consideration. Well, she can very well look after herself, that's certain. Anyway it has been a good morning's work, but somehow I don't like that young man any the better for it. I have it—there's something wanting. He is not quite a gentleman. Well, I must find that fellow George," and he rushed to the front door and roared for "George," till the whole place echoed and the pheasants crowed in the woods.

After a while there came faint answering yells of "Coming, Squire, coming," and in due course George's long form became visible, striding swiftly up the garden.

"Well!" said his master, who was in high good humour, "did you find your man?"

"Well no, Squire—that is, I had a rare hunt after him, and I had just happened of him up a tree when you began to halloa so loud, that he went nigh to falling out of it, so I had to tell him to come back next week, or the week after."

"You happened of him up a tree. Why, what the deuce was the man doing up a tree—measuring it?"

"No, Squire, I don't rightly know what he wor after, but he is a curious kind of a chap, and he said he had a fancy to wait there."

"Good heavens! no wonder the place is going to ruin, when you deal with men who have a fancy to transact their business up a tree. Well, never mind that, I have settled the matter about the mortgages. Of course somebody, a client of Mr. Quest's, has been found without the least difficulty to take them up at four per cent. and advance the other five thousand too, so that there need be no more anxiety about that."

"Well, that's a good job at any rate," answered George with a sigh of relief.

"A good job? Of course it's a good job, but it is no more than I expected. It wasn't likely that such an eligible investment, as they say in the advertisement, would be allowed to go begging for

long. But that's just the way with you; the moment there's a hitch you come with your long face and your uneducated sort of way, and swear that we are all ruined and that the country is breaking up, and that there's nothing before us but the workhouse, and nobody knows what."

George reflected that the Squire had forgotten that not an hour before he himself had been vowing that they were ruined, while he, George, had stoutly sworn that something would turn up to help them. But his back was accustomed to those vicarious burdens, nor, to tell the truth, did they go nigh to the breaking of it.

"Well it's a good job anyway, and I thank God Almighty for it," said he, "and more especial since there'll be the money to take over the Moat Farm and give that varmint Janter the boot."

"Give him *what?*"

"Why, kick him out, sir, for good and all, begging your pardon, sir."

"Oh, I see. I do wish that you would respect the Queen's English a little more, George, and the name of the Creator too. By the way, the parson was speaking to me again yesterday about your continued absence from church. It really is disgraceful; you are a most confirmed Sabbath-breaker. And

now you mustn't waste my time here any longer. Go and look after your affairs. Stop a minute, would you like a glass of port?"

"Well, thank you, sir," said George reflectively, "we hev had a lot of talk and I don't mind if I do, and as for that there parson, begging his pardon, I wish he would mind his own affairs, and leave me to mind mine."

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT ART.

EDWARD COSSEY drove from the Castle in a far from happy frame of mind. To begin with, the Squire and his condescending way of doing business irritated him very much, so much that once or twice in the course of the conversation he was within an ace of breaking the whole thing off, and only restrained himself with difficulty from so doing. As it was, notwithstanding all the sacrifices and money risks which he was undergoing to take up these mortgages, and they were very considerable even to a man of his great prospects, he felt that he had been placed in the position of a person who receives a favour rather than of a person who grants one. Moreover, there was an assumption of superiority about the old man, a visible recognition of the gulf which used to be fixed between the gentleman of family and the man of business who has grown rich by trading in money and money's worth, which was the more galling because it was founded on actual

fact, and Edward Cossey knew it. All his foibles and oddities notwithstanding, it would have been impossible for any person of discernment to entertain a comparison between the half ruined Squire and the young banker, who would shortly be worth between half a million and a million sterling. The former was a representative, though a somewhat erratic one, of all that is best in the old type of Englishmen of gentle blood, which is now so rapidly vanishing, and of the class to which to a large extent this country owes her greatness. His very eccentricities were wandering lights that showed unsuspected heights and depths in his character—love of country and his country's honour, respect for the religion of his fathers, loyalty of mind and valour for the right. Had he lived in other times, like some of the old Boisseys and de la Molles who were at Honham before him, he would probably have died in the Crusades or at Cressy, or perhaps more uselessly, for his king at Marston Moor, or like that last but one of the true de la Molles, kneeling in the courtyard of his Castle and defying his enemies to wring his secret from him. Now few such opportunities are left to men of his stamp, and they are, perhaps as a consequence, dying out of an age which is unsuited to them, and indeed to most

strong growths of individual character. It would be much easier to deal with a gentleman like the Squire of this history if we could only reach down one of those suits of armour from the walls of his vestibule, and put it on his back, and take that long two-handled sword which last flashed on Flodden Field from its resting-place beneath the clock, and at the end see him die as a loyal knight should do in the forefront of his retainers, with the old war cry of *"a Delamol—a Delamol"* upon his lips. As it is, he is an aristocratic anachronism, an entity unfitted to deal with the elements of our advanced and in some ways emasculated age. His body should have been where his heart was—in the past. What chance have such as he against the Quests of this polite era of political economy and penny papers?

No wonder that Edward Cossey felt his inferiority to this symbol and type of the things that no more are, yes even in the shadow of his thirty thousand pounds. For here we have a different breed. Goldsmiths two centuries ago, then bankers from generation to generation, money bees seeking for wealth and counting it and hiving it from decade to decade, till at last gold became to them what honour is to the nobler stock—the pervading principle, and the clink of the guinea and the rustling

of the bank note stirred their blood as the clang of armed men and the sound of the flapping banner with its three golden hawks flaming in the sun, was wont to set the hearts of the race of Boissey, of Dofferleigh and of de la Molle, beating to that tune to which England marched on to win the world.

It is a foolish and vain thing to scoff at business and those who do it in the market places, and to shout out the old war cries of our fathers, in the face of a generation which sings the song of capital, or groans in heavy labour beneath the banners of their copyrighted trade marks; and besides, who would buy our books (also copyrighted except in America) if we did? Let us rather rise up and clothe ourselves, and put a tall hat upon our heads and do homage to the new Democracy.

And yet in the depths of our hearts and the quiet of our chambers let us sometimes cry to the old days, and the old men, and the old ways of thought, let us cry *"Ave atque vale,*—Hail and farewell." Our fathers' armour hangs above the door, their portraits decorate the wall, and their fierce and half-tamed hearts moulder beneath the stones of yonder church. Hail and farewell to you, our fathers! Perchance a man might have had worse company than he met with at your boards, and

even have found it not more hard to die beneath your sword-cuts than to be gently cozened to the grave by duly qualified practitioners at two guineas a visit.

And the upshot of all this is that the Squire was not altogether wrong when he declared in the silence of *his* chamber that Edward Cossey was not quite a gentleman. He showed it when he allowed himself to be guided by the arts of Mr. Quest into the adoption of the idea of obtaining a lien upon Ida, to be enforced if convenient. He showed it again, and what is more he committed a huge mistake, when tempted thereto by the opportunity of the moment, he made a conditional bargain with the said Ida, whereby she was placed in pledge for a sum of thirty thousand pounds, well knowing that her honour would be equal to the test, and that if convenient to him she would be ready to pay the debt. He made a huge mistake, for had he been quite a gentleman, he would have known that he could not have adopted a worse road to the affections of a lady. Had he been content to advance the money and then by-and-bye, though even that would not have been gentlemanlike, have gently let transpire what he had done at great personal expense and inconvenience, her imagination might

have been touched and her gratitude would certainly have been excited. But the idea of bargaining, the idea of purchase, which after what had passed could never be put aside, would of necessity be fatal to any hope of tender feeling. Shylock might get his bond, but of his own act he had debarred himself from the possibility of ever getting more.

Now Edward Cossey was not lacking in that afterglow of refinement which is left by a course of public school and university education. No education can make a gentleman of a man who is not a gentleman at heart, for whether his station in life be that of a ploughboy or an Earl, the gentleman, like the poet, is born and not made. But it can and does, if he be of an observant nature, give him a certain insight into the habits of thought and probable course of action of the members of that class to which he outwardly, and by repute, belongs. Such an insight Edward Cossey possessed, and at the present moment its possession was troubling him very much. His trading instincts, the desire bred in him to get something for his money, had led him to make the bargain, but now that it was done his better judgment rose up against it. For the truth may as well be told at once, although he would as yet scarcely acknowledge it to himself, Edward

Cossey was already violently enamoured of Ida. He was by nature a passionate man, and as it chanced she had proved the magnet with power to draw his passion. But as the reader is aware, there existed another complication in his life for which he was not perhaps entirely responsible. When still quite a youth in mind, he had suddenly found himself the object of the love of a beautiful and enthralling woman, and had after a more or less severe struggle yielded to the temptation, as, out of a book, many young men would have done. Now to be the object of the violent affection of such a woman as Belle Quest is no doubt very flattering and even charming for a while. But if that affection is not returned in kind, if in short the gentleman does not love the lady quite as warmly as she loves him, then in course of time the charm is apt to vanish and even the flattery to cease to give pleasure. Also, when as in the present case the connection is wrong in itself and universally condemned by society, the affection which can still triumph and endure on both sides must be of a very strong and lasting order. Even an unprincipled man dislikes the acting of one long lie such as an intimacy of the sort necessarily involves, and if the man happens to be rather weak than unprincipled, the dislike is apt to turn

to loathing, some portion of which will certainly be reflected on to the partner of his ill-doing.

These are general principles, but the case of Edward Cossey offered no exception to them, indeed it illustrated them well. He had never been in love with Mrs. Quest; to begin with she had shown herself too much in love with him to necessitate any display of emotion on his part. Her violent and unreasoning passion wearied and alarmed him, he never knew what she would do next and was kept in a continual condition of anxiety and irritation as to what the morrow might bring forth. Too sure of her unaltering attachment to have any pretext for jealousy, he found it exceedingly irksome to be obliged to avoid giving cause for it on his side, which, however, he dreaded doing lest he should thereby bring about some overwhelming catastrophe. Mrs. Quest was, as he well knew, not a woman who would pause to consider consequences if once her passionate jealousy were really aroused. It was even doubtful if the certainty of her own ruin would check her. Her love was everything to her, it was her life, the thing she lived for, and rather than tamely lose it, it seemed extremely probable to Edward Cossey that she would not hesitate to face shame, or even death. Indeed it was through this great

passion of hers, and through it only, that he could hope to influence her. If he could persuade her to release him, by pointing out that a continuance of the intrigue must involve him in ruin of some sort, all might yet go well with him. If not, his future was a dark one.

This was the state of affairs before he became attached to Ida de la Molle, after which the horizon grew blacker than ever. At first he tried to get out of the difficulty by avoiding Ida, but it did not answer. She exercised an irresistible attraction over him. Her calm and stately presence was to him what the sight of mountain snows is to one scorched by continual heat. He was weary of passionate outbursts, tears, agonies, alarms, presentiments, and all the paraphernalia of secret love. It appeared to him, looking up at the beautiful snow, that if once he could reach it life would all be sweetness and light, that there would be no more thirst, no more fear, and no more forced marches through those ill-odoured quagmires of deceit. The more he allowed his imagination to dwell upon the picture, the fiercer grew his longing to possess it. Also, he knew well enough that to marry a woman like Ida de la Molle would be the greatest blessing that could happen to him, for she would of necessity lift him up above

himself. She had little money it was true, but that was a very minor matter to him, and she had birth and breeding and beauty, and a presence which commands homage. And so it came to pass that he fell deeply and yet more deeply in love with Ida, and that as he did so his connection with Mrs. Quest (although we have seen him but yesterday offering in a passing fit of tenderness and remorse to run away with her) became more and more irksome to him. And now, as he drove leisurely back to Boisingham, he felt that he had imperilled all his hopes by a rash indulgence in his trading instincts.

Presently the road took a turn and a sight was revealed that did not tend to improve his already irritable mood. Just here the roadway was bordered by a deep bank covered with trees which sloped down to the valley of the Ell, at this time of the year looking its loveliest in the soft autumn lights. And here, seated on a bank of turf beneath the shadow of a yellowing chestnut tree, in such position as to get a view of the green valley and flashing river where cattle red and white stood chewing the still luxuriant aftermath, was none other than Ida herself, and what was more, Ida accompanied by Colonel Quaritch. They were seated on camp-stools, and in front of each of them was an easel.

Clearly they were painting together, for as Edward gazed, the Colonel rose, came up close behind his companion's stool, made a ring of his thumb and first finger, gazed critically through it at the lady's performance, then sadly shook his head and made some remark. Thereupon Ida turned round and began an animated discussion.

"Hang me," said Edward to himself, "if she has not taken up with that confounded old military frump. Painting together! Ah, I know what that means. Well, I should have thought that if there was one man more than another whom she would have disliked, it would have been that battered-looking Colonel."

He pulled up his horse and reflected for a moment, then handing the reins to his servant, jumped out, and climbing through a gap in the fence walked up to the tree. So engrossed were they in their argument, that they neither saw nor heard him.

"It's nonsense, Colonel Quaritch, perfect nonsense, if you will forgive me for telling you so," Ida was saying with warmth. "It is all very well for you to complain that my trees are a blur, and the castle nothing but a splotch, but I am looking at the water, and if I am looking at the water,

it is quite impossible that I should see the trees and the cows otherwise than I have rendered them on the canvas. True art is to paint what the painter sees and as he sees it."

Colonel Quaritch shook his head and sighed.

"The cant of the impressionist school," he said sadly; "on the contrary, the business of the artist is to paint what he knows to be there," and he gazed complacently at his own canvas, which had the appearance of a spirited drawing of a fortified place, or of the contents of a child's Noah's ark, so stiff, so solid, so formidable were its outlines, trees and animals.

Ida shrugged her shoulders, laughed merrily, and turned round to find herself face to face with Edward Cossey. She started back, and her expression hardened—then she stretched out her hand and said, "How do you do?" in her very coldest tones.

"How do you do, Miss de la Molle?" he said, assuming as unconcerned an air as he could, and bowing stiffly to Harold Quaritch, who returned the bow and went back to his canvas, which was placed a few paces off.

"I saw you painting," went on Edward Cossey in a low tone, "so I thought I would come and tell

you that I have settled the matter with Mr. de la Molle."

"Oh, indeed," answered Ida, hitting viciously at a wasp with her paint brush. "Well, I hope that you will find the investment a satisfactory one. And now, if you please, do not let us talk any more about money, because I am quite tired of the subject." Then raising her voice she went on, "Come here, Colonel Quaritch, and Mr. Cossey shall judge between us," and she pointed to her picture.

Edward glanced at the Colonel with no amiable air. "I know nothing about art," he said, "and I am afraid that I must be getting on. Good-morning," and taking off his hat to Ida he turned and went.

"Umph," said the Colonel, looking after him with a quizzical expression, "that gentleman seems rather short in his temper. Wants knocking about the world a bit, I should say. But I beg your pardon, I suppose that he is a friend of yours, Miss de la Molle?"

"He is an acquaintance of mine," answered Ida with emphasis.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TIGER SHOWS HER CLAWS.

After this very chilling reception at the hands of the object of his affection, Edward Cossey continued his drive in an even worse temper than before. He reached his rooms, had some luncheon, and then in pursuance of a previous engagement went over to the Oaks to see Mrs. Quest.

He found her waiting for him in the drawing-room. She was standing at the window with her hands behind her, a favourite attitude of hers. As soon as the door was shut, she turned, came up to him, and grasped his hand affectionately between her own.

"It is an age since I have seen you, Edward," she said, "one whole day. Really, when I do not see you, I do not live, I only exist."

He freed himself from her clasp with a quick movement. "Really, Belle," he said impatiently, "you might be a little more careful than to go through that sort of performance in front of an open

window—especially as the gardener must have seen the whole thing."

"I don't much care if he did," she said defiantly. "What does it matter? My husband is certainly not in a position to make a fuss about other people."

"What does it matter?" he said, stamping his foot. "What does it *not* matter? If you have no care for your good name, do you suppose that I am indifferent to mine?"

Mrs. Quest opened her large violet eyes to the fullest extent, and a curious light was reflected from them.

"You have grown wonderfully cautious all of a sudden, Edward," she said meaningly.

"What is the use of my being cautious when you are so reckless? I tell you what it is, Belle. We are talked of all over this gossiping town, and I don't like it, and what is more, once and for all, I won't have it. If you will not be more careful, I will break with you altogether, and that is the long and short of it."

"Where have you been this morning?" she asked in the same ominously calm voice.

"I have been to Honham Castle on a matter of business."

"Oh, and yesterday you were there on a matter

of pleasure. Now did you happen to see Ida in the course of your business?"

"Yes," he answered, looking her full in the face, "I did see her, what about it?"

"By appointment I suppose."

"No, not by appointment. Have you done your catechism?"

"Yes—and now I am going to preach a homily on it. I see through you perfectly, Edward. You are getting tired of me, and you want to be rid of me. I tell you plainly, that you are not going the right way to work about it. No woman, especially if she be in my—unfortunate position, can tamely bear to see herself discarded for another. Certainly I cannot—and I caution you—I caution you to be careful, because when I think of such a thing I am not quite myself," and suddenly, without the slightest warning (for her face had been hard and cold as stone), she burst into a flood of tears.

Now Edward Cossey was naturally somewhat moved at this sight. Of course he did his best to console her, though with no great results, for she was still sobbing bitterly when suddenly there came a knock at the door. Mrs. Quest turned her face towards the wall and pretended to be reading a letter, and he tried to look as unconcerned as possible.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the girl with a sharp glance at her mistress. "The telegraph boy brought it on here, when he heard that you were not at home, because he said he would be sure to find you here—and please, sir, he hopes that you will give him sixpence for bringing it round, as he thought it might be important."

Edward felt in his pocket and gave the girl a shilling, telling her to say that there was no answer. As soon as she had gone, he opened the telegram. It was from his sister in London, and ran as follows:

"Come up to town at once. Father has had a stroke of paralysis. Shall expect you by the seven o'clock train."

"What is it?" said Mrs. Quest, noting the alarm on his face.

"Why, my father is very ill. He has had a stroke of paralysis, and I must go to town by the next train."

"Shall you be long away?"

"I do not know. How can I tell? Good-bye, Belle. I am sorry that we should have had this scene just as I am going, but I can't help it."

"Oh, Edward," she said, catching him by the arm and turning her tear-stained face up towards his own, "you are not angry with me, are you? Do

not let us part in anger. How can I help being jealous when I love you so? Tell me that you do not hate me—or I shall be wretched all the time that you are away."

"No, no, of course not—but I must say, I wish that you would not make such shocking scenes—good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered as she gave him her shaking hand. "Good-bye, my dear. If only you knew what I feel here," she pointed to her breast, "you would make excuses for me." Almost before she had finished her sentence he was gone. She stood near the door, listening to his retreating footsteps till they had quite died away, and then flung herself in the chair and rested her head upon her hands. "I shall lose him," she said to herself in the bitterness of her heart. "I know I shall. What chance have I against her? He already cares for Ida a great deal more than he does for me, in the end he will break from me and marry her. Oh, I had rather see him dead—and myself too."

Half-an-hour later, Mr. Quest came in.

"Where is Cossey?" he asked.

"Mr. Cossey's father has had a stroke of paralysis and he has gone up to London to look after him."

"Oh," said Mr. Quest. "Well, if the old gentleman dies, your friend will be one of the wealthiest men in England."

"Well, so much the better for him. I am sure money is a great blessing. It protects one from so much."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest with emphasis, "so much the better for him, and all connected with him. Why have you been crying? Because Cossey has gone away—or have you quarrelled with him?"

"How do you know that I have been crying? If I have, it's my affair. At any rate my tears are my own."

"Certainly they are—I do not wish to interfere with your crying—cry when you like. It will be lucky for Cossey if that old father of his dies just now; because he wants money."

"What does he want money for?"

"Because he has undertaken to pay off the mortgages on the Castle estates."

"Why has he done that, as an investment?"

"No, it is a rotten investment. I believe that he has done it because he is in love with Miss de la Molle, and is naturally anxious to ingratiate himself with her. Don't you know that? I thought perhaps that was what you had been crying about."

"It is not true," she answered, her lips quivering with pain.

Mr. Quest laughed gently. "I think you must have lost your power of observation, which used to be sufficiently keen. However, of course it does not matter to you. It will in many ways be a most suitable marriage, and I am sure they will make a very handsome couple."

She made no answer, and turned her back to hide the working of her face. For a few moments her husband stood looking at her, a gentle smile playing on his refined features. Then remarking that he must go round to the office, but would be back in time for tea, he went, reflecting with satisfaction that he had given his wife something to think about which would be scarcely to her taste.

As for Belle Quest, she waited till the door had closed, and then turned round towards it and spoke aloud, as though she were addressing her vanished husband.

"I hate you," she said, with bitter emphasis. "I hate you. You have ruined my life, and now you torment me as though I were a lost soul. Oh, I wish I were dead! I wish I were dead!"

On reaching his office, Mr. Quest found two letters for him, one of which had just arrived by

the afternoon post. The first was addressed in the Squire's handwriting and signed with his big seal, and the other bore a superscription, the sight of which made him turn momentarily faint. Taking up this last with a visible effort, he opened it.

It was from the "Tiger," alias Edith, and its coarse contents need not be written here. Put shortly they came to this. She was being summoned for debt. She wanted more money and would have it. If five hundred pounds were not forthcoming and that shortly — within a week, indeed—she threatened, with no uncertain voice, to journey down to Boisingham and put him to an open shame.

By the time that Mr. Quest had finished reading this effusion, the cold sweat was standing in beads on his forehead.

"Great heavens!" he said, "this woman will destroy me. What a devil! And she'd be as good as her word unless I found her the money. I must go up to town at once. I wonder how she got that idea into her head. It makes me shudder to think of her in Boisingham," and he dropped his face upon his hands and groaned in the bitterness of his heart.

"It is hard," he thought to himself; "here have I for years and years been striving and toiling,

labouring to become a respectable and respected member of society, but always this old folly haunts my steps and drags me down, and by heaven I believe that it will destroy me after all." With a sigh he lifted his head, and taking a sheet of paper wrote on it, "I have received your letter, and will come and see you to-morrow or the next day." This note he placed in an envelope, which he directed to the high-sounding name of Mrs. d'Aubigné, Rupert Street, Pimlico—and put it in his pocket.

Then with another sigh he took up the Squire's letter, and glanced through it. Its length was considerable, but in substance it announced his acceptance of the arrangement proposed by Mr. Edward Cossey, and requested that he would prepare the necessary deeds to be submitted to his lawyers. Mr. Quest read the letter absently enough, and threw it down with a little laugh.

"What a queer world it is," he said to himself, "and what a ludicrous side there is to it all. Here is Cossey advancing money to get a hold over Ida de la Molle, whom he means to marry if he can, and who is probably playing her own hand. Here is Belle madly in love with Cossey, who will break her heart. Here am I loving Belle, who hates me, and playing everybody's game in order to advance

my own, and become a respected member of a society I am superior to. Here is the Squire blundering about like a walrus in a horse-pond, and fancying everything is being conducted for his sole advantage, and that all the world revolves round Honham Castle. And then here at the end of the chain is this female harpy, Edith Jones, otherwise d'Aubigné, *alias* the Tiger, gnawing at my vitals and holding my fortunes in her hand.

"Bah! it's a queer world and full of combinations, but the worst of it is that plot as we will the solution of them does not rest with us, no—not with us."

CHAPTER XV.

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 with-

out 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 whih 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 argricultural 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 wanting 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 XVI.

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 wind-

bags 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 money-bags 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 gew-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 gentleman-like, 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 degration, 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 XVII.

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 XVIII.

"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 occasionally 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 en-

couraged 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 policemen 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 Tu-

dor 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 contemplation. 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 XIX.

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, in-

deed 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 neces-

sarily 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 XX.

"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 opportunity 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 sufficient 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 XXI.

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 heat, 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 bringing 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 dare-say 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 admirably 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. In-

deed, 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 daresay 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 XXII.

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 convey, 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 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 some-

how 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."

END OF VOL. I.

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