



BIBLIOTECA CENTRALA
A
UNIVERSITAȚII
DIN
BUCUREȘTI

No. Curent 46524 Format I

No. Inventar Anul

Secția Depozit II Raftul

Inw. H. 23411

COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE.

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD,

AUTHOR OF "KING SOLOMON'S MINES," ETC. ETC.

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

DONATIUNEA
Biblioteca General ALEX. SOCEC

78717

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1889.

The Right of Translation is reserved.



CONTROL 1953

1956

Biblioteca Centrală Universitară
"Carol I" București

Cota.....

46529

Re 169/09

B.C.U. Bucuresti



C71787

76

CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

	Page
CHAPTER I. The Blow falls	7
— II. "Good-bye, my dear, good-bye" . . .	20
— III. The Squire gives his Consent . . .	33
— IV. Belle pays a Visit	46
— V. Mr. Quest has his Innings	58
— VI. How George treated Johnnie	70
— VII. Edward Cossey meets with an Accident	82
— VIII. Harold takes the News	97
— IX. Ida recants	109
— X. George prophesies again	120
— XI. The Squire speaks his Mind	134
— XII. George's diplomatic Errand	145
— XIII. The Sword of Damocles	157
— XIV. How the Game ended	171
— XV. Sister Agnes	183
— XVI. Colonel Quaritch expresses his Views	196
— XVII. The Colonel goes to sleep	210
— XVIII. But not to Bed	220

	Page
CHAPTER XIX. How the Night went	231
— XX. Ida goes to meet her Fate	253
— XXI. George is seen to laugh	262
— XXII. Christmas Chimes	277
CONCLUSION. Good-bye	285

COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE BLOW FALLS.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” said Edward coolly.

“Before making any remarks on your conduct in bringing such a charge, which I give you credit for believing to be true, I propose to show to you that it is a false charge,” went on the Colonel quietly. “The story is a very simple one, and so sad that nothing short of necessity would force me to tell it. I was, when quite young, engaged to your aunt, Miss Heston, to whom I was much attached, and who was then twenty years of age. Though I had little besides my profession, she had money, and we were going to be married. The circumstances under which the marriage was broken off were as follow:—Three days before the wedding was to take place I went unexpectedly to the house, and was told by the servant that Miss Heston was upstairs in her sitting-room. I went upstairs to the room, which I knew well, knocked and got no answer. Then I walked

into the room, and this is what I saw. Your aunt was lying on the sofa in her wedding dress (that is, in half of it, for she had only the skirt on), as I first thought, asleep. I went up to her, and saw that by her side was a brandy bottle, half empty. In her hand also was a glass containing raw brandy. While I was wondering what it could mean, she woke up, got off the sofa, and I saw that she was intoxicated."

"It's a lie!" said Edward excitedly.

"Be careful what you say, sir," answered the Colonel, "and wait to say it till I have done."

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

hereditary, for her mother had died from the effects of drink, and one of her aunts had become mad from it.

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

"I believe so—at least it looks like it."

"Then read the letter."

Edward obeyed. It was one written in answer to that of Harold Quaritch to his betrothed's father,

and admitted in the clearest terms the justice of the step that he had taken. Further, it begged him, for the sake of Julia and the family at large, never to mention the cause of his defection to any one outside the family.

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

Edward made no reply, and the Colonel went on:—“I gave the promise your grandfather asked for, and in spite of the remarks that were freely made upon my behaviour, I kept it, as it was my duty to do. You, Mr. Cossey, are the first person to whom the story has been told. And now that you have thought fit to make accusations against me, which are without foundation, I must ask you to retract them as fully as you made them. I have prepared a letter which you will be so good as to sign,” and he handed him a note addressed to the Squire. It ran:

“DEAR MR. DE LA MOLLE,—

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

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

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

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

“Well,” said the Colonel, “please understand I mean that you should sign this letter, and, indeed, seeing how absolutely you are in the wrong, I do not think that you can hesitate to do so.”

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

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

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

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

will call the money in and smash the whole thing up"—and his handsome face bore a very evil look, as he thought of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It came, and the bustle connected with it prevented any further conversation for a while. At

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She withdrew it sharply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, Mr. Cossey," she said, in a voice that checked him. "I am sorry to have to speak so plainly, but till I marry I am my own mistress. Pray understand me."

"As you like," he said, drawing back from her sulkily. "I am so fond of you that I will marry you on any terms, and that is the truth. I have, however, one thing to ask of you, Ida, and it is that you will keep our engagement secret for the present, and

get your father (I suppose I must speak to him) to do the same. I have reasons," he went on by way of explanation, "for not wishing it to become known."

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

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

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

78711
 "Of course not," he answered. "Look here, Ida, I will give you those mortgage bonds as a wedding present, and you can put them in the fire; and I will make a good settlement on you."

"Thank you," she said, "but I do not require any settlement on myself; I had rather none was

Colonel Quaritch, V.C. II.

BIBLIOTECA 2
 CENTRALĂ
 UNIVERSITĂRĂ "CAROL I"
 BUCUREȘTI

made; but I consent to the engagement only on the express condition that the mortgages shall be cancelled before marriage, and as the property will ultimately come to me, this is not much to ask. And now one more thing, Mr. Cossey; I should like to know when you would wish this marriage to take place; not yet, I presume?"

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

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

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

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

"I wish it beyond everything in the world," he answered earnestly. "You can never know how much. By the way, I know I was foolish about Colonel Quaritch; but, Ida, I cannot bear to see

that man near you. I hope that you will now drop his acquaintance as much as possible."

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

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

She touched his outstretched hand with her fingers, and then fearing lest he should change his mind, promptly rang the bell.

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

CHAPTER II.

“GOOD-BYE, MY DEAR, GOOD-BYE.”

WHEN Edward Cossey had gone, Ida rose and put her hands to her head. So the blow had fallen, the deed was done, and she was engaged to be married to Edward Cossey. And Harold Quaritch! Well, there must be an end to that. It was hard, too—only a woman could know how hard. Ida was not a person with a long record of love affairs. Once, when she was twenty, she had received a proposal which she had refused, and that was all. So it happened that when she became attached to Colonel Quaritch she had found her heart for the first time, and for a woman, somewhat late in life. Consequently her feelings were all the more profound, and so indeed was her grief at being forced not only to put them away, but to give herself to another man who was not agreeable to her. She was not a violent or ill-regulated woman like Mrs. Quest. She looked facts in the face, recognised their meaning and bowed before their inexorable logic. It seemed to her almost

impossible that she could hope to avoid this marriage, and if that proved to be so, she might be relied upon to make the best of it. Scandal would, under any circumstances, never find a word to say against Ida, for she was not a person who could attempt to console herself for an unhappy marriage. But it was bitter, bitter as gall, to be thus forced to turn aside from her happiness—for she well knew that with Harold Quaritch her life would be very happy—and fit her shoulders to this heavy yoke. Well, she had saved the place to her father, and also to her descendants, if she had any, and that was all that could be said.

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

But bad as was the weather, it attracted Ida. When the heart is heavy and torn by conflicting passions, it seems to answer to the calling of the

storm, and to long to lose its petty troubling in the turmoil of the rushing world. Nature has many moods of which our own are but the echo and reflection, and she can be companionable when all human sympathy must fail. For she is our mother from whom we come, to whom we go, and her arms are ever open to clasp the children who can hear her voices. Drawn thereto by an impulse which she could not have analysed, Ida went upstairs, put on a thick pair of boots, a macintosh and an old hat. Then she sallied out into the wind and wet. It was blowing big guns, and as the rain whirled down, the drops struck upon her face like spray. She crossed the moat bridge, and went out into the parkland beyond. The air was full of dead leaves, and the grass rustled with them as though it were alive, for this was the first wind since the frost. The great boughs of the oaks rattled and groaned above her, and high overhead, among the sullen clouds, a flight of rooks were being blown this way and that,

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

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

Nor was he alone, for all around lay the dust of his kindred, come after the toil and struggle of their stormy lives to rest within the walls of that old church. Some of them had monuments of alabaster, whereon they lay in effigy, their heads pillowed upon that of a conquered Saracen; some had monuments of oak and brass, and some had no monuments at all, for the Puritans had ruthlessly destroyed them. But they were nearly all there, nearly twenty generations of the bearers of an ancient name, for even those of them who perished on the scaffold had been borne here for burial. The place was eloquent of the dead and of the mournful lesson of mortality. From century to century the bearers of that name had walked in these fields, and lived in yonder Castle, and looked upon the familiar swell of

yonder ground and the silver flash of yonder river, and now their ashes were gathered here and all the forgotten turmoil of their lives was lost in the silence of those narrow tombs.

Ida loved the spot, hallowed to her not only by the altar of her faith, but also by the human associations that clung around and clothed it as the ivy clothed its walls. Here she had been christened, and here among her ancestors she hoped to be buried also. Here as a girl, when the full moon was up, she had crept in awed silence with her brother James to look through the window at the white and solemn figures stretched within. Here, too, she had sat on Sunday after Sunday for more than twenty years, and stared at the quaint Latin inscriptions cut on marble slabs, recording the almost superhuman virtues of departed de la Molles of the eighteenth century, her own immediate ancestors. The place was familiar to her whole life; she had scarcely a recollection with which it was not in some way connected. It was not wonderful, therefore, that she loved it, and that in the trouble of her mind her feet shaped their course towards it.

Presently she was in the churchyard. Taking her stand under the shelter of a line of Scotch firs, through which the gale sobbed and sang, she leant

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

And then, poor woman, she thought of the long years between her and rest, and leaning her head against the gate-post, began to cry bitterly in the gloom.

Presently she ceased crying and with a start looked up, feeling that she was no longer alone.

Her instincts had not deceived her, for in the shadow of the fir trees, not more than two paces from her, was the figure of a man. Just then he took a step to the left, which brought his outline against the sky, and Ida's heart stood still, for now she knew him. It was Harold Quaritch, the man over whose loss she had been weeping.

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

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

In a minute he was by her side. She was caught, and perhaps she was not altogether sorry, especially as she had tried to get away.

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

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

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

Just then the light burnt out and he dropped it.

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

She tried to answer, but she could not, and in another minute, to tell the honest truth, she had exchanged the gate-post for Harold’s broad shoulder, and was finishing her “cry” there.

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

“What is it, darling?” he said, “what is the matter?”

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

He obeyed, though with some unwillingness.

She hunted for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, and then at last she spoke:

"I am engaged to be married," she said in a low voice, "I am engaged to Mr. Cossey."

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

"Oh, damn it all!" he said.

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

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

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

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

"Nothing," she answered sadly. "I do not see

what can help us, unless the man died,” she said; “and that is not likely. Harold,” she went on, addressing him for the first time in her life by his Christian name, for she felt that after crying upon a man’s shoulder it is ridiculous to scruple about calling him by his name; “Harold, there is no help for it. I did it myself, remember, because, as I told you, I do not think that any one woman has a right to place her individual happiness before the welfare of her family. And I am only sorry,” she added, her voice breaking a little, “that what I have done should bring suffering upon you.”

He groaned again, but said nothing.

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

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

“Yes, indeed I will. We all have our burdens to bear. It is a hard world, and we must bear them. And it will all be the same in the end, in just a few

years. I daresay these dead people here have felt as we feel, and how quiet they are! And perhaps there may be something beyond, where things are not so. Who can say? You won't go away from this place, Harold, will you? Not until I am married, at any rate; perhaps you had better go then. Say that you won't go till then, and you will let me see you sometimes; it is a comfort to see you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked at her curiously, and then said quietly—the Squire was always quiet in any matter of real emergency—“Indeed, my dear! That is a serious matter. However, speaking off-hand, I think that notwithstanding the disparity of age, Quaritch——”

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

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

At this moment the servant announced dinner.

“Well, never mind about it now, father,” she

said; "I am tired, and want my dinner. Mr. Cossey is coming to see you to-morrow, and we can talk about it afterwards."

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

CHAPTER III.

THE SQUIRE GIVES HIS CONSENT.

EDWARD COSSEY did not come away from the scene of his engagement in a very happy or triumphant tone of mind. Ida's bitter words stung like whips, and he understood, as she clearly meant he should understand, that it was only in consideration of the money advanced that she had consented to become his wife. Now, however satisfactory it is to be rich enough to purchase your heart's desire in this fashion, it is not altogether soothing to the pride of a nineteenth century man to be continually haunted by the thought that he is a buyer in the market and nothing but a buyer. Of course, he saw clearly enough that there was an object in all this—he saw that Ida, by making obvious her dislike, wished to disgust him with his bargain, and escape from an alliance of which the prospect was hateful to her. But he had no intention of being so easily discouraged. In the first place his passion for the woman was as a devouring flame, eating ever at his heart.

In that at any rate he was sincere; he did love her so far as his nature was capable of love, or at any rate he had the keenest desire to make her his wife. A delicate-minded man would probably have shrunk from forcing himself upon a woman under parallel circumstances; but Edward Cossey did not happen to fall into that category. As a matter of fact such men are not as common as they might be.

Another thing which he took into count was that Ida would probably get over her dislike. He was a close observer of women, in a cynical and half contemptuous way, and he remarked, or thought that he remarked, a curious tendency among them to submit with comparative complacency to the inevitable whenever it happened to coincide with their material advantage. Women, he argued, have not, as a class, outgrown the traditions of their primitive condition when their partners for life were chosen for them by lot or the chance of battle. They still recognise the claims of the wealthiest or strongest, and their love of luxury and ease is so keen that if the nest they lie in is only soft enough, they will not grieve long over the fact that it was not of their own choosing. Arguing from these untrustworthy premises, he came to the conclusion that Ida would soon get over her repugnance to marrying him, when

she found how many comforts and good things marriage with so rich a man would place at her disposal, and would, if for no other reason, learn to look on him with affection and gratitude as the author of her gilded ease. And so indeed she might have done had she been of another and more common stamp. But, unfortunately for his reasoning, there exist members of her sex who are by nature of an order of mind superior to these considerations, and who realise that they have but one life to live, and that the highest form of happiness is *not* dependent upon money or money's worth, but rather upon the indulgence of mental aspirations and those affections which, when genuine, draw nearer to holiness than anything else about us. Such a woman, more especially if she is already possessed with an affection for another man, does not easily become reconciled to a distasteful lot, however quietly she may endure it, and such a woman was Ida de la Molle.

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

he found the old gentleman standing with his back to the fire and plunged in reflection.

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

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

"It is very simple," said Edward; "I am deeply attached to your daughter, and I have been so fortunate as to be accepted by her. Should you give your consent to the marriage, I may as well say at once that I wish to carry out the most liberal money arrangements in my power. I will make Ida a present of the mortgage that I hold over this property, and she may put it in the fire. Further, I will covenant on the death of my father, which cannot now be long delayed, to settle two hundred thousand pounds upon her absolutely. Also, I am prepared to agree that if we have a son, and he should wish to do so, he shall take the name of de la Molle."

"I am sure," said the Squire, turning round to hide his natural gratification at these proposals,

“your offers on the subject of settlements are of a most liberal order, and of course so far as I am concerned, Ida will have this place, which may one day be again more valuable than it is now.”

“I am glad that they meet with your approval,” said Edward; “and now there is one more thing I want to ask you, Mr. de la Molle, and which I hope, if you give your consent to the marriage, you will not raise any objection to. It is that our engagement should not be announced at present. The fact is,” he went on hurriedly, “my father is a very peculiar man, and has a great idea of my marrying somebody with a large fortune. Also his state of health is so uncertain that there is no possibility of knowing how he will take anything. Indeed he is dying; the doctors told me that he might go off any day, and that he cannot last for another three months. If the engagement is announced to him now, at the best I shall have a great deal of trouble, and at the worst he might make me suffer in his will should he happen to take a fancy against it.”

“Umph,” said the Squire, “I don’t quite like the idea of a projected marriage with my daughter, Miss de la Molle of Honham Castle, being hushed up as though there were something discreditable about it, but still there may be peculiar circumstances in the

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

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

The Squire reflected for a moment. Everything seemed quite straight, and yet he suspected crookedness. His latent distrust of the man, which had not been decreased by the scene of two nights before—for he never could bring himself to like Edward Cossey—arose in force and made him hesitate when there was no visible ground for hesitation. He possessed, as has been said, an instinctive insight into character that was almost feminine in its intensity, and it was lifting a warning finger before him now.

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

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

"Ah, yes," said the Squire, rather coldly, "a most unfortunate affair. Of course, I don't know what the particulars of the matter were, and it is no business of mine, but speaking generally, I should say never bring an accusation of that sort against a man at all unless you are driven to it, and if you do bring it be quite certain of your ground. However, that is neither here nor there. Well, about this engagement. Ida is old enough to judge for herself, and seems to have made up her mind, so as I know no reason to the contrary, and

as the business arrangements proposed are all that I could wish, I cannot see that I have any ground for withholding my consent. So all I can say, sir, is that I hope that you will make my daughter a good husband, and that you will both be happy. Ida is a high-spirited woman, and in some ways a very peculiar woman; but in my opinion she is greatly above the average of her sex, as I have known it, and provided you have her affection, and don't attempt to drive her, she will go through thick and thin for you. But I dare say you would like to see her. Oh, by the way, I forgot, she has got a headache this morning, and is stopping in bed. It isn't much in her line, but I daresay that she is a little upset. Perhaps you would like to come up to dinner to-night."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wonder what it all means," he said to himself. "She can't care about the man much or she would not make that fuss about his being asked to dinner. Ida isn't the sort of woman to be caught by the money, I should think. Well, I know nothing about it; it is no affair of mine, and I can only take things as I find them."

And then he fell to reflecting that this marriage would be an extraordinary stroke of luck for the

family. Here they were at the last gasp, mortgaged up to the eyes, when suddenly fortune, in the shape of an, on the whole, perfectly unobjectionable young man, appears, takes up the mortgages, proposes settlements to the tune of hundreds of thousands, and even offers to perpetuate the old family name in the person of his son, should he have one. Such a state of affairs could not but be gratifying to any man, however unworldly, and the Squire was not altogether unworldly. That is, he had a keen sense of the dignity of his social position and his family, and it had all his life been his chief and laudable desire to be sufficiently provided with the goods of this world to raise the de la Molles to the positions which they had occupied in former centuries. Hitherto, however, the tendency of events had been all the other way—the house was a sinking one, and but the other day its ancient roof had nearly fallen about their ears. But now the prospect changed as though by magic. On Ida's marriage all the mortgages, those heavy accumulations of years of growing expenditure and narrowing means, would roll off the back of the estate, and the de la Molles of Honham Castle would once more take the place in the county to which they were undoubtedly entitled.

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

As it chanced, on that very morning it was necessary for Mr. Quest to pay the old gentleman a visit in order to obtain his signature to a lease of a bakery in Boisingham, which, together with two or three other houses, belonged to the estate.

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

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

The lawyer mentioned a certain date.

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

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

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

ments pending which will put an end to these embarrassments in a natural and a proper way."

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

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

"Lawyers are confidential agents," said Mr. Quest quietly.

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

"Certainly," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, the matter is this: Mr. Edward Cossey is engaged to Miss de la Molle. He has just been here to obtain my consent, which, of course, I have not withheld, as I know nothing against the young man—nothing at all. The only stipulation that he made is, as I think, a reasonable one under the circumstances, namely, that the engagement is to be kept quiet for a little while on account of the condition of his father's health. He says that he

is an unreasonable man, and that he might take a prejudice against it."

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

BELLE PAYS A VISIT.

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

The hour of his revenge was come. He had played his cards and he had won the game, and fortune with it, for his enemy lay in the hollow of his hand. He looked behind him at the proud towers of the Castle, reflecting as he did so, that in all probability they would belong to him before another year was over his head. At one time he had earnestly longed to possess this place, but now this was not so much the object of his desire. What he wanted now was the money. With thirty thousand pounds in his hand he would, together with what he had, be a rich man, and he had already laid his plans for the future. Of Edith he had heard nothing lately. She was cowed, but he well knew that it was only for a while. By-and-by her rapacity would get the better of her fear and

she would recommence her persecutions. This being so, he came to a determination—he would put the world between them. Once let him have this money in his hand and he would start his life afresh in some new country; he was not too old for it, and he would be a rich man, and then perhaps he might get rid of the cares which had rendered so much of his existence valueless. If Belle would go with him, well and good—if not, he could not help it. If she did go, there must be a reconciliation first, for he could not any longer tolerate the life they lived.

In due course he reached the Oaks and went in. Luncheon was on the table, at which Belle was sitting. She was, as usual, dressed in black, and beautiful to look on; but her round babyish face was pale and pinched, and there were black lines beneath her eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She leaned forward and he thought that she was going to faint, but she did not. By a supreme effort she recovered herself and drank a glass of sherry which was standing by her side.

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

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

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

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

"Belle, I did wrong to marry you when you did

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

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

“You do not understand me,” she said. “You are very kind and I am very grateful to you, but you do not understand me. I cannot get over things so easily as I know most women can; what I have done I never can undo. I do not blame him altogether, it was as much or more my fault than his, but having once loved him I cannot go back to you or any other man. If you like I will go on living with you as we live, and I will try to make you comfortable, but I can say no more.”

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

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

"Once more, Belle, I beg you to consider. Do you know what kind of man this is for whom you are giving up your life? Not only has he deserted you, but do you know how he has got hold of Ida de la Molle? He has, as I know well, *bought* her. I tell you he has bought her as much as though he had gone into the open market and paid down a price for her. The other day Cossey and Son were going to foreclose upon the Honham estates, which would have ruined the old gentleman. Well, what did your young man do? He went to the girl—who hates him, by the way, and is in love with Colonel Quaritch—and said to her, 'If you will promise to marry me when I ask you, I will find the thirty thousand pounds and take up the mort-

gages.' And on those terms she agreed to marry him. And now he has got rid of you and he claims her promise. There is the history. I wonder that your pride will bear such a thing. By heaven, I would kill the man."

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

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

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

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

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

"Were are you going?" he asked, not knowing what to say.

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

"I don't think that you will find her. She is in bed with a headache."

"Oh! So you have been up there this morning?"

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

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

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

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

"I don't know," she said, laughing a little; "feminine curiosity I suppose. I thought that you might be. Good-bye," and she went on, leaving Edward Cossey to the enjoyment of a very peculiar set of sensations.

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

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

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

"Have you walked up?" asked Ida.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ida shrank a little and coloured, as a pure and high-minded woman naturally does when she is for the first time suddenly brought into actual contact with impurity and passion.

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

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

"I loved him," went on Belle, "I loved him passionately, and for a while it was as though heaven had opened its gates, for he used to care for me a little, and I think he would have taken me away and married me afterwards, but I would not hear of it,

because I knew that it would ruin him. He offered to, once, and I refused, and within three hours of that I believe he was bargaining for you. Well, and then it was the old story, he fell more and more in love with you and of course I had no hold upon him."

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

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

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

"Thank you," said Belle; "but I have done with Mr. Cossey, and I think I hate him too. I know that I did hate him when I met him in the street just now and he told me that he was not engaged to you. You say that you detest him, why then do you marry him—you are a free woman?"

"Do you want to know?" said Ida, wheeling

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

"Why? why?" broke in Belle. "What is such a promise as that? He cannot force you to marry him, and it is better for a woman to die than to marry a man she hates, especially," she added meaningly, "if she happens to care for somebody else. Be advised by me, I know what it is."

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

BELLE PAYS A VISIT.

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

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

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

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

"Why? why?" broke in Belle. "What is such a promise as that? He cannot force you to marry him, and it is better for a woman to die than to marry a man she hates, especially," she added meaningly, "if she happens to care for somebody else. Be advised by me, I know what it is."

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

BELLE PAYS A VISIT.

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

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

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

CHAPTER V.

MR. QUEST HAS HIS INNINGS.

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

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

Next morning, about ten o'clock, Edward Cossey was sitting at breakfast in no happy frame of mind. He had gone up to the Castle to dinner on the previous evening, but it cannot be said that he had enjoyed himself. Ida was there, looking very handsome in her evening dress, but she was cold as a stone and unapproachable as a statue. She scarcely spoke to him, indeed, except in answer to some direct remark, reserving all her conversation for her father, who seemed to have caught the contagion of

restraint, and was, for him, unusually silent and depressed.

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

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

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

Now most men would in all human probability have been dismayed by this state of affairs into

relinquishing an attempt at matrimony which it was evident could only be carried through in the face of the quiet but none the less vigorous dislike and contempt of the other contracting party. But this was not so with Edward Cossey. Ida's coldness exercised upon his tenacious and obstinate mind much the same effect that may be supposed to be produced upon the benighted seeker for the North Pole by the sight of a frozen ocean of icebergs. Like the explorer he was convinced that if once he could get over those cold heights he would find a smiling sunny land beyond and perchance many other delights, and like the explorer again, he was, metaphorically, ready to die in the effort. For he loved her more every day, till now his passion dominated his physical being and his mental judgment, so that whatever loss was entailed, and whatever obstacles arose, he was determined to endure and overcome them if by so doing he might gain his end.

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

"How do you do, Quest?" he said, in a from high to low tone, which he was in the habit of

adopting towards his official subordinates. "Sit down. What is it?"

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

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

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

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

Mr. Quest smiled again and rang the bell, but did not take the cigarette. When the breakfast things had been removed he took a chair, and placing it on the further side of the table in such a position that the light, which was to his back, struck full upon Edward Cossey's face, began to deliberately untie and sort his bundle of papers. Presently he came to the one he wanted—a letter. It was not an original letter, but a copy. "Will you kindly

read this, Mr. Cossey?" he said quietly, as he pushed the letter towards him across the table.

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

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

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

He made no answer.

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

Edward looked at it. It was an intercepted

letter of his own, dated about a year before, and its contents, though not of so passionate a nature as the other, were still of a sufficiently incriminating character.

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

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

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

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

"Yes," he answered, "there are. In the first place there is no knowing in what light your father would look on the matter and how his view of it would affect your future interests. In the second

your engagement to Miss de la Molle, upon which you are so strongly set, would certainly be broken off."

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

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

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

"Yes, it does, Mr. Cossey, and I have thought of that. Everybody has his price in this world and I have mine; but the compensation for such a wrong must be a heavy one."

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

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

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

"I know it is, and I know also that it is worth your while to pay thirty thousand pounds to save yourself from the scandal, the chance of disinheritance, and the certainty of the loss of the woman whom you want to marry. So well do I know it that I have prepared the necessary deeds for your signature, and here they are. Listen, sir," he went on sternly; "refuse to accept my terms and by to-night's post I shall send this letter of instructions. Also I shall send to Mr. Cossey, Senior, and to Mr. de la Molle copies of these two precious epistles," and he pointed to the incriminating documents, "together with a copy of the letter to my agents; and where will you be then? Consent, and I will bind myself not to proceed in any way or form. Now make your choice."

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

"Yes," answered Mr. Quest, "I would take money. A little time ago I would not have taken it because I wanted that property; now I have changed my ideas. But as you yourself said, your credit is

strained to the utmost, and while your father is alive you will not find it possible to raise another thirty thousand pounds. Besides, if this matter is to be settled at all it must be settled at once. I will not wait while you make attempts to raise the money."

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

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

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

Mr. Quest turned aside to hide the expression of triumph which flitted across his face and then handed him the deeds. They were elaborately drawn, for he was a skilful legal draughtsman, quite as skilful as many a leading Chancery conveyancer, but the substance of them was that the mortgages were transferred to him by the said Edward Cossey in and for the consideration that he, the said William M. Quest,

consented to abandon for ever a pending action for divorce against his wife, Belle Quest, whereto the said Edward Cossey was to be joined as co-respondent.

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

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

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

Presently the man-servant and the landlady arrived, and Mr. Quest, in his most matter of fact way, explained to them that they were required to witness some documents. At the same time he handed the

letters to the woman, saying that she was to give them to Mr. Cossey when they had all done signing.

Then Edward Cossey signed, and placing his thumb on the familiar wafer delivered the various documents as his act and deed. The witnesses with much preparation and effort affixed their awkward signatures in the places pointed out to them, and in a few minutes the thing was done, leaving Mr. Quest a richer man by thirty thousand pounds than when he had got up that morning.

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

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

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

As soon as he had gone, Edward Cossey gave way to his feelings in language forcible rather than polite. For now, in addition to all the money that

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

Facilis est descensus Averni. When a man of the character of Edward Cossey, or indeed of any character, allows his passion to lead him into a course of deceit, he does not find it easy to check his wild career. From dishonour to dishonour shall he go till at length, in due season, he reaps as he has sown.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW GEORGE TREATED JOHNNIE.

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

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

"Well, Squire," answered his retainer, looking marvelously knowing, "I don't rightly know, but there's a cheap train goes up to this here Exhibition on the Tuesday morning and comes back on the Thursday evening. Ten shillings both ways, that's the fare, and I see in the *Chronicle*, I du, that there's a wonnerful show of these newfangled self-tying and delivering reapers, sich as they foreigners use over sea in America, and I'm rarely fell on seeing them and having a holiday look round Lunnon town. So as there ain't not northing particler a-doing, if you

hain't got anything to say agin it, I think I'll go, Squire."

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

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

And so it came to pass that on the afternoon of the day of the transfer of the mortgages from Edward Cossey to Mr. Quest the great George found himself wandering vaguely about the vast expanse of the Colinderies, and not enjoying himself in the least. He had been recommended by some travelled individual in Boisingham to a certain lodging near Liverpool Street Station, which he found with the help of a friendly porter. Thence he set out for the Exhibition, but, being of a prudent mind, thought that he would do well to save his money and walk the distance. So he walked and walked till he was tired, and then, after an earnest consultation with a policeman, he took a 'bus, which an hour later landed him—at the Royal Oak. His further adventures we need not pursue; suffice it to say that, having started from his lodging at three, it was past seven o'clock at night when he finally reached the

Exhibition, more thoroughly wearied than though he had done a good day's harvesting.

Here he wandered for a while in continual dread of having his pocket picked, seeking reaping machines and discovering none, till at length he found himself in the gardens, where the electric light display was in full swing. Soon wearying of this, for it was a cold damp night, he made a difficult path to a buffet inside the building, where he sat down at a little table, and devoured some very unpleasant-looking cold beef. Here slumber overcame him, for his weariness was great, and he dozed.

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

called Johnnie, whom she had sent away in the cab on the night of Mr. Quest's visit.

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

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

"'Wife!' Oh, yes, we know all about that," said the gentleman called Johnnie.

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

her long bony hands as washerwomen do when they squeeze a cloth.

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

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

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

The waiter grinned and brought the drink and the man Johnnie turned round as though to pay him, but really he went without doing so.

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

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

Thus ruminated George, who, be it observed, was no fool, and who had a hearty dislike and mistrust of Mr. Quest. While he was wondering

how he was to go to work an unexpected opportunity occurred. The lady had finished her brandy-and-soda, and was preparing to leave, when the waiter swooped down upon her.

"Money please, miss," he said.

"Money!" she said, "why, you're paid."

"Come, none of that," said the waiter. "I want a shilling for the brandy-and-soda."

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

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

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

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

"Permit me, marm," said George, putting a shilling on the table, which the waiter took and went

away. "I can't bear to see a real lady like you in difficulty."

"Well, you are a gentleman, you are," she said.

"Not at all, marm. That's my way. And now, marm, won't you have another?"

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

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

"You're going to give me a lift home, ain't you?" she said.

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

Accordingly they got into a hansom, and Mrs. d'Aubigné having given the address in Pimlico, of which George instantly made a mental note, they started.

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

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

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

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

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

Here the lady burst into a flood of incoherent abuse which tired her so much that she had a fourth brandy-and-soda; George mixed it for her and he mixed it strong.

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

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

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

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

"It's a lie!" she shrieked, "it's a lie! He married me before he married her. I could have him in the dock to-morrow, and I would, too, if I wasn't afraid of him, and that's a fact."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By this time the fairest Edithia had realised who her visitor was, and the trick whereby he had left her to pay for the brandy-and-soda recurring to her mind she sprang up and began to express her opinion of Johnnie in violent and libellous language. He replied in appropriate terms, as according to the newspaper reports people whose healths are proposed always do, and fast and furious grew the fun. At length, however, it seemed to occur to Johnnie that he, George, was in some way responsible for this state of affairs, for without word or warning he hit him on the nose. This proved too much for George’s Christian forbearance.

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

Now Johnnie was big and fat, but Johnnie was rather drunk, and George was tough and exceedingly strong. In almost less time than it takes to write it he grasped the abominable Johnnie by the scruff of the neck and had with a mighty jerk hauled him over the sofa so that he lay face downwards thereon. By the door quite convenient to his hand stood George's ground ash stick, a peculiarly good and well-grown one which he had cut himself in Honham wood. He seized it. "Now, boär," he said, "I'll teach you how we do the trick where I come from," and he laid on without mercy. *Whack! whack! whack!* came the ground ash on Johnnie's tight clothes. He yelled, swore and struggled in the grip of the sturdy countryman, but it was of no use, the ash came down like fate; never was a Johnnie so bastinadoed before.

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

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

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

Just then a policeman hurried up.

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII.

EDWARD COSSEY MEETS WITH AN ACCIDENT.

AT the best of times this is not a gay world, though no doubt we ought to pretend that humanity at large is as happy as it is represented to be in, let us say, the Christmas number of an illustrated paper. How well we can imagine the thoughtful inhabitant of this country Anno Domini 7500 or thereabouts disinterring from the crumbling remains of a fireproof safe a Christmas number of the *Illustrated London News* or the *Graphic*. The archaic letters would perhaps be unintelligible to him, but he would look at the pictures with much the same interest that we regard bushmen's drawings or the primitive clay figures of Peru, and though his whole artistic seventy-sixth century soul would be revolted at the crudeness of the colouring, surely he would moralise thus: "Oh, happy race of primitive men, how I, the child of light and civilisation, envy you your long-forgotten days! Here in these rude drawings, which in themselves reveal the extraordinary capacity for

pleasure possessed by the early races, who could look upon them and gather gratification from the sight, may we trace your joyous career from the cradle to the grave. Here you figure as a babe, at whose appearance everybody seems delighted, even those of your race whose inheritance will be thereby diminished—and here a merry lad you revel in the school which the youth of our age finds so wearisome. There, grown more old, you stand at the altar of a beautiful lost faith, a faith that told of hope and peace beyond the grave, and by you stands your blushing bride. No hard fate, no considerations of means, no worldly-mindedness, come to snatch you from her arms as now they daily do. With her you spend your peaceful days, and here at last we see you old but surrounded by love and tender kindness, and almost looking forward to that grave which you believed would be but the gate of glory. Oh, happy race of simple-minded men, what a commentary upon our fevered, avaricious, pleasure-seeking age is this rude scroll of primitive and infantile art!"

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

And yet, though we do not put a record of them

in our Christmas numbers, troubles are as troubles have been and will continually be, for however apparently happy the lot of individuals, it is not altogether a cheerful world in which we have been called to live. At any rate so thought Harold Quaritch on that night of the farewell scene with Ida in the churchyard, and so he continued to think for some time to come. A man's life is always more or less of a struggle; he is a swimmer upon an adverse sea, and to live at all he must keep his limbs in motion. If he grows faint-hearted or weary and no longer strives, for a little while he floats, and then at last, morally or physically, he vanishes. We struggle for our livelihoods, and for all that makes life worth living in the material sense, and not the less are we called upon to struggle with an army of spiritual woes and fears, which now we vanquish and now are vanquished by. Every man of refinement, and many women, will be able to recall periods in his or her existence when life has seemed not only valueless but hateful, when our small successes, such as they are, dwindled away and vanished in the gulf of our many failures, when our hopes and aspirations faded like a little sunset cloud, and we were surrounded by black and lonely mental night, from which even the star of Faith had

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

Our race is called upon to face many troubles; sickness, poverty and death, but it is doubtful if Evil holds another arrow so sharp as that which pierced him now. He was no longer young, it is true, and therefore did not feel that intense agony of disappointed passion, that sickening sense of utter loss which in such circumstances sometimes settle on the young. But if in youth we feel more sharply and with a keener sympathy of the imagination, we have at least more strength to bear, and hope does not altogether die. For we know that

we shall live it down, or if we do not know it then, we *do* live it down. Very likely, indeed, there comes a time when we look back upon our sorrow and he or she who caused it with wonder, yes even with scorn and bitter laughter. But it is not so when the blow falls in later life. It may not hurt so much at the time, it may seem to have been struck with the bludgeon of Fate rather than with her keen dividing sword, but the effect is more lasting, and for the rest of our days we are numb and cold, for Time has no salve to heal us.

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

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

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

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

“DEAR MR. COSSEY,—Will you come over and see me this afternoon about three o'clock. I shall

expect you, so I am sure you will not disappoint me.—B. Q.”

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

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

was of the ominous nature of the silence before the storm, and when she spoke her words were keen, and quick, and vivid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then it is true," she broke in coldly. "It is

true, and in addition to your other failings, Edward, you are a coward and—a liar.”

“What is it to you what I am or what I am not?” he answered savagely. “What business is it of yours? You have no hold over me, and no claim upon me. As it is I have suffered enough at your hands and at those of your accursed husband. I have had to pay him thirty thousand pounds, do you know that? But of course you know it. No doubt the whole thing is a plant, and you will share the spoil.”

“Ah!” she said, drawing a long breath.

“And now look here,” he went on. “Once and for all, I will not be interfered with by you. I *am* engaged to marry Ida de la Molle, and whether you wish it or no I shall marry her. And one more thing. I will not allow you to associate with Ida. Do you understand me? I will not allow it.”

She had been holding the fan before her face while he spoke. Now she lowered it and looked at him. Her face was paler than ever, paler than death, if that be possible, but in her eyes there shone the light of a flame.

“Why not?” she said quietly.

“Why not?” he answered savagely. “I wonder that you think it necessary to ask such a question,

but as you do I will tell you why. Because Ida is the lady whom I am going to marry, and I do not choose that she should associate with a woman who is what you are."

"Ah!" she said again, "I understand now."

At that moment a diversion occurred. The drawing-room looked on to the garden, and at the end of the garden was a door which opened into another street.

Through this door had come Colonel Quaritch, accompanied by Mr. Quest, the former with his gun under his arm. They walked up the garden and were almost at the French window when Edward Cossey saw them. "Control yourself," he said in a low voice, "here is your husband."

Mr. Quest advanced and knocked at the window, which his wife opened. When he saw Edward Cossey he hesitated a little, then nodded to him, while the Colonel came forward, and placing his gun by the wall entered the room, shook hands with Mrs. Quest, and bowed coldly to Edward Cossey.

"I met the Colonel, Belle," said Mr. Quest, "coming here with the benevolent intention of giving you some snipe, so I brought him up by the short way."

"That is very kind of you, Colonel Quaritch,"

said she with a sweet smile (for she had the sweetest smile imaginable).

He looked at her. There was something about her face which attracted his attention, something unusual.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“You,” he said bluntly, for they were out of hearing of the other two. “If I were poetically minded I should say that you looked like the Tragic Muse.”

“Do I?” she answered, laughing. “Well, that is curious, because I feel like Comedy herself.”

“There’s something wrong with that woman,” thought the Colonel to himself as he extracted two couple of snipe from his capacious coat tails. “I wonder what it is.”

Just then Mr. Quest and Edward Cossey passed out into the garden talking.

“Here are the snipe, Mrs. Quest,” he said. “I have had rather good luck. I killed four couple and missed two couple more; but then I had a new gun, and one can never shoot so well with a new gun.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, “do pull out the ‘painters’ for me. I like to put them in my riding hat, and I can never find them myself.”

"Very well," he answered, "but I must go into the garden to do it; there is not light enough here. It gets dark so soon now."

Accordingly he stepped out through the window, and began to hunt for the pretty little feathers which are to be found at the angle of a snipe's wing.

"Is that the new gun, Colonel Quaritch?" said Mrs. Quest presently: "what a beautiful one!"

"Be careful," he said, "I haven't taken the cartridges out."

If he had been looking at her, which at the moment he was not, Harold would have seen her stagger and catch at the wall for support. Then he would have seen an awful and malevolent light of sudden determination pass across her face.

"All right," she said, "I know about guns. My father used to shoot and I often cleaned his gun," and she took the weapon up and began to examine the engraving on the locks.

"What is this?" she said, pointing to a little slide above the locks on which the word "safe" was engraved in gold letters.

"Oh, that's the safety bolt," he said. "When you see the word 'safe,' the locks are barred and the gun won't go off. You have to push the bolt forward before you can fire."

"So?" she said carelessly, and suiting the action to the word.

"Yes, so, but please be careful, the gun is loaded."

"Yes, I'll be careful," she answered. "Well, it is a very pretty gun, and so light that I believe I could shoot with it myself."

Meanwhile Edward Cossey and Mr. Quest, who were walking up the garden, had separated, Mr. Quest going to the right across the lawn to pick up a glove which had dropped upon the grass, while Edward Cossey slowly sauntered towards them. When he was about nine paces off he too halted and, stooping a little, looked abstractedly at a white Japanese chrysanthemum which was still in bloom. Mrs. Quest turned, as the Colonel thought, to put the gun back against the wall. He would have offered to take it from her but at the moment both his hands were occupied in extracting one of the "painters" from a snipe. The next thing he was aware of was a loud explosion, followed by an exclamation or rather a cry from Mrs. Quest. He dropped the snipe and looked up, just in time to see the gun, which had leapt from her hands with the recoil, strike against the wall of the house and fall to the ground. Instantly, whether by instinct or

by chance he never knew, he glanced towards the place where Edward Cossey stood, and saw that his face was streaming with blood and that his right arm hung helpless by his side. Even as he looked, he saw him put his uninjured hand to his head and, without a word or a sound, sink down on the gravel path.

For a second there was silence, and the blue smoke from the gun hung heavily upon the damp autumn air. In the midst of it stood Belle Quest like one transfixed, her lips apart, her blue eyes opened wide, and the stamp of terror—or was it guilt?—upon her pallid face.

All this he saw in a flash, and then ran to the bleeding heap upon the gravel.

He reached it almost simultaneously with Mr. Quest, and together they turned the body over. But still Belle stood there enveloped in the heavy smoke.

Presently, however, her trance left her and she ran up, flung herself upon her knees, and looked at her former lover, whose face and head were now a mass of blood.

“He is dead,” she wailed; “he is dead, and I have killed him! Oh, Edward! Edward!”

Mr. Quest turned on her savagely; so savagely

that one might almost have thought he feared lest in her agony she should say something further.

“Stop that,” he said, seizing her arm, “and go for the doctor, for if he is not dead he will soon bleed to death.”

With an effort she rose, put her hand to her forehead, and then ran like the wind down the garden and through the little door.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAROLD TAKES THE NEWS.

MR. QUEST and Harold bore the bleeding man—whether he was senseless or dead they knew not—into the house and laid him on the sofa. Then, having despatched a servant to seek a second doctor in case the one already gone for was out, they set to work to cut the clothes from his neck and arm, and do what they could, and that was little enough, towards staunching the bleeding. It soon, however, became evident that Cossey had only got the outside portion of the charge of No. 7, that is to say, he had been struck by about a hundred pellets out of the three or four hundred which would go to the ordinary ounce and an eighth. Had he received the whole charge he must, at that distance, have been instantly killed. As it was, the point of the shoulder was riddled, and so to a somewhat smaller extent was the back of his neck and the region of the right ear. One or two outside pellets had also struck the head higher up, and the skin and muscles along the back were torn by the passage of shot.

“By Jove!” said Mr. Quest, “I think he is done for.”

The Colonel nodded. He had some experience of shot wounds, and the present was not of a nature to encourage hope of the patient's survival.

“How did it happen?” asked Mr. Quest presently, as he mopped up the streaming blood with a sponge.

“It was an accident,” groaned the Colonel. “Your wife was looking at my new gun. I told her it was loaded, and that she must be careful, and I thought she had put it down. The next thing that I heard was the report. It is all my cursed fault for leaving the cartridges in.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Quest. “She always thought she understood guns. It is a shocking accident.”

Just then one of the doctors, followed by Belle Quest, ran up the lawn carrying a box of instruments, and in another minute was at work. He was a quick and skilful surgeon, and having announced that the patient was not dead, at once began to tie one of the smaller arteries in the throat, which had been pierced, and through which Edward Cossey was rapidly bleeding to death. By the time that this was done the other doctor, an older man, put

in an appearance, and together they made a rapid examination of the injuries.

Belle stood by holding a basin of water. She did not speak, and on her face was that same fixed look of horror which Harold had observed after the discharge of the gun.

When the examination was finished the two doctors whispered together for a few seconds.

"Will he live?" asked Mr. Quest.

"We cannot say," answered the older doctor. "We do not think it likely that he will. It depends upon the extent of his injuries, and whether or no they have extended to the spine. If he does live he will probably be paralysed to some extent, and must certainly lose the hearing of the right ear."

When she heard this Belle sank down upon a chair overwhelmed. Then the two doctors, assisted by Harold, set to work to carry Edward Cossey into another room which had been rapidly prepared, leaving Mr. Quest alone with his wife.

He came, stood in front of her, looked her in the face, and then laughed.

"Upon my word," he said, "we men are bad enough, but you women beat us in wickedness."

"What do you mean?" she said faintly.

"I mean that you are a murderess, Belle," he said solemnly. "And you are a bungler, too. You could not hold the gun straight."

"I deny it," she said, "the gun went off——"

"Yes," he said, "you are wise to make no admissions; they might be used in evidence against you. Let me counsel you to make no admissions. But now look here. I suppose the man will have to lie in this house until he recovers or dies, and that you will help to nurse him. Well, I will have none of your murderous work going on here. Do you hear me? You are not to complete at leisure what you have begun in haste."

"What do you take me for?" she asked, with some return of spirit; "do you think that I would injure a wounded man?"

"I do not know," he answered with a shrug, "and as for what I take you for, I take you for a woman whose passion has made her mad," and he turned and left the room.

When they had carried Edward Cossey, dead or alive—and he looked more like death than life—up to the room prepared for him, seeing that he could be of no further use, the Colonel left the house with a view of going to the Castle.

On his way out he looked into the drawing-

room and there was Mrs. Quest, still sitting on the chair and gazing blankly before her. Pitying her he entered "Come, cheer up, Mrs. Quest," he said kindly, "they hope that he will live."

She made no answer.

"It is an awful accident, but I am almost as culpable as you, for I left the cartridges in the gun. Anyhow, God's will be done."

"God's will!" she said, looking up, and then once more relapsed into silence.

He turned to go, when suddenly she rose and caught him by the arm.

"Will he die?" she said almost fiercely. "Tell me what you think—not what the doctors say; you have seen many wounded men and know better than they do. Tell me the truth."

"I cannot say," he answered, shaking his head.

Apparently she interpreted his answer in the affirmative. At any rate she covered her face with her hands.

"What would you do, Colonel Quaritch, if you had killed the only thing you loved in the whole world?" she asked dreamily. "Oh, what am I saying?—I am off my head. Leave me—go and tell Ida; it will be good news for Ida."

Accordingly he started for the Castle, having

first picked up his gun on the spot where it had fallen from the hands of Mrs. Quest.

And then it was that for the first time the extraordinary importance of this dreadful accident in its bearing upon his own affairs flashed upon his mind. If Cossey died he could not marry Ida, that was clear. This was what Mrs. Quest must have meant when she said that it would be good news for Ida. But how did she know anything about Ida's engagement to Edward Cossey? And, by Jove! what did the woman mean when she asked what he would do if he had killed the only thing he loved in the world? Cossey must be the "only thing she loved," and now he thought of it, when she believed that he was dead she called him "Edward, Edward."

Harold Quaritch was as simple and unsuspecting a man as it would be easy to find, but he was no fool. He had moved about the world and on various occasions come in contact with cases of this sort, as most other men have done. He knew that when a woman, in a moment of distress, calls a man by his Christian name it is because she is in the habit of thinking of him and speaking to him by that name. Not that there was much in that by itself, but in public she called him "Mr. Cossey."

"Edward" clearly then was the "only thing she loved," and Edward was secretly engaged to Ida, and Mrs. Quest knew it.

Now when a man who is not her husband has the fortune, or rather the misfortune, to be the only thing a married woman ever loved, and when that married woman is aware of the fact of his devotion and engagement to somebody else, it is obvious, he reflected, that in nine cases out of ten the knowledge will excite strong feelings in her breast, feelings indeed which in some natures would amount almost to madness.

When he had first seen Mrs. Quest that afternoon she and Cossey were alone together, and he had noticed something unusual about her, something unnatural and intense. Indeed, he remembered he had told her that she looked like the Tragic Muse. Could it be that the look was the look of a woman maddened by insult and jealousy, who was meditating some fearful crime? *How did that gun go off?* He did not see it, and he thanked heaven that he did not, for we are not always so anxious to bring our fellow-creatures to justice as we might be, especially when they happen to be young and lovely women. How did it go off? She understood guns; he could see that from the way she handled it. Was it likely

that it exploded of itself, or owing to an accidental touch of the trigger? It was possible, but not likely. Still, such things have been known to happen, and it would be very difficult to prove that it had not happened in this case. If it should be an attempted murder it was very cleverly managed, because nobody could prove that it was not accidental. But could it be that this soft, beautiful, baby-faced woman had on the spur of the moment taken advantage of his loaded gun to wreak her jealousy and her wrongs upon her faithless lover? Well, the face is no mirror of the quality of the soul within, and it was possible. Further than that it did not seem to him to be his business to inquire.

By this time he had reached the Castle. The Squire had gone out but Ida was in, and he was shown into the drawing-room while the servant went to seek her. Presently he heard her dress rustle upon the stairs, and the sound of it sent the blood to his heart, for where is the music that is more sweet than the rustling of the dress of the woman whom we love?

“Why, what is the matter?” she said, noticing the disturbed expression on his face.

“Well,” he said, “there has been an accident—a very bad accident.”

"Who?" she said. "Not my father?"

"No, no; Mr. Cossey."

"Oh," she said, with a sigh of relief. "Why did you frighten me so?"

The Colonel smiled grimly at this unconscious exhibition of the relative state of her affections.

"What has happened to him?" asked Ida, this time with a suitable expression of concern.

"He has been accidentally shot."

"Who by?"

"Mrs. Quest."

"Then she did it on purpose—I mean—is he dead?"

"No, but I believe that he will die."

They looked at one another, and each read in the eyes of the other the thought which passed through their brains. If Edward Cossey died they would be free to marry. So clearly did they read it that Ida actually interpreted it in words.

"You must not think that," she said, "it is very wrong."

"It is wrong," answered the Colonel, apparently in no way surprised at her interpretation of his thoughts, "but unfortunately human nature is human nature."

Then he went on to tell her all about it. Ida

made no comment, that is after those first words, "she did it on purpose," which burst from her in her astonishment. She felt, and he felt too, that the question as to how that gun went off was one which was best left uninquied into by them. No doubt if the man died there would be an inquest, and the whole matter would be investigated. Meanwhile one thing was certain, Edward Cossey, whom she was engaged to, was shot and likely to die.

Presently, while they were still talking, the Squire came in from his walk. To him also the story was told, and to judge from the expression of his face he thought it grave enough. If Edward Cossey died the mortgages over the Honham property would, as he believed, pass to his heir, who, unless he had made a will, which was not probable, would be his father, old Mr. Cossey, the banker, from whom Mr. de la Molle well knew he had little mercy to expect. This was serious enough, and still more serious was it that all the bright prospects in which he had for some days been basking of the re-establishment of his family upon a securer basis than it had occupied for generations would vanish like a vision. He was not more worldly-minded than are other men, but he did fondly cherish a natural desire to see the family fortunes once more in the ascendant. The

projected marriage between his daughter and Edward Cossey would have brought this about most fully, and however much he might in his secret heart distrust the man himself, and doubt whether the match was really acceptable to Ida, he could not view its collapse with indifference. While they were still talking the dressing-bell rang, and Harold rose to go.

"Stop and dine, won't you, Quaritch?" said the Squire.

Harold hesitated and looked at Ida. She made no movement, but her eyes said "stay," and he sighed and yielded. Dinner was rather a melancholy feast, for the Squire was preoccupied with his own thoughts, and Ida had not much to say. So far as the Colonel was concerned, the recollection of the tragedy he had witnessed that afternoon, and of all the dreadful details with which it was accompanied, was not conducive to appetite.

As soon as dinner was over the Squire announced that he should walk into Boisingham to inquire how the wounded man was getting on. Shortly afterwards he started, leaving his daughter and Harold alone.

They went into the drawing-room and talked about indifferent things. No word of love passed

between them; no word, even, that could bear an affectionate significance, and yet every sentence which passed their lips carried a message with it, and was as heavy with unuttered tenderness as a laden bee with honey. For they loved each other dearly, and deep love is a thing that can hardly be concealed by lovers from each other.

It was happiness for him merely to sit beside her and hear her speak, to watch the changes of her face and the lamplight playing upon her hair, and it was happiness for her to know that he was sitting there and watching. For the most beautiful aspect of true affection is its accompanying sense of perfect companionship and rest. It is a sense which nothing else in this life can give, and, like a lifting cloud, reveals the white and distant peaks of that unbroken peace which we cannot hope to win in our stormy journey through the world.

And so the evening wore away till at last they heard the Squire's loud voice talking to somebody outside. Presently he came in.

"How is he?" asked Harold. "Will he live?"

"They cannot say," was the answer. "But two great doctors have been telegraphed for from London, and will be down to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX.

IDA RECANTS.

THE two great doctors came, and the two great doctors pocketed their hundred guinea fees and went, but neither the one nor the other, nor eke the twain, would commit themselves to a fixed opinion as to Edward Cossey's chances of life or death. However, one of them picked out a number of shot from the wounded man, and a number more he left in because he could not pick them out. Then they both agreed that the treatment of their local brethren was all that could be desired, and so far as they were concerned there was an end of it.

A week had passed, and Edward Cossey, nursed night and day by Belle Quest, still hovered between life and death.

It was a Thursday, and Harold had walked up to the Castle to give the Squire the latest news of the wounded man. Whilst he was in the vestibule saying what he had to say to Mr. de la Molle and Ida, a man rang the bell, whom he recognised as one of Mr. Quest's clerks. He was shown in, and

handed the Squire a fully addressed brief envelope, which, he said, he had been told to deliver by Mr. Quest, and adding that there was no answer bowed himself out.

As soon as he had gone the envelope was opened by Mr. de la Molle, who took from it two legal-looking documents which he began to read. Suddenly the first dropped from his hand, and with an exclamation he snatched at the second.

"What is it, father?" asked Ida.

"What is it? Why it's just this. Edward Cossey has transferred the mortgages over this property to Quest, the lawyer, and Quest has served a notice on me calling in the money," and he began to walk up and down the room in a state of great agitation.

"I don't quite understand," said Ida, her breast heaving, and a curious light shining in her eyes.

"Don't you?" said her father, "then perhaps you will read that," and he pushed the papers to her. As he did so another letter which he had not observed fell out of them.

At this point Harold rose to go.

"Don't go, Quaritch, don't go," said the Squire. "I shall be glad of your advice, and I am sure that what you hear will not go any further."

At the same time Ida motioned him to stay, and though somewhat unwillingly he did so.

“DEAR SIR,” began the Squire, reading the letter aloud,—

“Inclosed you will find the usual formal notices calling in the sum of thirty thousand pounds recently advanced upon mortgage of the Honham Castle Estates by Edward Cossey, Esq. These mortgages have passed into my possession for value received, and it is now my desire to realise them. I most deeply regret being forced to press an old client, but my circumstances are such that I am obliged so to do. If I can in any way facilitate your efforts to raise the sum I shall be very glad. But in the event of the money not being forthcoming at the end of the six months’ notice the ordinary steps will be taken to realise by foreclosure.

“I am, dear sir, yours truly,

“W. QUEST.

“James de la Molle, Esq., J. P., D. L.”

“I see now,” said Ida. “Mr. Cossey has no further hold on the mortgages or on the property.”

“That’s it,” said the Squire; “he has transferred

them to that rascally lawyer. And yet he told me—I can't understand it, I really can't."

At this point the Colonel insisted upon leaving, saying he would call in again that evening to see if he could be of any assistance. When he was gone Ida spoke in a cold, determined voice:

"Mr. Cossey told me that when we married he would put those mortgages in the fire. It now seems that the mortgages were not his to dispose of, or else that he has since transferred them to Mr. Quest without informing us."

"Yes, I suppose so," said the Squire.

"Very well," said Ida. "And now, father, I will tell you something. I engaged myself—or, to be more accurate, I promised to engage myself—to Edward Cossey on the condition that he would take up these mortgages when Cossey and Son were threatening to foreclose, or whatever it is called."

"Good heavens!" said her astonished father, "what an idea!"

"I did it," went on Ida, "and he took up the mortgages, and in due course he claimed my promise, and I became engaged to marry him, though that engagement was repugnant to me. You will see that having persuaded him to advance the money

I could not refuse to carry out my share of the bargain."

"Well," said the Squire, "this is all new to me."

"Yes," she answered, "and I should never have told you of it had it not been for this sudden change in the position of affairs. What I did, I did to save our family from ruin. But now it seems that we are to be ruined after all. Therefore, the condition upon which I promised to marry him has not been carried out, and my promise falls to the ground."

"You mean that supposing he lives, you will not marry Edward Cossey?"

"Yes, I do mean it."

The Squire thought for a minute. "This is a very serious step, Ida," he said. "I don't mean that I think that the man has behaved well—but still he may have given up the mortgages to Quest under pressure of some sort and might be willing to find the money to meet them."

"I do not care if he finds the money ten times over," said Ida, "I will not marry him. He has not kept to the letter of his bond and I will not keep to mine."

"It is all very well, Ida," said the Squire, "and of course nobody can force you into a distasteful

marriage, but I wish to point out one thing. You have your family to think of as well as yourself. I tell you frankly that I do not believe that as times are it will be possible to raise thirty thousand pounds to pay off the charges unless it is by the help of Edward Cossey. So if he lives—and as he has lasted so long I expect that he will live—and you refuse to go on with your engagement to him we shall be sold up, that is all; for this man Quest, confound him, will show us no mercy.”

“I know it, father,” answered Ida, “but I cannot and will not marry him, and I do not think you can expect me to do so. I became engaged, or rather promised to become engaged to him, because I thought that one woman had no right to put her own happiness before the welfare of an old family like ours, and I would have carried out that engagement at any cost. But since then, to tell you the truth,” and she blushed deeply, “not only have I learned to dislike him a great deal more, but I have come to care for some one else who also cares for me, and who therefore has a right to be considered. Think, father, what it means to a woman to sell herself into bodily and mental bondage—when she cares for another man.”

“Well, well,” said her father with some irritation,

"I am no authority upon matters of sentiment; they are not in my line and I know that women have their prejudices. Still you can't expect me to look at the matter in quite the same light as you do. And who is the gentleman? Colonel Quaritch?"

She nodded her head.

"Oh," said the Squire, "I have nothing to say against Quaritch, indeed I like the man, but I suppose that if he has £600 a year, it is every sixpence he can count on."

"I had rather marry him upon six hundred a year than Edward Cossey upon sixty thousand."

"Ah, yes, I have heard young women talk like that before, though perhaps they think differently afterwards. Of course I have no right to obtrude myself, but when you are comfortably married, what is going to become of Honham I should like to know, and incidentally of me?"

"I don't know, father, dear," she answered, her eyes filling with tears; "we must trust to Providence, I suppose. I know you think me very selfish," she went on, catching him by the arm, "but, oh, father! there are things that are worse than death to women, or, at least, to some women. I almost think that I would rather die than marry Edward Cossey, though

I should have gone through with it if he had kept his word."

"No, no," said her father. "I can't wonder at it, and certainly I do not ask you to marry a man whom you dislike. But still it is hard upon me to have all this trouble at my age, and the old place coming to the hammer too. It is enough to make a man wish that his worries were over altogether. However, we must take things as we find them, and we find them pretty rough. Quaritch said he was coming back this evening, didn't he? I suppose there will not be any public engagement at present, will there? And look here, Ida, I don't want him to come talking to me about it. I have got enough things of my own to think of without bothering my head with your love affairs. Pray let the matter be for the present. And now I am going out to see that fellow George, who hasn't been here since he came back from London, and a nice bit of news it will be that I shall have to tell him."

When her father had gone Ida did a thing she had not done for some time—she wept a little. All her fine intentions of self-denial had broken down, and she felt humiliated at the fact. She had intended to sacrifice herself upon the altar of her duty and to make herself the wedded wife of a man

whom she disliked, and now on the first opportunity she had thrown up the contract on a quibble—a point of law as it were. Nature had been too strong for her, as it often is for people with deep feelings; she could not do it, no, not to save Honham from the hammer. When she had promised that she would engage herself to Edward Cossey she had not been in love with Colonel Quaritch; now she was, and the difference between the two states is considerable. Still the fall humiliated her pride, and what is more she felt that her father was disappointed in her. Of course she could not expect him at his age to enter into her private feelings, for when looked at through the mist of years sentiment appears more or less foolish. She knew very well that age often strips men of those finer sympathies and sensibilities which clothe them in youth, much as the winter frost and wind strip the delicate foliage from the trees. And to such the music of the world is dead. Love has vanished with the summer dews, and in its place are cutting blasts and snows and sere memories rustling like fallen leaves about the feet. As we grow old we are too apt to grow away from beauty and what is high and pure, our hearts harden by contact with the hard world. We examine love and find, or believe we find, that it is nought

but a variety of passion; friendship, and think it self-interest; religion, and name it superstition. The facts of life alone remain clear and desirable. We know that money means power, and we turn our face to Mammon, and if he smiles upon us we are content to let our finer visions go where our youth has gone.

“Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.”

So says the poet, but alas! the clouds soon melt into the grey air of the world, and some of us, before our course is finished, forget that they ever were. And yet which is the shadow of the truth—those dreams, and hopes, and aspirations of our younger life, or the corruption with which the world cakes our souls?

Ida knew that she could not expect her father to sympathise with her; she knew that to his judgment, circumstances being the same, and both suitors being equally sound in wind and limb, the choice of one of them should, to a large extent, be a matter to be decided by the exterior considerations of wealth and general convenience.

However, she had made her choice, made it suddenly, but none the less had made it. It lay between her father's interest and the interest of the

family at large and her own honour as a woman—for the mere empty ceremony of marriage which satisfies society cannot make dishonour an honourable thing. She had made her choice, and the readers of her history must judge if that choice was right or wrong.

After dinner Harold came again as he had promised. The Squire was not in the drawing-room when he was shown in.

Ida rose to greet him with a sweet and happy smile upon her face, for in the presence of her lover all her doubts and troubles vanished like a mist.

“I have a piece of news for you,” said he, trying to look as though he was rejoiced to give it. “Edward Cossey has taken a wonderful turn for the better. They say that he will certainly recover.”

“Oh,” she answered, colouring a little, “and now I have a piece of news for you, Colonel Quaritch. My engagement with Mr. Edward Cossey is at an end. I shall not marry him.”

“Are you sure?” said Harold with a gasp.

“Quite sure. I have made up my mind,” and she held out her hand, as though to seal her words.

He took it and kissed it. “Thank heaven, Ida,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered, “thank heaven;” and at

that moment the Squire came in, looking very miserable and depressed, and of course nothing more was said about the matter.

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE PROPHESES AGAIN.

Six weeks passed, and in that time several things happened. In the first place the miserly old banker, Edward Cossey's father, had died, his death being accelerated by the shock of his son's accident. On his will being opened, it was found that property and money to no less a value than £600,000 passed under it to Edward absolutely, the only condition attached being that he should continue in the house of Cossey and Son and leave a certain share of his fortune in the business.

Edward Cossey also, thanks chiefly to Belle's tender nursing, had almost recovered, with one exception—he was, and would be for life, stone deaf in the right ear. The paralysis which the doctors feared had not shown itself. One of his first questions when he became convalescent was addressed to Belle Quest.

As in a dream, he had always seen her sweet

face hanging over him, and dimly known that she was ministering to him.

"Have you nursed me ever since the accident, Belle?" he said.

"Yes," she answered.

"It is very good of you, considering all things," he murmured. "I wonder that you did not let me die."

But she turned her face to the wall and said never a word, nor did any further conversation on these matters pass between them.

Then as his strength came back so did his passion for Ida de la Molle revive. He was not allowed to write or even receive letters, and with this explanation of her silence he was fain to content himself. But the Squire, he was told, often called to inquire after him, and once or twice Ida came with him.

At length a time came—it was two days after he had been told of his father's death—when he was pronounced fit to be moved into his own rooms and to receive his correspondence as usual.

The move was effected without any difficulty, and here Belle bade him good-bye. Even as she did so George drove his fat pony up to the door, and getting down gave a letter to the landlady, with

particular instructions that it was to be delivered into Mr. Cossey's own hands. As she passed Belle saw that it was addressed in the Squire's handwriting.

When it was delivered to him Edward Cossey opened it with eagerness. It contained an inclosure in Ida's writing, and this he read first. It ran as follows:

“DEAR MR. COSSEY,—

“I am told that you are now able to read letters, so I hasten to write to you. First of all, let me say how thankful I am that you are in a fair way to complete recovery from your dreadful accident. And now I must tell you what I fear will be almost as painful to you to read as it is for me to write, namely, that the engagement between us is at an end. To put the matter frankly, you will remember that I rightly or wrongly became engaged to you on a certain condition. That condition has not been fulfilled, for Mr. Quest, to whom the mortgages on my father's property have been transferred by you, is pressing for their payment. Consequently the obligation on my part is at an end, and with it the engagement must end also, for I grieve to tell you that it is not one which my personal inclination will

induce me to carry out. Wishing you a speedy and complete recovery, and every happiness and prosperity in your future life, believe me, dear Mr. Cossey,

“Very truly yours,

“IDA DE LA MOLLE.”

He put down this uncompromising and crushing epistle and nervously glanced at the Squire's, which was very short.

“MY DEAR COSSEY,” it began,—

“Ida has shown me the inclosed letter. I think that you did unwisely when you entered into what must be called a money bargain for my daughter's hand. Whether under all the circumstances she does either well or wisely to repudiate the engagement after it has once been agreed upon, is not for me to judge. She is a free agent and has a natural right to dispose of her life as she thinks fit. This being so I have of course no option but to endorse her decision, so far as I have anything to do with the matter. It is a decision which I for some reasons regret, but which I am quite powerless to alter.

“Believe me, with kind regards,

“Truly yours,

“JAMES DE LA MOLLE.”

Edward Cossey turned his face to the wall and indulged in such meditations as the occasion gave rise to, and they were bitter enough. He was as bent upon this marriage as he had ever been, more so in fact, now that his father was out of the way. He knew that Ida disliked him, he had known that all along, but he had trusted to time and marriage to overcome the dislike. And now that accursed Quest had brought about the ruin of his hopes, Ida had seen her chance of escape and like a bold woman, had seized upon it. There was one ray of hope, and one only. He knew that the money would not be forthcoming to pay off the mortgages. He could see too from the tone of the Squire's letter that he did not altogether approve of his daughter's decision. And his father was dead. Like Cæsar, he was the master of many legions, or rather of much money, which is as good as legions. Money can make most paths smooth to the feet of the traveller, and why not this? After much thought he came to a conclusion. He would not trust his chance to paper, he would plead his cause in person. So he wrote a short note to the Squire acknowledging Ida's and his letter, and saying that he hoped to come and see them as soon as ever the doctor would allow him out of doors.

Meanwhile George, having delivered his letter, had gone upon another errand. Pulling up the fat pony in front of Mr. Quest's office he alighted and entered. Mr. Quest was disengaged, and he was shown straight into the inner office, where the lawyer sat, looking more refined and gentlemanlike than ever.

"How do you do, George?" he said cheerily; "sit down; what is it?"

"Well, sir," answered that lugubrious worthy, as he awkwardly took a seat, "the question is what isn't it? These be rum times, they be, they fare to puzzle a man, they du."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest, balancing a quill pen on his finger, "the times are bad enough."

Then came a pause.

"Dash it all, sir," went on George presently, "I may as well get it out; I hev come to speak to you about the Squire's business."

"Yes," said Mr. Quest.

"Well, sir," went on George, "I'm told that these dratted mortgages hev passed into your hands, and that you hev called in the money."

"Yes, that is correct," said Mr. Quest again.

"Well, sir, the fact is that the Squire can't git the money. It can't be had nohow. Nobody won't

take the land as security. It might be so much water for all folk will look at it."

"Quite so. Land is in very bad odour as security now."

"And that being so, sir, what is to be done?"

Mr. Quest shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. If the money is not forthcoming, of course I shall, however unwillingly, be forced to take my legal remedy."

"Meaning, sir——"

"Meaning that I shall bring an action for foreclosure and do what I can with the lands."

George's face darkened.

"And that reads, sir, that the Squire and Miss Ida will be turned out of Honham, where they and theirs hev been for centuries, and that you will turn in?"

"Well, that is what it comes to, George. I am sincerely sorry to press the Squire, but it's a matter of thirty thousand pounds, and I am not in a position to throw away thirty thousand pounds."

"Sir," said George, rising in indignation, "I don't rightly know how you came by them there mortgages. There is some things as laryers know and honest men don't know, and that's one on them. But it seems that you've got 'em and are a-going to use 'em—

and that being so, Mr. Quest, I have summut to say to you—and that is that no good won't come to you from this here move."

"What do you mean by that, George?" said the lawyer sharply.

"Niver you mind what I means, sir. I means what I says. I means that sometimes people has things in their lives snugged away where nobody can't see 'em, things as quiet as though they was dead and buried, and that ain't dead nor buried neither, things so much alive that they fare as though they were fit to kick the lid off their coffin. That's what I means, sir, and I means that when folk set to work to do a hard and wicked thing those dead things sometimes gits up and walks where they is least wanting; and mayhap if you goes on for to turn the old Squire and Miss Ida out of the Castle, mayhap, sir, summut of that sort will happen to you, for mark my word, sir, there's justice in the world, sir, as mebbe you will find out. And now, sir, begging your pardon, I'll wish you good-morning, and leave you to think on what I've said," and he was gone.

"George!" called Mr. Quest after him, rising from his chair, "George!" but George was out of hearing.

“Now what did he mean by that—what the devil did he mean?” said Mr. Quest with a gasp as he sat down again. “Surely,” he thought, “the man cannot have got hold of anything about Edith. Impossible, impossible; if he had he would have said more, he would not have confined himself to hinting, that would take a cleverer man, he would have shown his hand. He must have been speaking at random to frighten me, I suppose. By heaven! what a thing it would be if he *had* got hold of something. Ruin! absolute ruin! I’ll settle up this business as soon as I can and leave the country; I can’t stand the strain, it’s like having a sword over one’s head. I’ve half a mind to leave it in somebody else’s hands and go at once. No, for that would look like running away. It must be all rubbish; how could he know anything about it!”

So shaken was he, however, that though he tried once and yet again, he found it impossible to settle himself down to work till he had taken a couple of glasses of sherry from the decanter in the cupboard. Even as he did so he wondered if the shadow of the sword disturbed him so much, how he would be affected if it ever was his lot to face the glimmer of its naked blade.

No further letter came to Edward Cossey from

the Castle, but, impatient as he was to do so, another fortnight elapsed before he was able to see Ida and her father. At last one fine December morning for the first time since his accident he was allowed to take carriage exercise and his first drive was to Honham Castle.

When the Squire, who was sitting in the vestibule writing letters, saw a poor pallid man, rolled up in fur, with a white face scarred with shot marks and black rings round his large dark eyes, being helped from a closed carriage, he did not know who it was, and called to Ida, who was passing along the passage, to tell him.

Of course she recognised her admirer instantly, and wished to leave the room, but her father prevented her.

“You got into this mess,” he said, forgetting how and for whom she got into it, “and now you must get out of it in your own way.”

When Edward, having been assisted into the room, saw Ida standing there, all the blood in his wasted body seemed to rush into his pallid face.

“How do you do, Mr. Cossey?” she said. “I am glad to see you out, and hope that you are better.”

“I beg your pardon, I cannot hear you,” he

said, turning round; "I am stone deaf in my right ear."

A pang of pity shot through her heart. Edward Cossey, feeble, dejected, and limping from the jaws of Death, was a very different being to Edward Cossey in the full glow of his youth, health, and strength. Indeed, so much did his condition appeal to her sympathies that for the first time since her mental attitude towards him had been one of entire indifference, she looked on him without repugnance.

Meanwhile, her father had shaken him by the hand, and led him to an armchair before the fire.

Then after a few questions and answers as to his accident and merciful recovery there came a pause.

At length he broke it. "I have come to see you both," he said with a faint nervous smile, "about the letters you wrote me. If my condition had allowed I should have come before, but it would not."

"Yes," said the Squire attentively, while Ida folded her hands in her lap and sat still with her eyes fixed upon the fire.

"It seems," he went on, "that the old proverb has applied to my case as to so many others—being absent I have suffered. I understand from these

letters that my engagement to you, Miss de la Molle, is broken off."

She made a motion of assent.

"And that it is broken off on the ground that having been forced by a combination of circumstances which I cannot enter into to transfer the mortgages to Mr. Quest, consequently I broke my bargain with you?"

"Yes," said Ida.

"Very well then, I come to tell you both that I am ready to find the money to meet those mortgages and to pay them off in full."

"Ah!" said the Squire.

"Also that I am ready to do what I offered to do before, and which, as my father is now dead, I am perfectly in a position to do, namely, to settle two hundred thousand pounds absolutely upon Ida, and indeed generally to do anything else that she or you may wish," and he looked at the Squire.

"It is no use looking to me for an answer," said he with some irritation. "I have no voice in the matter."

He turned to Ida, who put her hand before her face and shook her head.

"Perhaps," said Edward, somewhat bitterly, "I should not be far wrong if I said that Colonel

Quaritch has more to do with your change of mind than the fact of the transfer of these mortgages."

She dropped her hand and looked him full in the face.

"You are quite right, Mr. Cossey," she said boldly. "Colonel Quaritch and I are attached to each other, and we hope one day to be married."

"Confound that Quaritch," growled the Squire beneath his breath.

Edward winced visibly at this outspoken statement.

"Ida," he said, "I make one last appeal to you. I am devoted to you with all my heart; so devoted that though it may seem foolish to say so, especially before your father, I really think I would rather not have recovered from my accident than that I should have recovered for this. I will give you everything that a woman can want, and my money will make your family what it was centuries ago, the greatest in the country side. I don't pretend to have been a saint—perhaps you may have heard something against me in that way—or to be anything out of the common. I am only an ordinary every-day man, but I am devoted to you. Think, then, before you refuse me altogether."

"I have thought, Mr. Cossey," answered Ida

almost passionately: "I have thought until I am tired of thinking, and I do not consider it fair that you should press me like this, especially before my father."

"Then," he said, rising with difficulty, "I have said all I have to say, and done all that I can do. I shall still hope that you may change your mind. I shall not yet abandon hope. Good-bye."

She touched his hand, and then the Squire offering him his arm, he went down the steps to his carriage.

"I hope, Mr. de la Molle," he said, "that bad as things look for me, if they should take a turn I shall have your support."

"My dear sir," answered the Squire, "I tell you frankly that I wish my daughter would marry you. As I said before, it would for obvious reasons be desirable. But Ida is not like ordinary women. When she sets her mind upon a thing she sets it like a flint. Times may change, however, and that is all I can say. Yes, if I were you, I should remember that this is a changeable world, and women are the most changeable things in it."

When the carriage had gone he re-entered the vestibule. Ida, who was going away much disturbed in mind, saw him come, and knew from the ex-

pression of his face that there would be trouble. With characteristic courage she turned, determined to brave it out.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SQUIRE SPEAKS HIS MIND.

FOR a minute or more her father fidgetted about, moving his papers backwards and forwards but saying nothing.

At last he spoke. "You have taken a most serious and painful step, Ida," he said. "Of course you have a right to do as you please, you are of full age and I cannot expect that you will consider me or your family in your matrimonial engagements, but at the same time I think it my duty to point out to you what it is that you are doing. You are refusing one of the finest matches in England in order to marry a broken-down, middle-aged, half-pay colonel, a man who can hardly support you, whose part in life is played, or who is apparently too idle to seek another."

Here Ida's eyes flashed ominously, but she made no comment, being apparently afraid to trust herself to speak.

"You are doing this," went on her father, working himself up as he spoke, "in the face of my wishes, and with a knowledge that your action will bring your family, to say nothing of your father, to utter and irretrievable ruin."

"Surely, father, surely," broke in Ida, almost in a cry, "you would not have me marry one man when I love another. When I made the promise I had not become attached to Colonel Quaritch."

"Love! pshaw!" said her father. "Don't talk to me in that sentimental and school-girl way—you are too old for it. I am a plain man, and I believe in family affection and in *duty*, Ida. *Love*, as you call it, is only too often another word for self-will and selfishness and other things that we are better without."

"I can understand, father," answered Ida, struggling to keep her temper under this jobation, "that my refusal to marry Mr. Cossey is disagreeable to you for obvious reasons, though it is not so very long since you detested him yourself. But I do not see why an honest woman's affection for another man should be talked of as though there was something shameful about it. It is all very well to sneer at 'love,' but after all a woman is flesh and blood; she is not a chattel or a slave girl, and marriage is

not like anything else—it means many things to a woman. There is no magic about marriage to make that which is unrighteous righteous.”

“There,” said her father, “it is no good your lecturing to me on marriage, Ida. If you do not want to marry Cossey I can’t force you to. If you want to ruin me, your family and yourself, you must do so. But there is one thing. While it is over me, which I suppose will not be for much longer, my house is my own, and I will not have that Colonel of yours hanging about it, and I shall write to him to say so. You are your own mistress, and if you choose to walk over to church and marry him you can do so, but it will be done without my consent, which of course, however, is an unnecessary formality. Do you hear me, Ida?”

“If you have quite done, father,” she answered coldly, “I should like to go before I say something which I might be sorry for. Of course you can write what you like to Colonel Quaritch, and I shall write to him, too.”

Her father made no answer beyond sitting down at his table and grabbing viciously at a pen. So she left the room, indignant, indeed, but with as heavy a heart as any woman could carry in her breast.

"Dear Sir," wrote the not unnaturally indignant Squire, "I have been informed by my daughter Ida of her entanglement with you. It is one which, for reasons that I need not enter into, is distasteful to me, as well as, I am sorry to say, ruinous to Ida herself and to her family. Ida is of full age, and must, of course, do as she pleases with herself. But I cannot consent to become a party to what I disapprove of so strongly, and this being the case, I must beg you to cease your visits to my house.

"I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

"JAMES DE LA MOLLE.

"Colonel Quaritch, V.C."

Ida as soon as she had sufficiently recovered herself also wrote to the Colonel. She told him the whole story, keeping nothing back, and ended her letter thus:

"Never, dear Harold, was a woman in a greater difficulty and never have I more needed help and advice. You know and have good reason to know how hateful this marriage would be to me, loving you as I do entirely and alone, and having no higher desire than to become your wife. But of course I see the painfulness of the position. I am not so selfish as my father believes or says that he be-

lieves. I quite understand how great would be the material advantage to my father if I could bring myself to marry Mr. Cossey. You may remember I told you once that I thought no woman has a right to prefer her own happiness to the prosperity of her whole family. But, Harold, it is easy to speak thus, and very, very hard to act up to it. What am I to do? And yet how can I in common fairness ask you to answer that question? God help us both, Harold! Is there *no* way out of it?"

These letters were both duly received by Harold Quaritch on the following morning and threw him into a fever of anxiety and doubt. He was a just and reasonable man, and, knowing something of human nature, under the circumstances did not altogether wonder at the Squire's violence and irritation. The financial position of the de la Molle family was little, if anything, short of desperate. He could easily understand how maddening it must be to a man like Mr. de la Molle, who loved Honham, which had for centuries been the home of his race, better than he loved anything on earth, to suddenly realise that it must pass away from him and his for ever, merely because a woman happened to prefer one man to another, and that man, to his view, the less eligible of the two. So keenly did he realise this,

indeed, that he greatly doubted whether or no he was justified in continuing his advances to Ida. Finally, after much thought, he wrote to the Squire as follows:

“I have received your letter, and also one from Ida, and I hope you will believe me when I say that I quite understand and sympathise with the motives which evidently led you to write it. I am, unfortunately—although I never regretted it till now—a poor man, whereas my rival suitor is a very rich one. I shall, of course, strictly obey your injunctions; and, moreover, I can assure you that, whatever my own feelings may be in the matter, I shall do nothing, either directly or indirectly, to influence Ida’s ultimate decision. She must decide for herself.”

To Ida herself he also wrote at length:

“Dearest Ida,” he ended, “I can say nothing more; you must judge for yourself; and I shall accept your decision loyally whatever it may be. It is unnecessary for me to tell you how inextricably my happiness in life is interwoven with that decision, but at the same time I do not wish to influence it. It certainly to my mind does not seem right that a woman should be driven into sacrificing her whole life to secure any monetary advantage either for her-

self or for others, but then the world is full of things that are not right. I can give you no advice, for I do not know what advice I ought to give. I try to put myself out of the question and to consider you, and you only; but even then I fear that my judgment is not impartial. At any rate, the less we see of each other at present the better, for I do not wish to appear to be taking any undue advantage. If we are destined to pass our lives together, this temporary estrangement will not matter, and if on the other hand we are doomed to a life-long separation the sooner we begin the better. It is a hard world, and sometimes (as it does now) my heart sinks within me as from year to year I struggle on towards a happiness that ever vanishes when I stretch out my hand to clasp it; but, if I feel thus, what must you feel who have so much more to bear? My dearest love, what can I say? I can only say with you, God help us!"

This letter did not tend to raise Ida's spirits. Evidently her lover saw that there was another side to the question — the side of duty, and was too honest to hide it from her. She had said that she would have nothing to do with Edward Cossey, but she was well aware that the matter was still an open one. What should she do, what ought she to do?

Abandon her love, desecrate herself and save her father and her house, or cling to her love and leave the rest to chance? It was a cruel position, nor did the lapse of time tend to make it less cruel. Her father went about the place pale and melancholy—all his jovial manner had vanished beneath the pressure of impending ruin. He treated her with studious and old-fashioned courtesy, but she could see that he was bitterly aggrieved by her conduct and that the anxiety of his position was telling on his health. If this was the case now, what, she wondered, would happen in the Spring, when steps were actually taken to sell the place?

One bright cold morning she was walking with her father through the fields down the foot-path that led to the church, and it would have been hard to say which of the two looked the paler or the more miserable. On the previous day the Squire had seen Mr. Quest and made as much of an appeal *ad misericordiam* to him as his pride would allow, only to find the lawyer very courteous, very regretful, but hard as adamant. Also that very morning a letter had reached him from London announcing that the last hope of raising money to meet the mortgages had failed.

The path ran along towards the road past a line

of oaks. Half-way down this line they came across George who, with his marking instrument in his hand, was contemplating some of the trees which it was proposed to take down.

“What are you doing there?” said the Squire, in a melancholy voice.

“Marking, Squire.”

“Then you may as well save yourself the trouble, for the place will belong to somebody else before the sap is up in those oaks.”

“Now, Squire, don’t you begin to talk like that, for I don’t believe it. That ain’t a-going to happen.”

“Ain’t a-going to happen, you stupid fellow, ain’t a-going to happen,” answered the Squire with a dreary laugh. “Why, look there,” and he pointed to a dog-cart which had drawn up on the road in such a position that they could see it without its occupants seeing them; “they are taking notes already.”

George looked and so did Ida. Mr. Quest was the driver of the dog-cart, which he had pulled up in such a position as to command a view of the Castle, and his companion—in whom George recognised a well-known London auctioneer who sometimes did business in these parts—was standing up, an open notebook in his hand, alternately looking at

the noble towers of the gateway and jotting down memoranda.

"Damm 'em, and so they be," said George, utterly forgetting his manners.

Ida looked up and saw her father's eyes fixed upon her with an expression that seemed to say, "See, you wilful woman, see the ruin that you have brought upon us!"

She turned away; she could not bear it, and that very night she came to a determination, which in due course was communicated to Harold, and him alone. That determination was to let things be for the present, upon the chance of something happening by means of which the dilemma might be solved. But if nothing happened—and indeed it did not seem probable to her that anything would happen—then she would sacrifice herself at the last moment. She believed, indeed she knew, that she could always call Edward Cossey back to her if she liked. It was a compromise, and like all compromises had an element of weakness; but it gave time, and time to her was like breath to the dying.

"Sir," said George presently, "it's Boisingham Quarter Sessions the day after to-morrow, ain't it?" (Mr. de la Molle was chairman of Quarter Sessions.)

"Yes, of course, it is."

George thought for a minute.

"I'm a-thinking, Squire, that if I arn't wanting that day I want to go up to Lunnon about a bit of business."

"Go up to London!" said the Squire; "why what are you going to do there? You were in London the other day."

"Well, Squire," he answered, looking inexpressibly sly, "that ain't no matter of nobody's. It's a bit of private affairs."

"Oh, all right," said the Squire, his interest dying out. "You are always full of twopenny-half-penny mysteries," and he continued his walk.

But George shook his fist in the direction of the road down which the dog-cart had driven.

"Ah! you laryer devil," he said, alluding to Mr. Quest. "If I don't make Boisingham, yes and all England, too hot to hold you, my mother never christened me and my name ain't George. I'll give you what for, my cuckoo, that I will!"

CHAPTER XII.

GEORGE'S DIPLOMATIC ERRAND.

GEORGE carried out his intention of going to London. On the second morning after the day when Mr. Quest had driven the auctioneer in the dog-cart to Honham, he might have been seen an hour before it was light purchasing a third-class return ticket to Liverpool Street. Arriving there in safety he partook of a second breakfast, for it was ten o'clock, and then hiring a cab caused himself to be driven to the end of that street in Pimlico where he had gone with the fair "Edithia," and where Johnnie had made acquaintance with his ash stick.

Dismissing the cab he made his way to the house with the red pillars, but on arriving was considerably taken aback, for the place had every appearance of being deserted. There were no blinds to the windows, and on the steps were muddy footmarks and bits of rag and straw which seemed to be the litter of a recent removal. Indeed, there on the road were the broad wheelmarks of the van which had carted off the

furniture. He stared at this sight with dismay. The bird had apparently flown, leaving no address, and he had taken his trip for nothing.

He pressed upon the electric bell; that is, he did this ultimately. George was not accustomed to electric bells, indeed he had never seen one before, and after attempting in vain to pull it with his fingers (for he knew that it must be a bell because there was the word itself written on it), as a last resource he condescended to try his teeth. Ultimately, however, he discovered how to use it, but without result. Either the battery had been taken away, or it was out of gear. Just as he was wondering what to do next he made a discovery—the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it and it opened—revealing a dirty hall, stripped of every scrap of furniture. Entering, he shut the door and walked up the stairs to the room whence he had fled after thrashing Johnnie. Here he paused and listened, thinking that he heard somebody in the room. Nor was he mistaken, for presently a well-remembered voice shrilled out:

“Who’s skulking round outside there? If it’s one of those bailiffs he’d better hook it, for there’s nothing left here.”

George’s countenance positively beamed at the sound,

“Bailiffs, marm?” he called through the door—
“it ain’t no varminty bailiffs, it’s a friend, and just
when you’re a-wanting one seemingly. Can I
come in?”

“Oh, yes, come in, whoever you are,” said the
voice. Accordingly he opened the door and entered,
and this was what he saw. The room, like the rest
of the house, had been stripped of everything, with
the solitary exceptions of a box and a mattress,
beside which were an empty bottle and a dirty glass.
On the mattress sat the fair Edithia, *alias* Mrs.
d’Aubigné, *alias* the Tiger, *alias* Mrs. Quest, and
such a sight as she presented George had never
seen before. Her fierce face bore traces of recent
heavy drinking and was moreover dirty, haggard and
dreadful to look upon; her hair was a frowsy mat,
on some patches of which the golden dye had faded,
leaving it its natural hue of doubtful grey. She wore
no collar and her linen was open at the neck. On
her feet were a filthy pair of white satin slippers,
and on her back that same gorgeous pink satin tea-
gown which Mr. Quest had observed on the occasion
of his visit, now however soiled and torn. Anything
more squalid or repulsive than the whole picture
cannot be imagined, and though his nerves were
pretty strong, and in the course of his life he had

seen many a sight of utter destitution, George literally recoiled from it.

“What’s the matter?” said the hag sharply, “and who the dickens are you? Ah, I know now; you’re the chap who whacked Johnnie,” and she burst into a hoarse scream of laughter at the recollection. “It was mean of you though to hook it and leave me. He pulled me, and I was fined two pounds by the beak.”

“Mean of *him*, marm, not me, but he was a mean varmint altogether he was; to go and pull a lady too, I niver heard of such a thing. But, marm, if I might say so, you seem to be in trouble here,” and he took a seat upon the deal box.

“In trouble, I should think I was in trouble. There’s been an execution in the house, that is, there’s been three executions, one for rates and taxes, one for a butcher’s bill, and one for rent. They all came together, and fought like wild cats for the things. That was yesterday, and you see all they have left me; cleaned out everything down to my new yellow satin, and then asked for more. They wanted to know where my jewellery was, but I did them, hee, hee!”

“Meaning, marm?”

“Meaning that I hid it, that is, what was left of it, under a board. But that ain’t the worst. When

I was asleep that devil Ellen, who's had her share all these years, got to the board and collared the things and bolted with them, and look what she's left me instead," and she held up a scrap of paper, "a receipt for five years' wages, and she's had them over and over again. Ah, if ever I get a chance at her," and she doubled her long hand and made a motion as of a person scratching. "She's bolted and left me here to starve. I haven't had a bit since yesterday, nor a drink either, and that's worse. What's to become of me? I shall have to go to the workhouse. Yes, me," she added, in a scream, "me, who have spent thousands; I shall have to go to a workhouse like a common woman!"

"It's cruel, marm, cruel," said the sympathetic George, "and you a lawful wedded wife 'till death do us part.' But, marm, I saw a public over the way. Now, no offence, but you'll let me just go over and fetch a bite and a sup."

"Well," she answered hungrily, "you're a gent, you are, though you're a country one. You go, while I just make a little toilette, and as for the drink, why let it be brandy."

"Brandy it shall be," said the gallant George, and departed.

In ten minutes he returned with a supply of

beef patties, and a bottle of good, strong "British Brown," which as everybody knows is a sufficient quantity to render three privates or two blue-jackets drunk and incapable.

The woman, who now presented a slightly more respectable appearance, seized the bottle and pouring about a wineglass and a half of its contents into a tumbler mixed it with an equal quantity of water and drank it off at a draught.

"That's better," she said, "and now for a patty. It's a real picnic, this is."

He handed her one, but she could not eat more than half of it, for alcohol destroys the healthier appetites, and she soon went back to the brandy bottle.

"Now, marm, that you are a little more comfortable, perhaps you will tell me how as you got into this way, and you with a rich husband, as I well knows, to love and cherish you."

"A husband to love and cherish me?" she said; "why I have written to him three times to tell him that I'm starving, and never a cent has he given me—and there's no allowance due yet, and when there is they'll take it, for I owe hundreds."

"Well," said George, "I call it cruel—cruel, and he rolling in gold. Thirty thousand pounds he hev

just made, that I knows on. You must be an angel, marm, to stand it, an angel without wings. If it were my husband, now I'd know the reason why."

"Ay, but I daren't. He'd murder me. He said he would."

George laughed gently. "Lord! Lord!" he said, "to see how men do play it off upon poor weak women, working on their narves and that like. He kill you! Laryer Quest kill you, and he the biggest coward in Boisingham; but there it is; this is a world of wrong, as the parson says, and the poor shorn lambs must jamb their tails down and turn their backs to the wind and so must you, marm. So it's the workhus you'll be in to-morrow. Well, you'll find it a poor place; the skilly is that rough it do fare to take the skin off your throat, and not a drop of liquor, not even a cup of hot tea, and work too, lots of it—scrubbing, marm, scrubbing!"

This vivid picture of miseries to come drew something between a sob and a howl from the woman. There is nothing more horrible to the imagination of such people than the idea of being forced to work. If their notions of a future state of punishment could be got at, they would be found in nine cases out of ten to resolve themselves into a

vague conception of hard labour in a hot climate. It was the idea of the scrubbing that particularly affected the Tiger.

"I won't do it," she said, "I'll go to chokey first——"

"Look here, marm," said George, in a persuasive voice, and pushing the brandy bottle towards her, "where's the need for you to go to the workhus or to chokey either—you with a rich husband as is bound by law to support you as becomes a lady? And, marm, mind another thing, a husband as hev wickedly deserted you—which how he could do so it ain't for me to say—and is living along of another young party."

She took some more brandy before she answered.

"That's all very well, you duffer," she said; "but how am I to get at him? I tell you I'm afraid of him, and even if I weren't, I haven't a cent to travel with, and if I got there what am I to do?"

"As for being afeard, marm," he answered, "I've told you Laryer Quest is a long sight more frightened of you than you are of him. Then as for money, why, marm, I'm a-going down to Boisingham myself by the train as leaves Liverpool Street at half-past one, and that's an hour and a bit

from now, and it's proud and pleased I should be to take a lady down and be the means of bringing them as has been in holy matrimony together again. And as to what you should do when you gets there, why, you should just walk up with your marriage lines and say, 'You are my lawful husband, and I calls on you to cease living as you didn't oughter and to take me back;' and if he don't, why then you swears an information, and it's a case of warrant for bigamy."

The woman chuckled, and then suddenly seized with suspicion looked at her visitor sharply.

"What do you want me to blow the gaff for?" she said; "you're a leery old hand, you are, for all your simple ways, and you've got some game on, I'll take my davy."

"I a game—I——!" answered George, an expression of the deepest pain spreading itself over his ugly features. "No, marm—and when one hev wanted to help a friend too. Well, if you thinks that—and no doubt misfortune hev made you doubtful-like—the best I can do is to bid you good-day, and to wish you well out of your troubles, workhus and all, marm, which I do according," and he rose from his box with much dignity, politely

bowed to the hag on the mattress, and then turning walked towards the door.

She sprung up with an oath.

"I'll go," she said. "I'll take the change out of him; I'll teach him to let his lawful wife starve on a beggarly pittance. I don't care if he does try to kill me. I'll ruin him," and she stamped upon the floor and screamed, "I'll ruin him, I'll ruin him!" presenting such a picture of abandoned rage and wickedness that even George, whose feelings were not finely strung, inwardly shrank from her.

"Ah, marm," he said, "no wonder you're put about. When I think of what you've had to suffer, I own it makes my blood go a-biling through my veins. But if you is a-coming, mayhap it would be as well to stop cursing of and put your hat on, for we hev got to catch the train." And he pointed to a head-gear chiefly made of somewhat dilapidated peacock feathers, and an ulster which the bailiffs had either overlooked or left through pity.

She put on the hat and cloak. Then going to the hole beneath the board, out of which she said the woman Ellen had stolen her jewellery, she extracted the copy of the certificate of marriage which that lady had not apparently thought worth

taking, and placed it in the pocket of her pink silk *peignoir*.

Then George having first secured the remainder of the bottle of brandy, which he slipped into his capacious pocket, they started, and drove to Liverpool Street. Such a spectacle as the Tiger upon the platform George was wont in after days to declare he never did see. But it can easily be imagined that a fierce, dissolute, hungry-looking woman, with half-dyed hair, who had drunk as much as was good for her, dressed in a hat made of shabby peacock feathers, dirty white shoes, an ulster with some buttons off, and a gorgeous but filthy pink silk tea-gown, presented a sufficiently curious appearance. Nor did it lose strength by contrast with that of her companion, the sober and melancholy-looking George, who was arrayed in his pepper-and-salt Sunday suit.

So curious indeed was their aspect that the people loitering about the platform collected round them, and George, who felt heartily ashamed of the position, was thankful enough when once the train started. From motives of economy he had taken her a third-class ticket, and at this she grumbled, saying that she was accustomed to travel, like a lady

should, first; but he appeased her with the brandy bottle.

All the journey through he talked to her about her wrongs, till at last, what between the liquor and his artful incitements, she was inflamed into a condition of savage fury against Mr. Quest. When once she got to this point he would let her have no more brandy, seeing that she was now ripe for his purpose, which was of course to use her to ruin the man who would ruin the house he served.

Mr. Quest, sitting in state as Clerk to the Magistrates assembled in Quarter Sessions at the Court House, Boisingham, little guessed that the sword at whose shadow he had trembled all these years was even now falling on his head. Still less did he dream that the hand to cut the thread which held it was that of the stupid bumpkin whose warning he had despised.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.

At last the weary journey was over, and to George's intense relief he found himself upon the platform at Boisingham. He was a pretty tough subject, but he felt that a very little more of the company of the fair Edithia would be too much for him. As it happened, the station-master was a particular friend of his, and the astonishment of that worthy when he saw the respectable George in such company could scarcely be expressed in words.

"Why boär! Well I never! Is she a furriner?" he ejaculated in astonishment.

"If you mean me," said Edithia, who was by now in fine bellicose condition, "I'm no more foreign than you are. Shut up, can't you? or ——" and she took a step towards the stout station-master. He retreated precipitately, caught his heel against the threshold of the booking office and vanished backward with a crash.

"Steady, marm, steady," said George. "Save it

up now, do, and as for you, don't you irritate her none of yer or I won't answer for the consequences, for she's an injured woman she is, and injured women is apt to be dangerous."

It chanced that a fly which had brought somebody to the station was still standing there. George bundled his fair charge into it, telling the driver to go to the Sessions House.

"Now, marm," he said, "listen to me; I'm a-going to take you to the man as hev wronged you. He's sitting as clerk to the magistrates. Do you go up and call him your husband. Thin he'll tell the policeman to take you away. Thin do you sing out for justice, because when people sings out for justice everybody's bound to hearken, and say how as you wants a warrant agin him for bigamy, and show them the marriage lines. Don't you be put down, and don't you spare him. If you don't startle him you'll niver get northing out of him."

"Spare him," she snarled; "not I. I'll have his blood. But look here, if he's put in chokey, where's the tin to come from?"

"Why, marm," answered George with splendid mendacity, "it's the best thing that can happen for you, for if they collar him you git the property, and that's law."

"Oh," she answered, "if I'd known that he'd have been collared long ago, I can tell you."

"Come," said George, seeing that they were nearing their destination. "Hev one more nip just to keep your spirits up," and he produced the brandy bottle, at which she took a long pull.

"Now," he said, "go for him like a wild cat."

"Never you fear," she said.

They got out of the cab and entered the Sessions House without attracting any particular notice. The court itself was crowded, for a case which had excited public interest was coming to a conclusion. The jury had given their verdict, and sentence was being pronounced by Mr. de la Molle, the chairman.

Mr. Quest was sitting at his table below the bench taking some notes.

"There's your husband," George whispered, "now do you draw on."

George's part in the drama was played, and with a sigh of relief he fell back to watch its final development. He saw the fierce tall woman slip through the crowd like a snake or a panther to its prey, and some compunction touched him when he thought of the prey. He glanced at the elderly respectable-looking gentleman by the table, and re-

flected that he too was stalking *his* prey—the old Squire and the ancient house of de la Molle. Then his compunction vanished, and he rejoiced to think that he would be the means of destroying a man who, to fill his pockets, did not hesitate to ruin the family with which his life and the lives of his forefathers had been interwoven for many generations.

By this time the woman had fought her way through the press, bursting the remaining buttons off her ulster in so doing, and reached the bar which separated spectators from the space reserved for the officials. On the further side of the bar was a gangway, and beyond it a table at which Mr. Quest sat. He had been busy writing something all this time, now he rose, passed it to Mr. de la Molle, and then turned to sit down again.

Meanwhile his wife had craned her long lithe body forward over the bar till her head was almost level with the hither edge of the table. There she stood glaring at him, her wicked face alive with fury and malice, for the brandy she had drunk had caused her to forget her fears.

As Mr. Quest turned, his eye caught the flash of colour from the peacock feather hat. Thence it travelled to the face beneath.

He gave a gasp, and the court seemed to whirl round him. The sword had fallen indeed!

"Well, Billy," whispered the hateful voice, "you see I've come to look you up."

With a desperate effort he recovered himself. A policeman was standing near. He beckoned to him, and told him to remove the woman, who was drunk. The policeman advanced and touched her on the arm.

"Come, you be off," he said, "you're drunk."

At that moment Mr. de la Molle ceased giving judgment.

"I ain't drunk," said the woman, loud enough to attract the attention of the whole court, which now for the first time observed her extraordinary attire, "and I've a right to be in the public court."

"Come on," said the policeman, "the clerk says you're to go."

"The clerk says so, does he?" she answered, "and do you know who the clerk is? I'll tell you all," and she raised her voice to a scream; "he's my husband, my lawful wedded husband, and here's proof of it," and she took the folded certificate from her pocket and flung it so that it struck the desk of one of the magistrates.

Mr. Quest sank into his chair, and a silence of astonishment fell upon the court.

The Squire was the first to recover himself.

"Silence," he said, addressing her. "Silence. This cannot go on here."

"But I want justice," she shrieked. "I want justice; I want a warrant against that man for *bigamy*." (Sensation.) "He's left me to starve; me, his lawful wife. Look here," and she tore open the pink satin tea-gown, "I haven't enough clothes on me; the bailiffs took all my clothes; I have suffered his cruelty for years, and borne it, and I can bear it no longer. Justice, your worships; I only ask for justice."

"Be silent, woman," said Mr. de la Molle; "if you have a criminal charge to bring against anybody there is a proper way to make it. Be silent or leave this court."

But she only screamed the more for *justice*, and loudly detailed fragments of her woes to the eagerly listening crowd.

Then policemen were ordered to remove her, and there followed a frightful scene. She shrieked and fought in such a fashion that it took four men to drag her to the door of the court, where she dropped exhausted against the wall in the corridor.

"Well," said the observant George to himself, "she hev done the trick proper, and no mistake. Couldn't have been better. That's a master one, that is." Then he turned his attention to the stricken man before him. Mr. Quest was sitting there, his face ashen, his eyes wide open, and his hands placed flat on the table before him. When silence had been restored he rose and turned to the bench apparently with the intention of addressing the court. But he said nothing, either because he could not find words or because his courage failed him. There was a moment's intense silence, for every one in the crowded court was watching him, and the sense of it seemed to take what resolution he had left out of him. At any rate, he left the table and hurried from the court. In the passage he found the Tiger, who, surrounded by a little crowd, her hat awry and her clothes half torn from her back, was huddled gasping against the wall.

She saw him and began to speak, but he stopped and faced her. He faced her, grinding his teeth, and with such an awful fire of fury in his eyes that she shrank from him in terror, flattening herself against the wall.

"What did I tell you?" he said in a choked voice, and then passed on. A few paces down the

passage he met one of his own clerks, a sharp fellow enough.

"Here, Jones," he said, "you see that woman there. She has made a charge against me. Watch her. See where she goes to, and find out what she is going to do. Then come and tell me at the office. If you lose sight of her, you lose your place too. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the astonished clerk, and Mr. Quest was gone.

He made his way direct to the office. It was closed, for he had told his clerks he should not come back after court, and that they could go at half-past four. He had his key, however, and, entering, lit the gas. Then he went to his safe and sorted some papers, burning a good number of them. Two large documents, however, he put by his side to read. One was his will, the other was endorsed "Statement of the circumstances connected with Edith."

First he looked through his will. It had been made some years ago, and was entirely in favour of his wife, or, rather, of his reputed wife, Belle.

"It may as well stand," he said aloud; "if anything happens to me she'll take about ten thousand under it, and that was what she brought me." Tak-

ing the pen he went through the document carefully, and wherever the name of "Belle Quest" occurred he put a X, and inserted these words, "Gennett, commonly known as Belle Quest," Gennett being Belle's maiden name, and initialled the correction. Next he glanced at the Statement. It contained a full and fair account of his connection with the woman who had ruined his life. "I may as well leave it," he thought; "some day it will show Belle that I was not quite so bad as I seemed."

He replaced the statement in a brief envelope, sealed and directed it to Belle, and finally marked it, "Not to be opened till my death.—W. Quest." Then he put the envelope away in the safe and took up the will for the same purpose. Next it on the table lay the deeds executed by Edward Cossey transferring the Honham mortgages to Mr. Quest in consideration of his abstaining from the commencement of a suit for divorce in which he proposed to join Edward Cossey as co-respondent. "Ah!" he thought to himself, "that game is up. Belle is not my legal wife, therefore I cannot commence a suit against her in which Cossey would figure as co-respondent, and so the consideration fails. I am sorry, for I should have liked him to lose his thirty thousand pounds as well as his wife, but it can't be

helped. It was a game of bluff, and now that the bladder has been pricked I haven't a leg to stand on."

Then, taking a pen, he wrote on a sheet of paper which he inserted in the will, "Dear B.,— You must return the Honham mortgages to Mr. Edward Cossey. As you are not my legal wife the consideration upon which he transferred them fails, and you cannot hold them in equity, nor I suppose would you wish to do so.—W. Q."

Having put all the papers away, he shut the safe at the moment that the clerk whom he had deputed to watch his wife knocked at the door and entered.

"Well?" said his master.

"Well, sir, I watched the woman. She stopped in the passage for a minute, and then George, Squire de la Molle's man, came out and spoke to her. I got quite close so as to hear, and he said, 'You'd better get out of this.'

"'Where to?' she answered. 'I'm afraid.'

"'Back to London,' he said, and gave her a sovereign, and she got up without a word and slunk off to the station followed by a mob of people. She is in the refreshment room now, but George

sent word to say that they ought not to serve her with any drink."

"What time does the next train go—7.15, does it not?" said Mr. Quest.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, go back to the station and keep an eye upon that woman, and when the time comes get me a first-class return ticket to London. I shall go up myself and give her in charge there. Here is some money," and he gave him a five-pound note, "and look here, Jones, you need not trouble about the change."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure," said Jones, to whom, his salary being a guinea a week, on which he supported a wife and family, a gift of four pounds was sudden wealth.

"Don't thank me, but do as I tell you. I will be down at the station at 7.10. Meet me outside and give me the ticket. That will do."

When Jones had gone Mr. Quest sat down to think.

So George had loosed this woman on him, and that was the meaning of his mysterious warnings. How did he find her? That did not matter, he had found her, and in revenge for the action taken against the de la Molle family brought her here to

denounce him. It was cleverly managed, too. Mr. Quest reflected to himself that he should never have given the man credit for the brains. Well, that was what came of underrating people.

And so this was the end of all his hopes, ambitions, shifts and struggles! The story would be in every paper in England before another twenty-four hours were over, headed, "*Remarkable occurrence at Boisingham Quarter Sessions.—Alleged bigamy of a solicitor.*" No doubt, too, the Treasury would take it up and institute a prosecution. This was the end of his strivings after respectability and the wealth that brings it. He had overreached himself. He had plotted and schemed, and hardened his heart against the de la Molle family, and fate had made use of his success to destroy him. In another few months he had expected to be able to leave this place a wealthy and respected man—and now? He laid his hand upon the table and reviewed his past life—tracing it from year to year, and seeing how the shadow of this accursed woman had haunted him, bringing disgrace and terror and mental agony with it—making his life a misery. And now what was to be done? He was ruined. Let him fly to the utmost parts of the earth, let him burrow in the recesses of the cities of the earth, and his shame

would find him out. He was an impostor, a bigamist; one who had seduced an innocent woman into a mock marriage and then taken her fortune to buy the silence of his lawful wife. More, he had threatened to bring an action for divorce against a woman to whom he knew he was not really married and made it a lever to extort large sums of money or their value.

What is there that a man in this position can do?

He can do two things—he can revenge himself upon the author of his ruin, and if he be bold enough, he can put an end to his existence and his sorrows at a blow.

Mr. Quest rose and walked to the door. Halting there, he turned and looked round the office in that peculiar fashion wherewith the eyes take their adieu. Then with a sigh he went.

Reaching his own house he hesitated whether or no to enter. Had the news reached Belle? If so, how was he to face her? Her hands were not clean, indeed, but at any rate she had no mock marriage in her record, and her dislike of him had been unconcealed throughout. She had never wished to marry him, and never for one single day regarded him otherwise than with aversion.

After reflection he turned and went round by the back way into the garden. The curtains of the French windows were drawn, but it was a wet and windy night, and the draught occasionally lifted the edge of one of them. He crept like a thief up to his own window and looked in. The drawing-room was lighted, and in a low chair by the fire sat Belle. She was as usual dressed in black, and to Mr. Quest, who loved her, and who knew that he was about to bid farewell to the sight of her, she looked more beautiful now than ever she had before. A book lay open on her knee, and he noticed, not without surprise, that it was a Bible. But she was not reading it, her dimpled chin rested on her hand, her violet eyes were fixed on vacancy, and even from where he was he thought that he could see the tears in them.

She had heard nothing; he was sure of that from the expression of her face; she was thinking of her own sorrows, not of his shame.

Yes, he would go in.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE GAME ENDED.

MR. QUEST entered the house by a side door, and having taken off his hat and coat went into the drawing-room. He had still half an hour to spare before starting to catch the train.

"Well," said Belle, looking up. "Why are you looking so pale?"

"I have had a trying day," he answered. "What have you been doing?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Reading the Bible, I see."

"How do you know that?" she asked, colouring a little, for she had thrown a newspaper over the book when she heard him coming in. "Yes, I have been reading the Bible. Don't you know that when everything else in life has failed them women generally take to religion?"

"Or drink," he put in, with a touch of his old bitterness. "Have you seen Mr. Cossey lately?"

"No. Why do you ask that? I thought we had agreed to drop that subject."

As a matter of fact it had not been alluded to since Edward left the house.

"You know that Miss de la Molle will not marry him after all?"

"Yes; I know. She will not marry him because you forced him to give up the mortgages."

"You ought to be much obliged to me. Are you not pleased?"

"No. I no longer care about anything. I am tired of passion, and sin and failure. I care for nothing any more."

"It seems that we have both reached the same goal, but by different roads."

"You?" she answered, looking up; "at any rate you are not tired of money, or you would not do what you have done to get it."

"I never cared for money itself," he said. "I only wanted money that I might be rich and, therefore, respected."

"And you think any means justifiable so long as you get it?"

"I thought so. I do not think so now."

"I don't understand you to-night, William. It is time for me to go to dress for dinner."

"Don't go just yet. I'm leaving in a minute."

"Leaving? Where for?"

"London; I have to go up to-night about some business."

"Indeed; when are you coming back?"

"I don't quite know—to-morrow, perhaps. I wonder, Belle," he went on, his voice shaking a little, "if you will always think as badly of me as you do now."

"I?" she said, opening her eyes widely; "who am I that I should judge you? However bad you may be, I am worse."

"Perhaps there are excuses to be made for both of us," he said; "perhaps, after all, there is no such thing as free will, and we are nothing but pawns moved by a higher power. Who knows? But I will not keep you any longer. Good-bye—Belle!"

"Yes."

"May I kiss you before I go?"

She looked at him in astonishment. Her first impulse was to refuse. He had not kissed her for years. But something in the man's face touched her. It was always a refined and melancholy face, but to-night it wore a look which to her seemed almost unearthly.

"Yes, William, if you wish," she said; "but I wonder that you care to."

"Let the dead bury their dead," he answered,

and stooping he put his arm round her delicate waist and drawing her to him kissed her tenderly but without passion on the forehead. "There, good-night," he said; "I wish that I had been a better husband to you. Good-night," and he was gone.

When he reached his room he flung himself for a few moments face downwards upon the bed, and from the convulsive motion of his back an observer might almost have believed that he was sobbing. When he rose, however, there was no trace of tears or tenderness upon his features. On the contrary, they were stern and set, like the features of one bent upon some terrible endeavour. Going to a drawer, he unlocked it and took from it a Colt's revolver of the small pattern. It was loaded, but he extracted the cartridges and replaced them with fresh ones from a tin box. Then he went downstairs, put on a large ulster with a high collar, and a soft felt hat, the brim of which he turned down over his face, placed the pistol in the pocket of his ulster, and started.

It was a dreadful night, the wind was blowing a heavy gale, and between the gusts the rain came down in sheets of driving spray. Nobody was about the streets—the weather was far too bad;

and Mr. Quest reached the station without meeting a living soul. Outside the circle of light from a lamp over the doorway he paused, and looked about for the clerk Jones. Presently, he saw him walking backwards and forwards under the shelter of a lean-to, and going up, touched him on the shoulder.

The man started back.

"Have you got the ticket, Jones?" he asked.

"Lord, sir," said Jones, "I didn't know you in that get-up. Yes, here it is."

"Is the woman there still?"

"Yes, sir; she's taken a ticket, third-class, to town. She has been going on like a wild thing because they would not give her any liquor at the refreshment bar, till at last she frightened them into letting her have six of brandy. Then she began and told the girl all sorts of tales about you, sir—said she was going back to London because she was afraid that if she stopped here you would murder her—and that you were her lawful husband, and she would have a warrant out against you, and I don't know what all. I sat by and heard her with my own ears."

"Did she—did she indeed?" said Mr. Quest, with an attempt at a laugh. "Well, she's a common thief and worse, that's what she is, and by this time

to-morrow I hope to see her safe in gaol. Ah! here comes the train. Good-night, Jones. I can manage for myself now."

"What's his game?" said Jones to himself as he watched his master slip on to the platform by a gate instead of going through the booking office. "Well, I've had four quid out of it, any way, and it's no affair of mine." And Jones went home to tea.

Meanwhile Mr. Quest was standing on the wet and desolate platform quite away from the lamps, watching the white lights of the approaching train rushing on through the storm and night. Presently it drew up. No passengers got out.

"Now, mam, look sharp if you're going," cried the porter, and the woman Edith came out of the refreshment room.

"There's the third, forrard there," said the porter, running to the van to see about the packing of the mails.

On she came, passing quite close to Mr. Quest, so close that he could hear her swearing at the incivility of the porter. There was a third-class compartment just opposite, and this she entered. It was one of those carriages that are still often to be seen on provincial lines in which the partitions do not go up to the roof, and, if possible, more vilely

lighted than usual. Indeed the light which should have illuminated the after-half of it had either never been lit or had gone out. There was not a soul in the whole length of the compartment.

As soon as his wife was in, Mr. Quest watched his opportunity. Slipping up to the dark carriage, he opened and shut the door as quietly as possible and took his seat in the gloom.

The engine whistled, there was a cry of "right forrard," and they were off.

Presently he saw the woman stand up in her division of the compartment and peep over into the gloom.

"Not a blessed soul," he heard her mutter, "and yet I feel as though that devil Billy was creeping about after me. Ugh! it must be the horrors. I can see the look he gave me now."

A few minutes later the train stopped at a station, but nobody got in, and presently it moved on again. "Any passengers for Effry?" shouted the porter, and there had been no response. If they did not stop at Effry there would be no halt for forty minutes. Now was his time. He waited a little till they had got up the speed. The line here ran through miles and miles of fen country, more or less drained by dykes and rivers, but still wild and desolate enough. Over

this great flat the storm was sweeping furiously—even drowning in its turmoil the noise of the traveling train.

Very quietly he rose and climbed over the low partition which separated his compartment from that in which the woman was. She was seated in the corner, her head leaning back, so that the feeble light from the lamp fell on it, and her eyes were closed. She was asleep.

He slid himself along the seat till he was opposite to her, then paused to look at the fierce wicked face on which drink and paint and years of evil-thinking and living had left their marks, and looking shuddered. There was his bad genius, there was the creature who had driven him from evil to evil and finally destroyed him. Had it not been for her he might have been a good and respected man, and not what he was now, a fraudulent ruined out-cast. All his life seemed to flash before his inner eye in those few seconds of contemplation, all the long weary years of struggle, crime, and deceit. And this was the end of it, and *there* was the cause of it. Well, she should not escape him; he would be revenged upon her at last. There was nothing but death before *him*, she should die too.

He set his teeth, drew the loaded pistol from his pocket, cocked it and lifted it to her breast.

What was the matter with the thing? He had never known the pull of a pistol to be so heavy before.

No, it was not *that*. He could not do it. He could not shoot a sleeping woman, devil though she was; he could not kill her in her sleep. His nature rose up against it.

He placed the pistol on his knee, and as he did so she opened her eyes. He saw the look of wonder gather in them and grow to a stare of agonised terror. Her face became rigid like a dead person's and her lips opened to scream, but no cry came. She could only point to the pistol.

"Make a sound and you are dead," he said fiercely. "Not that it matters though," he added, as he remembered that the scream must be loud which could be heard in that raging gale.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped at last. "What are you going to do with that pistol? And where do you come from?"

"I come out of the night," he answered, raising the weapon, "out of the night into which you are going."

"You are not going to kill me?" she moaned,

turning up her ghastly face. "I can't die. I'm afraid to die. It will hurt, and I've been wicked. Oh, you are not going to kill me, are you?"

"Yes, I am going to kill you," he answered. "I told you months ago that I would kill you if you molested me. You have ruined me now, there is nothing but death left for *me*, and *you* shall die too, you fiend."

"Oh no! no! no! anything but that. I was drunk when I did it; that man brought me there, and they had taken all my things, and I was starving," and she glanced wildly round the empty carriage to see if help could be found, but there was none. She was alone with her fate.

She slipped down upon the floor of the carriage and clasped his knees. Writhing in her terror upon the ground, in hoarse accents she prayed for mercy.

"You used to kiss me," she said; "you cannot kill a woman you used to kiss years ago. Oh, spare me, spare me!"

He set his lips and placed the muzzle of the pistol against her head. She shivered at the contact, and her teeth began to chatter.

He could not do it. He must let her go, and leave her to fate. After all, she could hurt him no

more, for before another sun had set he would be beyond her reach.

His pistol hand fell against his side, and he looked down with loathing not unmixed with pity at the abject human snake who was writhing at his feet.

She caught his eye, and her faculties, sharpened by the imminent peril, read relentment there. For the moment, at any rate, he was softened. If she could master him now while he was off his guard—he was not a very strong man! But the pistol——

Slowly, still groaning out supplications, she rose to her feet.

“Yes,” he said, “be quiet while I think if I can spare you,” and he half turned his head away from her. For a moment nothing was heard but the rush of the gale and the roll of the wheels running over and under bridges.

This was her opportunity. All her natural ferocity arose within her, intensified a hundred times by the instinct of self-protection. With a sudden blow she struck the pistol from his hand; it fell upon the floor of the carriage. And then with a scream she sprang like a wild cat straight at his throat. So sudden was the attack that the long lean hands were gripping his windpipe before he knew it had

been made. Back she bore him, though he seized her round the waist. She was the heavier of the two, and back they went, *crash* against the carriage door.

It gave! Oh, God, the worn catch gave! Out together, out with a yell of despair into the night and the raging gale; down together through sixty feet of space into the black river beneath. Down together, deep into the watery depths—into the abyss of Death.

The train rushed on, the wild winds blew, and the night was as the night had been. But there in the black water, though there was never a star to see them, there, locked together in death as they had been locked together in life, the fierce glare of hate and terror yet staring from their glazed eyes, two bodies rolled over and over as they sped silently towards the sea.

CHAPTER XV.

SISTER AGNES.

TEN days had passed. The tragedy had echoed through all the land. Numberless articles and paragraphs had been written in numberless papers, and numberless theories had been built upon them. But the echoes were already beginning to die away. Both actors in the dim event were dead, and there was no pending trial to keep the public interest alive.

The two corpses, still linked in that fierce dying grip, had been picked up upon a mudbank. An inquest had been held, at which an open verdict was returned, and they were buried. Other events had occurred, the papers were filled with the reports of new tragedies, and the affair of the country lawyer who committed bigamy and together with his lawful wife came to a tragic and mysterious end began to be forgotten.

In Boisingham and its neighbourhood much sympathy was shown with Belle, whom people still called Mrs. Quest, though she had no title to that name. But she received it coldly and kept herself secluded.

As soon as her supposed husband's death was beyond a doubt Belle had opened his safe (for he had left the keys on his dressing-table), and found therein his will and other papers, including the mortgage deeds, to which, as Mr. Quest's memorandum advised her, she had no claim. Nor, indeed, had her right to them been good in law, would she have retained them, seeing that they were a price wrung from her late lover under threat of an action that could not be brought.

So she made them into a parcel and sent them to Edward Cossey, together with a formal note of explanation, greatly wondering in her heart what course he would take with reference to them. She was not left long in doubt. The receipt of the deeds was acknowledged, and three days afterwards she heard that a notice calling in the borrowed money had been served upon Mr. de la Molle on behalf of Edward Cossey.

So he had evidently made up his mind not to forego this new advantage which chance threw in his way. Pressure and pressure alone could enable him to attain his end, and he was applying it unmercifully. Well, she had done with him now, it did not matter to her; but she could not help faintly wondering at the extraordinary tenacity and hard-

ness of purpose which his action showed. Then she turned her mind to the consideration of another matter, in connection with which her plans were approaching maturity.

It was some days after this, exactly a fortnight from the date of Mr. Quest's death, that Edward Cossey was sitting one afternoon brooding over the fire in his rooms. He had much business awaiting his attention in London, but he would not go to London. He could not tear himself away from Boisingham, and such of the matters as could not be attended to there were left without attention. He was still as determined as ever to marry Ida, more determined if possible, for from constant brooding on the matter he had arrived at a condition approaching monomania. He had been quick to see the advantage resulting to him from Mr. Quest's tragic death and the return of the deeds, and though he knew that Ida would hate him the more for doing it, he instructed his lawyers to call in the money and make use of every possible legal means to harass and put pressure upon Mr. de la Molle. At the same time he had written privately to the Squire, calling his attention to the fact that matters were now once more as they had been at the beginning, but that he was as before willing to carry out the

arrangements which he had already specified, provided that Ida could be persuaded to consent to marry him. To this Mr. de la Molle had answered courteously enough, notwithstanding his grief and irritation at the course his would-be son-in-law had taken about the mortgages on the death of Mr. Quest, and the suspicion (it was nothing more) that he now had as to the original cause of their transfer to the lawyer. He said what he had said before, that he could not force his daughter into a marriage with him, but that if she chose to agree to it he should offer no objection. And there the matter stood. Once or twice Edward had met Ida walking or driving. She bowed to him coldly and that was all. Indeed he had only one crumb of comfort in his daily bread of disappointment, and the hope deferred which, where a lady is concerned, makes the heart more than normally sick, and it was, that he knew his hated rival, Colonel Quaritch, had been forbidden the Castle, and that intercourse between him and Ida was practically at an end.

But he was a dogged and persevering man; he knew the power of money and the shifts to which people can be driven who are made desperate by the want of it. He knew, too, that it is no rare thing for women who are attached to one man to

sell themselves to another of their own free will, realising that love may pass, but wealth (if the settlements are properly drawn) does not. Therefore he still hoped that with so many circumstances bringing an ever-increasing pressure upon her, Ida's spirit would in time be broken, her resistance would collapse, and he would have his will. Nor, as the sequel will show, was that hope a baseless one.

As for his infatuation there was literally no limit to it. It broke out in all sorts of ways, and for miles round was a matter of public notoriety and gossip. Over the mantelpiece in his sitting-room was a fresh example of it. By one means and another he had obtained several photographs of Ida, notably one of her in a court dress which she had worn two or three years before, when her brother James had insisted upon her being presented. These photographs he caused to be enlarged and then, at the cost of £ 500, commissioned a well-known artist to paint from them a full-length life-size portrait of Ida in her court dress. This order had been executed, and the portrait, which although the colouring was not entirely satisfactory was still an effective likeness and a fine piece of work, now hung in a splendid frame over his mantelpiece.

There, on the afternoon in question, he sat be-

fore the fire, his eyes fixed upon the portrait, of which the outline was beginning to grow dim in the waning December light, when the servant girl came in and announced that a lady wished to speak to him. He asked what her name was, and the girl said that she did not know, because she had her veil down and was wrapped up in a big cloak.

In due course the lady was shown up. He had relapsed into his reverie, for nothing seemed to interest him much now unless it had to do with Ida—and he knew that the lady could not be Ida, because the girl said that she was short. As it happened, he sat with his right ear, in which he was deaf, towards the door, so that between his infirmity and his dreams he never heard Belle—for it was she—enter the room.

For a minute or more she stood looking at him as he sat with his eyes fixed upon the picture, and while she looked an expression of pity stole across her sweet pale face.

“I wonder what curse there is laid upon us that we should be always doomed to seek what we cannot find?” she said aloud.

He heard her now, and looking up saw her standing in the glow and flicker of the firelight, which played upon her white face and black-draped

form. He started violently; as he did so she loosed the heavy cloak and hood that she wore and it fell behind her. But where was the lovely rounded form, and where the clustering golden curls? Gone, and in their place a coarse robe of blue serge, on which hung a crucifix, and the white hood of the nun.

He sprang from his chair with an exclamation, not knowing if he dreamed or if he really saw the woman who stood there like a ghost in the firelight.

"Forgive me, Edward," she said presently, in her sweet low voice. "I daresay that this all looks theatrical enough—but I have put on this dress for two reasons: firstly, because I must leave this town in an hour's time and wish to do so unknown; and secondly, to show that you need not fear that I have come to be troublesome. Will you light the candles?"

He did so mechanically, and then pulled down the blinds. Meanwhile Belle had seated herself near the table, her face buried in her hands.

"What is the meaning of all this, Belle?" he said.

"'Sister Agnes,' you must call me now," she said, taking her hands from her face. "The mean-

ing of it is that I have left the world and entered a sisterhood which works among the poor in London, and I have come to bid you farewell, a last farewell."

He stared at her in amazement. He did not find it easy to connect the idea of this beautiful, human, loving creature with the cold sanctuary of a sisterhood. He did not know that natures like this, whose very intensity is often the cause of their destruction are most capable of these strange developments. The man or woman who can really love and endure—and they are rare,—can also, when their passion has utterly broken them, turn to climb the stony paths that lead to love's antipodes.

"Edward," she went on, speaking very slowly, "you know in what relation we have stood to each other, and what that relationship means to woman. You know this—I have loved you with all my heart, and all my strength, and all my soul——" Here she trembled and broke down.

"You know too," she continued presently, "what has been the end of all this, the shameful end. I am not come to blame you. I do not blame you, for the fault was mine, and if I have anything to forgive I forgive it freely. Whatever memories may still live in my heart I swear I put away all bitter-

ness, and that my most earnest wish is that you may be happy, as happiness is to you. The sin was mine; that is it would have been mine were we free agents, which perhaps we are not. I should have loved my husband, or rather the man whom I thought my husband, for with all his faults he was of a different clay to you, Edward."

He looked up, but said nothing.

"I know," she went on, pointing to the picture over the mantelpiece, "that your mind is still set upon her, and I am nothing, and less than nothing, to you. When I am gone you will scarcely give me a thought. I cannot tell if you will succeed in your end, and I think the methods you are adopting wicked and shameful. But whether you succeed or not, your fate also will be what my fate is—to love a person who is not only indifferent to you but who positively dislikes you, and reserves all her secret heart for another man, and I know no greater penalty than is to be found in that daily misery."

"You are very consoling," he said sulkily.

"I only tell you the truth," she answered. "What sort of life do you suppose mine has been when I am so utterly broken, so entirely robbed of hope, that I have determined to leave the world and hide myself and my shame in a sisterhood? And now,

Edward," she went on after a pause, "I have something to tell you, for I will not go away, if indeed you allow me to go away at all after you have heard it, until I have confessed." And she leant forward and looked him full in the face, whispering—"I shot you on purpose, Edward!"

"What!" he said, springing from his chair; "you tried to murder me?"

"Yes, yes; but don't think too hardly of me. I am only flesh and blood, and you drove me wild with jealousy—you taunted me with having been your mistress and said that I was not fit to associate with the lady whom you were going to marry. It made me mad, and the opportunity offered—the gun was there, and I shot you. God forgive me, I think that I have suffered more than you did. Oh! when day after day I saw you lying there and did not know if you would live or die, I thought that I should have gone mad with remorse and agony!"

He listened so far, and then suddenly walked across the room towards the bell. She placed herself between him and it.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"Going to do? I am going to send for a policeman and give you into custody for attempted murder, that is all."

She caught his arm and looked him in the face. In another second she had loosed it.

"Of course," she said, "you have a right to do that. Ring and send for the policeman, only remember that nothing is known now, but the whole truth will come out at the trial."

This checked him, and he stood thinking.

"Well," she said, "why don't you ring?"

"I do not ring," he answered, "because on the whole I think I had better let you go. I do not wish to be mixed up with you any more. You have done me mischief enough; you have finished by attempting to murder me. Go; I think that a convent is the best place for you; you are too bad and too dangerous to be left at large."

"*Oh!*" she said, like one in pain. "*Oh!* and you are the man for whom I have come to this! Oh, God! it is a cruel world." And she pressed her hands to her heart and stumbled rather than walked to the door.

Reaching it she turned, and her hands still pressing the coarse blue gown against her heart, she leaned against the door.

"Edward," she said, in a strained whisper, for her breath came thick, "Edward—I am going for ever—have you *no* kind word—to say to me?"

He looked at her, a scowl upon his handsome face. Then by way of answer he turned upon his heel.

And so, still holding her hands against her poor broken heart, she went out of the house, out of Boisingham and of touch and knowledge of the world. In after years these two were fated to meet once again, and under circumstances sufficiently tragic; but the story of that meeting does not lie within the scope of this history. To the world Belle is dead, but there is another world of sickness, and sordid unchanging misery and shame, where the lovely face of Sister Agnes moves to and fro like a ray of heaven's own light. There those who would know her must go to seek her.

Poor Belle! Poor shamed, deserted woman! She was an evil-doer, and the fatality of love and the unbalanced vigour of her mind, which might, had she been more happily placed, have led her to all things that are pure, and true, and of good report, combined to drag her into shame and wretchedness. But the evil that she did was paid back to her in full measure, pressed down and running over. Few of us need to wait for a place of punishment to get the due of our follies and our sins. *Here* we ex-

piate them. They are with us day and night, about our path and about our bed, scourging us with the whips of memory, mocking us with empty longing and the hopelessness of despair. Who can escape the consequence of sin, or even of the misfortune which led to sin? Certainly Belle did not, nor Mr. Quest, nor even that fierce-hearted harpy who hunted him to his grave.

And so good-bye to Belle. May she find peace in its season!

CHAPTER XVI.

COLONEL QUARITCH EXPRESSES HIS VIEWS.

MEANWHILE things had been going very ill at the Castle. Edward Cossey's lawyers were carrying out their client's instructions to the letter with a perseverance and ingenuity worthy of a County Court solicitor. Day by day they found a new point upon which to harass the wretched Squire. Some share of the first expenses connected with the mortgages had, they said, been improperly thrown upon their client, and they again and again demanded, in language which was almost insolent, the immediate payment of the amount. Then there was three months' interest overdue, and this also they pressed and clamoured for, till the old gentleman was nearly driven out of his senses, and as a consequence drove everybody about the place out of theirs.

At last this state of affairs began to tell upon his constitution, which, strong as he was, could not at his age withstand such constant worry. He grew to look years older, his shoulders acquired a stoop,

and his memory began to fail him, especially on matters connected with the mortgages and farm accounts. Ida, too, became pale and ill; she caught a heavy cold, which she could not throw off, and her face acquired a permanently pained and yet listless look.

One day, it was on the 15th of December, things reached a climax. When Ida came down to breakfast she found her father busy poring over some more letters from the lawyers.

"What is it now, father?" she said.

"What is it now?" he answered irritably. "Why, it's another claim for two hundred, that's what it is. I keep telling them to write to my lawyers, but they won't, at least they write to me too. There, I can't make head or tail of it. Look here," and he showed her two sides of a big sheet of paper covered with statements of accounts. "Anyhow, I have not got two hundred, that's clear. I don't even know where we are going to find the money to pay the three months' interest. I'm worn out, Ida, I'm worn out! There is only one thing left for me to do, and that is to die, and that's the long and short of it. I get so confused with these figures. I'm an old man now, and all these troubles are too much for me."

"You must not talk like that, father," she an-

swered, not knowing what to say, for affairs were indeed desperate.

"Yes, yes, it's all very well to talk so, but facts are stubborn. Our family is ruined, and we must accept it."

"Cannot the money be got anyhow? Is there *nothing* to be done?" she said in despair.

"What is the good of asking me that? There is only one thing that can save us, and you know what it is as well as I do. But you are your own mistress. I have no right to put pressure on you. I don't wish to put pressure on you. You must please yourself. Meanwhile I think we had better leave this place at once, and go and live in a cottage somewhere, if we can get enough to support us; if not we must starve, I suppose, I cannot keep up appearances any longer."

Ida rose, and with a strange sad light of resolution shining in her eyes, came to where her father was sitting, and, putting her hands upon his shoulders, looked him in the face.

"Father," she said, "do you wish me to marry that man?"

"Wish you to marry him? What do you mean?" he said, not without irritation, and avoiding her gaze. "It is no affair of mine. I don't like the man, if

that's what you mean. He is acting like—well, like the cur that he is, in putting on the screw as he is doing; but, of course, that is the way out of it, and the only way, and there you are.”

“Father,” she said again, “will you give me ten days, that is, until Christmas Day? If nothing happens between this and then I will marry Mr. Edward Cossey.”

A sudden light of hope shone in his eyes. She saw it, though he tried to hide it by turning his head away.

“Oh, yes,” he answered, “as you wish; settle it one way or the other on Christmas Day, and then we can go out with the new year. You see your brother James is dead, I have no one left to advise me now, and I suppose that I am getting old. At any rate things seem to be too much for me. Settle it as you like; settle it as you like,” and he got up, leaving his breakfast half swallowed, and went off to moon aimlessly about the park.

So she made up her mind at last. This was the end of her struggling. She could not let her old father be turned out of house and home to starve, for practically they would starve. She knew her hateful lover well enough to be aware that he

would show no mercy. It was a question of the woman or the money, and she was the woman. Either she must let him take her or they must be destroyed; there was no middle course. And in these circumstances there was no room for hesitation. Once more her duty became clear to her. She must give up her life, she must give up her love, she must give up herself. Well, so be it. She was weary of the long endeavour against fortune, now she would yield and let the tide of utter misery sweep over her like a sea—to bear her away till at last it brought her to that oblivion in which perchance all things come right or are as though they had never been.

She had scarcely spoken to her lover, Harold Quaritch, for some weeks. She had as she understood it entered into a kind of unspoken agreement with her father not to do so, and that agreement Harold had realised and respected. Since their last letters to each other they had met once or twice casually or at church, interchanged a few indifferent words, though their eyes spoke another story, touched each other's hands and parted. That was absolutely all. But now that Ida had come to this momentous decision she felt he had a right to learn it, and so once more she wrote to him. She might have gone

to see him or told him to meet her, but she would not. For one thing she did not dare to trust herself on such an errand in his dear company, for another she was too proud, thinking if her father came to hear of it he might consider that it had a clandestine and underhand appearance.

And so she wrote. With all she said we need not concern ourselves. The letter was loving, even passionate, more passionate perhaps than one would have expected from a woman of Ida's calm and stately sort. But a mountain may have a heart of fire although it is clad in snows, and so it sometimes is with women who seem cold and unemotional as marble. Besides it was her last chance—she could write him no more letters and she had much to say.

“And so I have decided, Harold,” she said after telling him of all her doubts and troubles. “I must do it, there is no help for it, as I think you will see. I have asked for the ten days' respite. I really hardly know why, except that it is a respite. And now what is there left to say to you except good-bye? I love you, Harold, I make no secret of it, and I shall never love any other. Remember all your life that I love you and have not forgotten you, and never can forget. For people placed as we are

there is but one hope—the grave. In the grave earthly considerations fail and earthly contracts end, and there I trust and believe we shall find each other—or at the least forgetfulness. My heart is so sore I know not what to say to you, for it is difficult to put all I feel in words. I am overwhelmed, my spirit is broken, and I wish to heaven that I were dead. Sometimes I almost cease to believe in a God who can allow His creatures to be so tormented and give us love only that it may be daily dishonoured in our sight; but who am I that I should complain, and after all what are our troubles compared to some we know of? Well, it will come to an end at last, and meanwhile pity me and think of me.

“Pity me and think of me; yes, but never see me more. As soon as this engagement is publicly announced, go away, the further the better. Yes, go to New Zealand, as you suggested once, and in pity of our human weakness never let me see your face again. Perhaps you may write to me sometimes—if Mr. Cossey will allow it. Go there and occupy yourself, it will divert your mind—you are still too young a man to lay yourself upon the shelf—mix yourself up with the politics of the place, take to writing; anything, so long as you can absorb

yourself. I send you a photograph of myself (I have nothing better) and a ring which I have worn night and day since I was a child. I think that it will fit your little finger and I hope you will always wear it in memory of me. It was my mother's. And now it is late and I am tired, and what is there more that a woman can say to the man she loves—and whom she must leave for ever? Only one word—Good-bye. Ida.”

When Harold got this letter it fairly broke him down. His hopes had been revived when he thought that all was lost, and now again they were utterly dashed and broken. He could see no way out of it, none at all. He could not quarrel with Ida's decision, shocking as it was, for the simple reason that he knew in his heart she was acting rightly and even nobly. But, oh, the thought of it made him mad. It is probable that to a man of imagination and deep feeling hell itself can invent no more hideous torture than he must undergo in the position in which Harold Quaritch found himself. To truly love some good woman or some woman whom he thinks good—for it comes to the same thing—to love her more than life, to hold her dearer even than his honour, to be, like Harold, beloved in turn; and then to know that this woman,

this one thing for which he would count the world well lost, this light that makes his days beautiful, has been taken from him by the bitterness of Fate (not by Death, for that he could bear), taken from him, and given—for money or money's worth—to some other man! It is, perhaps, better that a man should die than that he should pass through such an experience as that which threatened Harold Quaritch now: for though the man die not, yet will it kill all that is best in him; and whatever triumphs may await him, whatever women may be ready in the future to pin their favours to his breast, life will never be for him what it might have been, because his lost love took its glory with her.

No wonder, then, that he despaired. No wonder, too, that there rose up in his breast a great anger and indignation against the man who had brought this last extremity of misery upon them. He was just, and could make allowances for his rival's infatuation—which, indeed, Ida being concerned, it was not difficult for him to understand. But he was also, and above all things, a gentleman; and the spectacle of a woman being inexorably driven into a distasteful marriage by money pressure, put on by the man who wished to gain her, revolted him beyond measure, and, though he was slow to wrath,

moved him to fiery indignation. So much did it move him that he took a resolution; Mr. Cossey should know his mind about the matter, and that at once. Ringing the bell, he ordered his dog-cart, and drove to Edward Cossey's rooms with the full intention of giving that gentleman a very unpleasant quarter-of-an-hour.

Mr. Cossey was in. Fearing lest he should refuse to see him, the Colonel followed the servant up the stairs, and entered almost as she announced his name. There was a grim and even formidable look upon his plain but manly face, and something of menace, too, in his formal and soldierly bearing; nor did his aspect soften when his eyes fell upon the full-length picture of Ida over the mantel-piece.

Edward Cossey rose with astonishment and irritation, not unmixed with nervousness, depicted on his face. The last person whom he wished to see and expected a visit from was Colonel Quaritch, whom in his heart he held in considerable awe. Besides, he had of late received such a series of unpleasant calls that it is not wonderful that he began to dread these interviews.

"Good-day," he said coldly. "Will you be seated?"

The Colonel bowed his head slightly, but he did not sit down.

"To what am I indebted for the pleasure?" began Edward Cossey with much politeness.

"Last time I was here, Mr. Cossey," said the Colonel in his deep voice, speaking very deliberately, "I came to give an explanation; now I come to ask one."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. To come to the point, Miss de la Molle and I are attached to each other, and there has been between us an understanding that this attachment might end in marriage."

"Oh! has there?" said the younger man with a sneer.

"Yes," answered the Colonel, keeping down his rising temper as well as he could. "But now I am told, upon what appears to be good authority, that you have actually condescended to bring, directly and indirectly, pressure of a monetary sort to bear upon Miss de la Molle and her father in order to force her into a distasteful marriage with yourself."

"And what the devil business of yours is it, sir," asked Cossey, "what I have or have not done? Making every allowance for the disappointment of

an unsuccessful suitor, for I presume that you appear in that character," and again he sneered, "I ask, what business is it of yours?"

"It is every business of mine, Mr. Cossey, because if Miss de la Molle is forced into this marriage, I shall lose my wife."

"Then you will certainly lose her. Do you suppose that I am going to consider you? Indeed," he went on, being now in a towering passion, "I should have thought that considering the difference of age and fortune between us, you might find other reasons than you suggest to account for my being preferred, if I should be so preferred. Ladies are apt to choose the better man, you know."

"I don't quite know what you mean by the 'better man,' Mr. Cossey," said the Colonel quietly. "Comparisons are odious and I will make none, though I admit that you have the advantage of me in money and in years. However, that is not the point; the point is that I have had the fortune to be preferred to *you* by the lady in question, and *not* you to me. I happen to know that the idea of her marriage with you is as distasteful to Miss de la Molle as it is to me. This I know from her own lips. She will only marry you, if she does so at all, under the pressure of direst necessity, and to

save her father from the ruin you are deliberately bringing upon him."

"Well, Colonel Quaritch," he answered, "have you quite done lecturing me? If you have, let me tell you, as you seem anxious to know my mind, that if by any legal means I can marry Ida de la Molle I certainly intend to marry her. And let me tell you another thing, that when once I am married it will be the last that you shall see of her, if I can prevent it."

"Thank you for your admissions," said Harold, still more quietly. "So it seems that it is all true; it seems that you are using your wealth to harass this unfortunate gentleman and his daughter until you drive them into consenting to this marriage. That being so, I wish to tell you privately what I shall probably take some opportunity of telling you in public, namely, that a man who does these things is a cur, and worse than a cur, he is a *blackguard*, and *you* are such a man, Mr. Cossey."

Edward Cossey's face turned perfectly livid with fury, and he drew himself up as though to spring at his adversary's throat.

The Colonel held up his hand. "Don't try that on with me," he said. "In the first place it is vulgar, and in the second you have only just re-

covered from an accident and are no match for me, though I am over forty years old. Listen, our fathers had a way of settling their troubles; I don't approve of that sort of thing as a rule, but in some cases it is salutary. If you think yourself aggrieved it does not take long to cross the water, Mr. Cossey."

Edward Cossey looked puzzled. "Do you mean to suggest that I should fight a duel with you?" he said.

"To challenge a man to fight a duel," answered the Colonel with deliberation, "is an indictable offence, therefore I make no such challenge. I have made a suggestion, and if that suggestion falls in with your views as," and he bowed, "I hope it may, we might perhaps meet accidentally abroad in a few days' time, when we could talk this matter over further."

"I'll see you hanged first," answered Cossey. "What have I to gain by fighting you except a very good chance of being shot? I have had enough of being shot as it is, and we will play this game out upon the old lines, until I win it."

"As you like," said Harold. "I have made a suggestion to you which you do not see fit to accept. As to the end of the game, it is not finished yet, and therefore it is impossible to say who will win

it. Perhaps you will be checkmated after all. In the meanwhile allow me again to assure you that I consider you both a cur and a blackguard, and to wish you good-morning." And he bowed himself out, leaving Edward Cossey in a curious condition of concentrated rage.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COLONEL GOES TO SLEEP.

THE state of mind is difficult to picture which could induce a peaceable christian-natured individual, who had moreover in the course of his career been mixed up with enough bloodshed to have acquired a thorough horror of it, to offer to fight a duel. Yet this state had been reached by Harold Quaritch.

Edward Cossey wisely enough declined to entertain the idea, but the Colonel had been perfectly in earnest about it. Odd as it may appear in the latter end of this nineteenth century, nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to pit his life against that of his unworthy rival. Of course, it was foolish and wrong, but human nature is the same in all ages, and in the last extremity we fall back by in-

stinct on those methods which men have from the beginning adopted to save themselves from intolerable wrong and dishonour, or, be it admitted, to bring the same upon others.

But Cossey utterly declined to fight. As he said, he had had enough of being shot, and so there was an end of it. Indeed, in after days the Colonel frequently looked back upon this episode in his career with shame not unmingled with amusement, reflecting when he did so on the strange potency of that passion which can bring men to seriously entertain the idea of such extravagances.

Well, there was nothing more to be done. He might, it is true, have seen Ida, and working upon her love and natural inclinations have tried to persuade her to cut the knot by marrying him off-hand. Perhaps he would have succeeded, for in these affairs women are apt to find the arguments advanced by their lovers weighty and well worthy of consideration. But he was not the man to adopt such a course. He did the only thing he could do—answered her letter by saying that what must be must be. He had learnt that on the day subsequent to his interview with his rival the Squire had written to Edward Cossey informing him that a decided answer would be given to him on Christmas Day, and

that thereon all vexatious proceedings on the part of that gentleman's lawyers had been stayed for the time. He could now no longer doubt what the answer would be. There was only one way out of the trouble, the way which Ida had made up her mind to adopt.

So he set to work to make his preparations for leaving Honham and this country for good and all. He wrote to land agents and put Molehill upon their books to be sold or let on lease, and also to various influential friends to obtain introductions to the leading men in New Zealand. But these matters did not take up all his time, and the rest of it hung heavily on his hands. He mooned about the place until he was tired. He tried to occupy himself in his garden, but it is weary work sowing crops for strange hands to reap, and so he gave it up.

Somehow the time wore on until at last it was Christmas Eve; the eve, too, of the fatal day of Ida's decision. He dined alone that night as usual, and shortly after dinner some waits came to the house and began to sing their cheerful carols outside. The carols did not chime in at all well with his condition of mind, and he sent five shillings out to the singers with a request that they would go away as he had a headache.

Accordingly they went; and shortly after their departure the great gale for which that night is still famous began to rise. Then he fell to pacing up and down the quaint old oak-panelled parlour, thinking until his brain ached. The hour was at hand, the evil was upon him and her whom he loved. Was there no way out of it, no possible way? Alas! there was but one way and that a golden one; but where was the money to come from? He had it not, and as land stood it was impossible to raise it. Ah, if only that great treasure which old Sir James de la Molle had hid away and died rather than reveal, could be brought to light, now in the hour of his house's sorest need! But the treasure was very mythical, and if it had ever really existed it was not now to be found. He went to his dispatch box and took from it the copy he had made of the entry in the Bible which had been in Sir James's pocket when he was murdered in the courtyard. The whole story was a very strange one. Why did the brave old man wish that his Bible should be sent to his son, and why did he write that somewhat peculiar message in it?

Suppose Ida was right and that it contained a cypher or cryptograph which would give a clue to the whereabouts of the treasure? If so it was ob-

vious that it would be one of the simplest nature. A man confined by himself in a dungeon and under sentence of immediate death would not have been likely to pause to invent anything complicated. It would, indeed, be curious that he should have invented anything at all under such circumstances, and when he could have so little hope that the riddle would be solved. But, on the other hand, his position was desperate; he was quite surrounded by foes; there was no chance of his being able to convey the secret in any other way, and he *might* have done so.

Harold placed the piece of paper upon the mantelpiece, and sitting down in an arm-chair opposite began to contemplate it earnestly, as indeed he had often done before. In case its exact wording should not be remembered, it is repeated here. It ran: "*Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly and wickedly 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 moneys 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.*"

Harold stared and stared at this inscription. He read it forwards, backwards, crossways, and in every other way, but absolutely without result. At last, wearied out with misery of mind and the pursuit of a futile occupation, he dropped off sound asleep in his chair. This happened about a quarter to eleven o'clock. The next thing he knew was that he suddenly woke up; woke up completely, passing as quickly from a condition of deep sleep to one of wakefulness as though he had never shut his eyes. He used to say afterwards that he felt as though somebody had come and aroused him; it was not like a natural waking. Indeed, so unaccustomed was the sensation, that for a moment the idea flashed through his brain that he had died in his sleep, and was now awakening to a new state of existence.

This soon passed, however. Evidently he must have slept some time, for the lamp was out and the fire dying. He got up and hunted about in the dark for some matches, which at last he found. He struck a light, standing exactly opposite to the bit of paper with the copy of Sir James de la Molle's dying message on it. This message was neatly copied long-ways upon a half-sheet of large writing paper, such as the Squire generally used. Its first line ran as it was copied:

“Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly and wickedly done.”

Now, as the match burnt up, by some curious chance, connected probably with the darkness and the sudden striking of light upon his eyeballs, it came to pass that Harold, happening to glance thereon, was only able to read four letters of this first line of writing. All the rest seemed to him but as a blur connecting those four letters. They were:

D.....E.....a.....d

being respectively the initial letters of the first, the sixth, the eleventh, and the sixteenth words of the line given above.

The match burnt out, and he began to hunt about for another.

“D-E-A-D,” he said aloud, repeating the letters almost automatically. “Why it spells ‘Dead.’ That is rather curious.”

Something about this accidental spelling awakened his interest very sharply—it was an odd coincidence. He lit some candles, and hurriedly examined the line. The first thing which struck him was that the four letters which went to make up the word “dead” were about equi-distant in the line of writing. Could it be? He hurriedly counted the words in the line.

There were sixteen of them. That is after the first, one of the letters occurred at the commencement of every fifth word.

This was certainly curious. Trembling with nervousness he took a pencil and wrote down the initial letter of every fifth word in the message, thus:

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

When he had done he wrote these initials in a line:

DEadmansmountabc

He stared at them for a little—then he saw.

Great heaven! he had hit upon the reading of the riddle.

The answer was:

“Dead Man’s Mount,”

followed by the mysterious letters A. B. C.

Breathless with excitement, he checked the letters again to see if by any chance he had made an error. No, it was perfectly correct.

“Dead Man’s Mount.” That was and had been for centuries the name of the curious tumulus or mound in his own back garden. It was this mount that learned antiquarians had discussed the origin of so fiercely, and which his aunt, the late Mrs. Massey, had roofed at the cost of two hundred and fifty pounds, in order to prove that the hollow in the top had once been the agreeable country seat of an ancient British family.

Could it then be but a coincidence that after the first word the initial of every fifth word in the message should spell out the name of this remarkable place, or was it so arranged? He sat down to think it over, trembling like a frightened child. Obviously, it was *not* accident; obviously, the prisoner

of more than two centuries ago had, in his helplessness, invented this simple cryptograph in the hope that his son or, if not his son, some one of his descendants would discover it, and thereby become master of the hidden wealth. What place would be more likely for the old knight to have chosen to secrete the gold than one that even in those days had the uncanny reputation of being haunted? Who would ever think of looking for modern treasure in the burying place of the ancient dead? In those days, too, Molehill, or Dead Man's Mount, belonged to the de la Molle family, who had re-acquired it on the break up of the Abbey. It was only at the Restoration, when the Dofferleigh branch came into possession under the will of the second and last baronet, Sir Edward de la Molle, who died in exile, that they failed to recover this portion of the property. And if this was so, and Sir James, the murdered man, had buried his treasure in the mount, what did the mysterious letters A. B. C. mean? Were they, perhaps, directions as to the line to be taken to discover it? Harold could not imagine, nor, as a matter of fact, did he or anybody else ever find out either then or thereafter.

Ida, indeed, used afterwards to laughingly declare that old Sir James meant to indicate that he

considered the whole thing as plain as A. B. C., but this was an explanation which did not commend itself to Harold's practical mind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUT NOT TO BED.

HAROLD glanced at the clock; it was nearly one in the morning, time to go to bed if he was going. But he did not feel inclined to go to bed. If he did, with this great discovery on his mind he should not sleep. There was another thing; it was Christmas Eve, or rather Christmas Day, the day of Ida's answer. If any succour was to be given at all, it must be given at once, before the fortress had capitulated. Once let the engagement be renewed, and even if the money should subsequently be forthcoming, the difficulties would be doubled. But he was building his hopes upon sand, and he knew it. Even supposing that he held in his hand the key to the hiding place of the long-lost treasure, who knew whether it would still be there, or whether rumour had not enormously added to its proportions? He was allowing his imagination to carry him away.

Still he could not sleep, and he had a mind to

see if anything could be made of it. Going to the gun-room he put on a pair of shooting-boots, an old coat, and an ulster. Next he provided himself with a dark lantern and the key of the summerhouse at the top of Dead Man's Mount, and silently unlocking the back door started out into the garden. The night was very rough, for the great gale was now rising fast, and bitterly cold, so cold that he hesitated for a moment before making up his mind to go on. However, he did go on, and in another two minutes was climbing the steep sides of the tumulus. There was a wan moon in the cold sky—the wind whistled most drearily through the naked boughs of the great oaks which groaned in answer like things in pain. Harold was not a nervous or impressionable man, but the place had a spectral look about it, and he could not help thinking of the evil reputation it had borne for all these ages. There was scarcely a man in Honham, or in Boisingham either, who could have been persuaded to stay half an hour by himself on Dead Man's Mount after the sun was well down. Harold had at different times asked one or two of them what they saw to be afraid of, and they had answered that it was not what they saw so much as what they felt. He had laughed at the time, but now he admitted to himself that he was anything

but comfortable, though if he had been obliged to put his feelings into words he could probably not have described them better than by saying that he had a general sensation of somebody being behind him.

However, he was not going to be frightened by this nonsense, so consigning all superstitions to their father the Devil, he marched on boldly and unlocked the summer-house door. Now, though this curious edifice had been designed for a summer-house, and for that purpose lined throughout with encaustic tiles, nobody as a matter of fact had ever dreamed of using it to sit in. To begin with, it roofed over a great depression some thirty feet or more in diameter, for the top of the mount was hollowed out like one of those wooden cups in which jugglers catch balls. But, notwithstanding all encaustic tiles in the world, damp will gather in a hollow like this, and the damp alone was an objection. The real fact was, however, that the spot had an evil reputation, and even those who were sufficiently well educated to know the folly of this sort of thing would not willingly have gone there for purposes of enjoyment. So it had suffered the general fate of disused places, having fallen more or less out of repair and become a receptacle for garden tools, broken cucumber frames and lumber of various sorts.

Harold pushed the door open and entered, shutting it behind him. It was, if anything, more disagreeable in the empty silence of the wide place than it had been outside, for the space roofed over was considerable, and the question at once arose in his mind, what was he to do now that he had got there? If the treasure was there at all, probably it was deep down in the bowels of the great mound. Well, as he was on the spot, he thought that he might as well try a dig, though probably nothing would come of it. In the corner were a pickaxe and some spades and shovels. Harold got them, advanced to the centre of the space and, half laughing at his own folly, set to work. First, having lit another lantern which was kept there, he removed with the sharp end of the pickaxe a large patch of the encaustic tiles exactly in the centre of the depression. Then having loosened the soil beneath with the pick he took off his ulster and fell to digging with a will. The soil proved to be very sandy and easy to work. Indeed, from its appearance, he soon came to the conclusion that it was not virgin earth, but worked soil which had been thrown there.

Presently his spade struck against something hard; he picked it up and held it to the lantern. It proved to be an ancient spear-head, and near it

were some bones, though whether or no they were human he could not at the time determine. This was very interesting, but it was scarcely what he wanted, so he dug on manfully until he found himself chest deep in a kind of grave. He had been digging for an hour now, and was getting very tired. Cold as it was the perspiration poured from him. As he paused for breath he heard the church clock strike two, and very solemnly it sounded down the wild ways of the wind-torn winter night. He dug on a little more, and then seriously thought of giving up what he was somewhat ashamed of having undertaken. How was he to account for this great hole to his gardener on the following morning? Then and there he made up his mind that he would not account for it. The gardener, in common with the rest of the village, believed that the place was haunted. Let him set down the hole to the "spooks" and their spiritual activity.

Still he dug on at the grave for a little longer. It was by now becoming a matter of exceeding labour to throw the shovelfuls of soils clear of the hole. Then he determined to stop, and with this view scrambled, not without difficulty, out of the amateur tomb. Once out, his eyes fell on a stout iron crow-bar which was standing among the other tools, such

an implement as is used to make holes in the earth wherein to set hurdles and stakes. It occurred to him that it would not be a bad idea to drive this crowbar into the bottom of the grave which he had dug, in order to ascertain if there was anything within its reach. So he once more descended into the hole and began to work with the iron crow, driving it down with all his strength. When he had got it almost as deep as it would go, that is about two feet, it struck something—something hard—there was no doubt of it. He worked away in great excitement, widening the hole as much as he could.

Yes, it was masonry, or if it was not masonry it was something uncommonly like it. He drew the crow out of the hole, and, seizing the shovel, commenced to dig again with renewed vigour. As he could no longer conveniently throw the earth from the hole he took a "skep" or leaf basket, which lay handy, and, placing it beside him, put as much of the sandy soil as he could carry into it, and then lifting shot it on the edge of the pit. For three-quarters of an hour he laboured thus most manfully, till at last he came down to the stonework. He cleared a patch of it and examined it attentively by the light of the dark lantern. It appeared to be rubble work built in the form of an arch. He struck

it with the iron crow and it gave back a hollow sound. There was a cavity of some sort underneath.

His excitement and curiosity redoubled. By great efforts he widened the spot of stonework already laid bare. Luckily the soil, or rather sand, was so friable that there was very little exertion required to loosen it. This done he took the iron crow, and inserting it beneath a loose flat stone levered it up. Here was a beginning, and having got rid of the large flat stone he struck down again and again with all his strength, driving the sharp point of the heavy crow into the rubble work beneath. It began to give, he could hear bits of it falling into the cavity below. There! it went with a crash, more than a square foot of it.

He leant over the hole at his feet, devoutly hoping that the ground on which he was standing would not give way also, and tried to look down. Next second he threw his head back coughing and gasping. The foul air rushing up from the cavity or chamber, or whatever it was, had half poisoned him. Then not without difficulty he climbed out of the grave and sat down on the pile of sand he had thrown up. Clearly he must allow the air in the place to sweeten a little. Clearly also he must have

assistance if he was to descend into the great hole. He could not undertake this by himself.

He sat upon the edge of the pit wondering who there was that he might trust. Not his own gardener. To begin with he would never come near the place at night, and besides such people talk. The Squire? No, he could not rouse him at this hour, and also, for obvious reasons, they had not met lately. Ah, he had it. George was the man! To begin with he could be relied upon to hold his tongue. The episode of the production of the real Mrs. Quest had taught him that George was a person of no common powers. He could think and he could act also.

Harold threw on his coat, extinguished the large stable lantern, and passing out, locked the door of the summer-house and started down the mount at a trot. The wind had risen steadily during his hours of work, and was now blowing a furious gale. It was about a quarter to four in the morning and the stars shone brightly in the hard clean-blown sky. By their light and that of the waning moon he struggled on in the teeth of the raging tempest. As he passed under one of the oaks he heard a mighty crack overhead, and guessing what it was ran like a hare. He was none too soon. A circular gust of more than usual fierceness had twisted the top right out

of the great tree, and down it came upon the turf with a rending crashing sound that made his blood turn cold. After this escape he avoided the neighbourhood of the groaning trees.

George lived in a neat little farmhouse about a quarter of a mile away. There was a short cut to it across the fields, and this he took, breathlessly fighting his way against the gale, which roared and howled in its splendid might as it swept across the ocean from its birthplace in the distances of air. Even the stiff hawthorn fences bowed before its breath, and the tall poplars on the sky-line bent like a rod beneath the first rush of a salmon.

Excited as he was, the immensity and grandeur of the sight and sounds struck upon him with a strange force. Never before had he felt so far apart from man and so near to that dread Spirit round Whose feet thousands of rolling worlds rush on, at Whose word they are, endure, and are not.

He struggled forward until at last he reached the house. It was quite silent, but in one of the windows a light was burning. No doubt its occupants found it impossible to sleep in that wild gale. The next thing to consider was how to make himself heard. To knock at the door would be useless in that turmoil. There was only one thing to

be done—throw stones at the window. He found a good-sized pebble, and standing underneath, threw it with such goodwill that it went right through the glass. It lit, as he afterwards heard, full upon the sleeping Mrs. George's nose, and nearly frightened that good woman, whose nerves were already shaken by the gale, into a fit. Next minute a red nightcap appeared at the window.

“George!” roared the Colonel, in a lull of the gale.

“Who's there?” came the faint answer.

“I—Colonel Quaritch. Come down. I want to speak to you.”

The head was withdrawn, and a couple of minutes afterwards Harold saw the front door begin to open slowly. He waited till there was space enough, and then slipped in, and together they forced it to.

“Stop a bit, sir,” said George; “I'll light the lamp;” and he did.

Next minute he stepped back in amazement.

“Why, what on arth hev you bin after, Colonel?” he said, contemplating Harold's filth-begrimed face, and hands, and clothes. “Is anything wrong up at the Castle, or is the cottage blown down?”

“No, no,” said Harold; “listen. You've heard

tell of the treasure that old Sir James de la Molle buried in the time of the Roundheads?"

"Yes, yes. I've heard tell of that. Hev the gale blown it up?"

"No, but by heaven I believe that I am in a fair way to find it."

George took another step back, remembering the tales that Mrs. Jobson had told, and not being by any means sure but that the Colonel was in a dangerous condition of lunacy.

"Give me a glass of something to drink, water or milk, and I'll tell you. I've been digging all night, and my throat's like a limekiln."

"Digging, why where?"

"Where? In Dead Man's Mount!"

"In Dead Man's Mount?" said George. "Well, blow me, if that ain't a funny place to dig at on a night like this," and, too amazed to say anything more, he went off to get the milk.

Harold drank three glasses of milk, and then sat down to tell as much of his moving tale as he thought desirable.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THE NIGHT WENT.

GEORGE sat opposite to him, his hands on his knees, the red nightcap on his head, and a comical expression of astonishment upon his melancholy countenance.

"Well," he said, when Harold had done, "blow me if that ain't a master one. And yet there's folks who say that there ain't no such thing as Prowidence—not that there's anything provided yet—p'raps there ain't nawthing there after all."

"I don't know if there is or not, but I'm going back to see, and I want you to come with me."

"Now?" said George rather uneasily. "Why, Colonel, that bain't a very nice spot to go digging about in on a night like this. I niver heard no good of that there place—not as I holds by sich talk myself," he added apologetically.

"Well," said the Colonel "you can do as you like, but I'm going back at once, and going down the hole, too; the gas must be out of it by now.

There are reasons," he added, "why, if this money is to be found at all, it should be found this morning. To-day is Christmas Day, you know."

"Yes, yes, Colonel; I knows what you mean. Bless you, I know all about it; the old Squire must talk to somebody; if he don't he'd bust, so he talks to me. That Cossey's coming for his answer from Miss Ida this morning. Poor young lady, I saw her yesterday, and she looks like a ghost, she du. Ah, he's a mean one, that Cossey. Laryer Quest warn't in it with him after all. Well, I cooked his goose for him, and I'd give summut to have a hand in cooking that banker chap's too. You wait a minute, Colonel, and I'll come along, gale and ghostesses and all. I only hope it mayn't be after a fool's arrand, that's all," and he retired to put on his boots. Presently he appeared again, his red night-cap still on his head, for he was afraid that the wind would blow a hat off, and carrying an unlighted lantern in his hand.

"Now, Colonel, I'm ready, sir, if you be;" and they started.

The gale was, if anything, fiercer than ever. Indeed, there had been no such wind in those parts for years, or rather centuries, as the condition of the timber by ten o'clock that morning amply testified.

"This here timest must be like that as the Squire tells us on in the time of King Charles, as blew the top of the church tower off on a Christmas night," shouted George. But Harold made no answer, and they fought their way onward without speaking any more, for their voices were almost inaudible. Once the Colonel stopped and pointed to the sky-line. Of all the row of tall poplars which he had seen bending like whips before the wind as he came along but one remained standing now, and as he pointed that vanished also.

Reaching the summer-house in safety, they entered, and the Colonel shut and locked the door behind them. The frail building was literally rocking in the fury of the storm.

"I hope the roof will hold," shouted George, but Harold took no heed. He was thinking of other things. They lit the lanterns, of which they now had three, and the Colonel slid down into the great grave he had so industriously dug, motioning to George to follow. This that worthy did, not without trepidation. Then they both knelt and stared down through the hole in the masonry, but the light of the lanterns was not strong enough to enable them to make out anything with clearness.

"Well," said George, falling back upon his

favourite expression in his amazement, as he drew his nightcapped head from the hole, "if that ain't a master one, I niver saw a masterer, that's all."

"What be you a-going to du now, Colonel? Hev you a ladder here?"

"No," answered Harold, "I never thought of that, but I've a good rope: I'll get it."

Scrambling out of the hole, he presently returned with a long coil of stout rope. It belonged to some men who had been recently employed in cutting boughs off such of the oaks as needed attention.

They undid the rope and let the end down to see how deep the pit was. When they felt that the end lay upon the floor they pulled it up. The depth from the hole to the bottom of the pit appeared to be about sixteen feet or a trifle more.

Harold took the iron crow, and having made the rope fast to it fixed the bar across the mouth of the aperture. Then he doubled the rope, tied some knots in it, and let it fall into the pit, preparatory to climbing down it.

But George was too quick for him. Forgetting his doubts as to the wisdom of groping about Dead Man's Mount at night, in the ardour of his burning curiosity he took the dark lantern, and holding it

with his teeth passed his body through the hole in the masonry and cautiously slid down the rope.

"Are you all right?" asked Harold in a voice tremulous with excitement, for was not his life's fortune trembling on the turn?

"Yes," answered George doubtfully. Harold looking down could see that he was holding the lantern above his head and staring at something very hard.

Next moment a howl of terror echoed up from the pit, the lantern was dropped upon the ground and the rope began to be agitated with the utmost violence.

In another two seconds George's red night-cap appeared followed by a face that was literally livid with terror.

"Let me up for Goad's sake," he gasped, "or he'll hev me by the leg!"

"He! who?" asked the Colonel, not without a thrill of superstitious fear, as he dragged the panting man through the hole.

But George would give no answer until he was out of the grave. Indeed had it not been for the Colonel's eager entreaties, backed to some extent by actual force, he would by this time have been

out of the summer-house also, and half way down the mount.

“What is it?” roared the Colonel in the pit to George, who shivering with terror was standing on its edge.

“It’s a blessed ghost, that’s what it is, Colonel,” answered George, keeping his eyes fixed upon the hole as though he momentarily expected to see the object of his fears emerge.

“Nonsense,” said Harold doubtfully. “What rubbish you talk. What sort of a ghost?”

“A white un,” said George, “all bones like.”

“All bones?” answered the Colonel; “why it must be a skeleton.”

“I don’t say that he ain’t,” was the answer, “but if he be, he’s nigh on seven foot high, and sitting airing of hisself in a stone bath.”

“Oh, rubbish,” said the Colonel. “How can a skeleton sit and air himself? He would tumble to bits.”

“I don’t know, but there he be, and they don’t call this here place ‘Dead Man’s Mount’ for naw-thing.”

“Well,” said the Colonel argumentatively, “a skeleton is a perfectly harmless thing.”

“Yes, if he’s dead maybe, sir, but this one’s alive, I saw him nod his head at me.”

"Look here, George," answered Harold, feeling that if this went on much longer he should lose his nerve altogether. "I'm not going to be scared. Great heavens, what a gust! I'm going down to see for myself."

"Very good, Colonel," answered George, "and I'll wait here till you come up again—that is if you iver du."

Thrice did Harold look at the hole in the masonry and thrice did he shrink back.

"Come," he shouted angrily, "don't be a fool, get down here and hand me the lantern."

George obeyed with evident trepidation. Then Harold scrambled through the opening and with many an inward tremor, for there is scarcely a man on the earth who is really free from supernatural fears, descended hand over hand. But in so doing he managed to let the lantern fall and it went out. Now as any one will admit this was exceedingly trying. It is not pleasant to be left alone in the dark and underground in the company of an unknown "spook." He had some matches, but what between fear and cold it was some time before he could get a light. Down in this deep place the rush of the great gale reached his ears like a faint and melancholy sighing, and he heard other tapping

noises, too, or he thought he did, noises of a creepy and unpleasant nature. Would the matches never light? The chill and death-like damp of the place struck to his marrow and the cold sweat poured from his brow. Ah! at last! He kept his eyes steadily fixed upon the lantern till he had lit it and the flame was burning brightly. Then with an effort he turned and looked round him.

And this is what he saw.

There, three or four paces from him, in the centre of the chamber of Death sat or rather lay a figure of Death. It reclined in a stone chest or coffin, like a man in a hip bath which is too small for him. The bony arms hung down on either side, the bony limbs projected towards him, the great white skull hung forward over the massive breast bone. It moved, too, of itself, and as it moved the jaw-bone tapped against the breast and the teeth clacked gently together.

Terror seized him while he looked, and, as George had done, he turned to fly. How could that thing move its head? The head ought to fall off.

Seizing the rope, he jerked it violently in the first effort of mounting.

“Hev he got yew, Colonel?” sung out George

above; and the sound of a human voice brought him back to his senses.

"No," he answered as boldly as he could, and then setting his teeth, turned and tottered straight at the Horror in the chest.

He was there now, and holding the lantern against the thing, examined it. It was a skeleton of enormous size, and the skull was fixed with rusty wire to one of the vertebræ.

At this evidence of the handiwork of man his fears almost vanished. Even in that company he could not help remembering that it is scarcely to be supposed that spiritual skeletons carry about wire with which to tie on their skulls.

With a sigh of relief he held up the lantern and looked round. He was standing in a good-sized vault or chamber, built of rubble stone. Some of this rubble had fallen in to his left; but otherwise, though the workmanship showed that it must be of extreme antiquity, the stone lining was still strong and good. He looked upon the floor, and then for the first time saw that the nodding skeleton before him was not the only one. All round lay remnants of the dead. There they were, stretched out in the form of a circle, of which the stone kist

was the centre.* One place in the circle was vacant; evidently it had once been occupied by the giant frame which now sat within the kist. Next he looked at the kist itself. It had all the appearance of one of those rude stone chests in which the very ancient inhabitants of this island buried the ashes of their cremated dead. But, if this was so, whence came the un-cremated skeletons?

Perhaps a subsequent race or tribe had found the chamber ready prepared, and used it to bury some among them who had fallen in battle. It was impossible to say more, especially as with one exception there was nothing buried with the skeletons which would assist to identify their race or age. That exception was a dog. A dog had been placed by one of the bodies. Evidently from the position

* At Bungay, in Suffolk, there stood a mound or tumulus, on which was a windmill. Some years ago the windmill was pulled down, and the owner of the ground wishing to build a house upon its site, set to work to cart away the mound. His astonishment may be conceived when he found in the earth a great number of skeletons arranged in circles. These skeletons were of large size, and a gentleman who saw them informed me that he measured one. It was that of a man who must have been nearly seven feet high. The bones were, unhappily, carted away and thrown into a dyke. But no house has been built upon the resting-place of those unknown warriors.

of the bones of its master's arms he had been left to his last sleep with his hand resting on the hound's head.

Bending down, Harold examined the seated skeleton more closely. It was, he discovered, accurately jointed together with strong wire. Clearly this was the work of hands which were born into the world long after the flesh on those mighty bones had crumbled into dust.

But where was the treasure? He saw none. His heart sank as the idea struck him that he had made an interesting archæological discovery, and that was all. Before undertaking a closer search he went under the hole and holloed to George to come down, as there was nothing but some bones to frighten him.

This the worthy George was at length with much difficulty persuaded to do.

When at last he stood beside him in the vault, Harold explained to him what the place was and how ridiculous were his fears, without however succeeding in allaying them to any considerable extent.

And really when one considers the position it is not wonderful that George was scared. For they were shut up in the bowels of a place which had for centuries owned the reputation of being haunted, faced by a nodding skeleton of almost superhuman

size, and surrounded by various other skeletons all "very fine and large," while the most violent tempest that had visited the country for years sighed away outside.

"Well," he said, his teeth chattering, "if this ain't the masterest one that iver I did see." But here he stopped, language was not equal to the expression of his feelings.

Meanwhile Harold, with a heart full of anxiety, was turning the lantern this way and that in the hope of discovering some traces of Sir James's treasure, but nought could he see. There to the left the masonry had fallen in. He went to it and pulled aside some of the stones. There was a cavity behind, apparently a passage, leading no doubt to the secret entrance to the vault, but he could see nothing in it. Once more he searched. There was nothing. Unless the treasure was buried somewhere, or hidden away in the passage, it was non-existent.

And yet what was the meaning of that jointed skeleton sitting in the stone bath? It must have been put there for some purpose, probably to frighten would-be plunderers away. Could he be sitting on the money? He rushed to the chest and looked through the bony legs. No, his pelvis rested on the stone bottom of the kist.

"Well, George, it seems we're done," said Harold, with a ghastly attempt at a laugh. "There's no treasure here."

"Maybe it's underneath that there stone corn bin," suggested George, whose teeth were still chattering. "It should be here or hereabouts, surely."

This was an idea. Helping himself to the shoulder-blade of some deceased hero, Harold, using it as a trowel, began to scoop away the soft sand upon which the stone chest stood. He scooped and scooped manfully, but he could not come to the bottom of the kist.

He stepped back and looked at it. It must be one of two things—either the hollow at the top was but a shallow cutting in a great block of stone, or the kist had a false bottom.

He sprang at it. Seizing the giant skeleton by the spine, he jerked it out of the kist and dropped it on one side in a bristling bony heap. Just as he did so there came so furious a gust of wind that, buried as they were in the earth, they literally felt the mound rock beneath it. Instantly it was followed by a frightful crash overhead.

George collapsed in terror, and for a moment Harold could not for the life of him think what had happened. He ran to the hole and looked up.

Straight above him he could see the sky, in which the first cold lights of dawn were quivering. Mrs. Massey's summer-house had been blown bodily away, and the "ancient British Dwelling Place" was once more open to the sky, as it had been for centuries.

"The summer-house has gone, George," he said. "Thank goodness that we were not in it, or we should have gone too."

"Oh Lord, sir," groaned the unhappy George, "this is an awful business. It's like a judgment."

"It might have been if we had been up above instead of safe down here," he answered. "Come, bring that other lantern."

George roused himself, and together they bent over the now empty kist, examining it closely.

The stone bottom was not of quite the same colour as the walls of the chest, and there was a crack across it. Harold felt in his pocket and drew out his knife, which had at the back of it one of those strong iron hooks that are used to extract stones from the hoofs of horses. This hook he worked into the crack and managed before it broke to pull up a fragment of stone. Then, looking round, he found a long sharp flint among the rubbish where the wall had fallen in. This he inserted in the hole and they both levered away at it.

Half of the cracked stone came up a few inches, far enough to allow them to get their fingers underneath it. So it *was* a false bottom.

"Catch hold," gasped the Colonel, "and pull for your life."

George did as he was bid, and setting their knees against the hollowed stone, they tugged till their muscles cracked.

"It's a-moving," said George. "Now thin, Colonel."

Next second they both found themselves on the flat of their backs. The stone had given with a run.

Up sprang Harold like a kitten. The broken stone was standing edgeways in the kist. There was something soft beneath it.

"The light, George," he said hoarsely.

Beneath the stone were some layers of rotten linen.

Was it a shroud, or what?

They pulled the linen out by handfuls. One! two! three!

Oh, great heaven!

There, under the linen, were row on row of shining gold coins set edgeways.

For a moment everything swam before Harold's eyes, and his heart stopped beating. As for George, he muttered something inaudible about its being a "master one," and collapsed.

With trembling fingers Harold managed to pick out two pieces of gold which had been disturbed by the upheaval of the stone, and held them to the light. He was a skilled numismatist, and had no difficulty in recognising them. One was a beautiful three-pound piece of Charles I., and the other a Spur Rial of James I.

That proved it. There was no doubt that this was the treasure hidden by Sir James de la Molle. He it must have been also who had conceived the idea of putting a false bottom to the kist and setting up the skeleton to frighten marauders from the treasure, if by any chance they should enter.

For a minute or two the men stood staring at each other over the great treasure which they had unearthed in that dread place, shaking with the reaction of their first excitement, and scarcely able to speak.

“How deep du it go?” said George at length.

Harold took his knife and loosed some of the top coins, which were very tightly packed, till he could move his hand in them freely. Then he pulled out handful after handful of every sort of gold coin. There were Rose Nobles of Edward IV.; Sovereigns and Angels of Henry VII. and VIII.; Sovereigns, Half-Sovereigns and gold Crowns of Edward VI.;

Sovereigns, Rials, and Angels of Mary; Sovereigns, Double Crowns and Crowns of Elizabeth; Thirty-shilling pieces, Spur Rials, Angels, Unites and Laurels of James I.; Three-pound pieces, Broads, and Half Broads of Charles I., some in greater quantity and some in less; all were represented. Handful after handful did he pull out, and yet the bottom was not reached. At last he came to it. The layer of gold pieces was about twenty inches broad by three feet six long.

"We must get this into the house, George, before any one is about," gasped the Colonel.

"Yes, sir, yes, for sure we must; but how be we a-going to carry it?"

Harold thought for a minute, and then acted thus. Bidding George stay in the vault with the treasure, which he was with difficulty persuaded to do, he climbed the improvised rope ladder, and got in safety through the hole. In his excitement he had forgotten about the summer-house having been carried away by the gale, which was still blowing, though not with so much fury as before. The wind-swept desolation that met his view as he emerged into the dawning light broke upon him with a shock. The summer-house was clean gone, nothing but a few uprights remained of it; and fifty yards away

he thought he could make out the crumpled shape of the roof. Nor was that all. Quite a quarter of the great oaks which were the glory of the place were down, or splintered and ruined.

But what did he care for the summer-house or the oaks now? Forgetting his exhaustion, he ran down the slope and reached the house, which he entered as softly as he could by the side door. Nobody was about yet, or would be for another hour. It was Christmas Day, and not a pleasant morning to get up on, so the servants would be sure to lie-a-bed. On his way to his bed-room he peeped into the dining-room, where he had fallen asleep on the previous evening. When he had woke up, it may be remembered, he lit a candle. This candle was now flaring itself to death, for he had forgotten to extinguish it, and by its side lay the paper from which he had made the great discovery. There was nothing in it, of course, but somehow the sight impressed him very much. It seemed months since he awoke to find the lamp gone out. How much may happen between the lighting of a candle and its burning away! Smiling at this trite reflection, he blew that light out, and, taking another, went to his room. Here he found a stout hand-bag, with which he made haste to return to the Mount.

"Are you all right, George?" he shouted down the hole.

"Well, Colonel, yes, but not sorry to see you back. It's lonesome like down here with these deaders."

"Very well. Look out! There's a bag. Put as much gold in it as you can lift comfortably, and then make it fast to the rope."

Some three minutes passed, and then George announced that the bagful of gold was ready. Harold hauled away, and with a considerable effort brought it to the surface. Then, lifting the bag on to his shoulder he staggered with it to the house. In his room stood a massive sea-going chest, the companion of his many wanderings. It was about half full of uniforms and old clothes, which he bundled unceremoniously on to the floor. This done, he shot the bagful of shining gold, as bright and uncorrupted now as when it was packed away two and a half centuries ago, into the chest, and returned for another load.

About twenty times did he make this journey. At the tenth something happened.

"Here's a writing, sir, with this lot," shouted George. "It was packed away in the money."

He took the "writing," or rather parchment, out

of the mouth of the bag, and put it in his pocket unread.

At length the store, enormous as it was, was exhausted.

"That's the lot, sir," shouted George as he sent up the last bagful. "If you'll kindly let down that there rope, I'll come up, too."

"All right," said the Colonel, "put the skeleton back first."

"Well, sir," answered George, "he looks wonderful comfortable where he lay, he du, so if you're agreeable I think I'll let him be."

Harold chuckled, and presently George arrived, covered with filth and perspiration.

"Well, sir," he said, "I never did think that I should get dead tired of handling gold coin, but it's a rum world, and that's a fact. Well, I niver, and the summer-house gone, and jist look at thim there oaks. Well, if that beant a master one."

"You never saw a masterer, that's what you were going to say, wasn't it? Well, and take one thing with another, nor did I, George, if that's any comfort to you. Now look here, just cover over this hole with some boards and earth, and then come in and get some breakfast. It's past eight o'clock and the gale is blowing itself out. A merry Christmas to

you, George!" and he held out his hand, covered with cuts, grime and blood.

George shook it. "Same to you, Colonel, I'm sure. And a merry Christmas it is. God bless you, sir, for what you've done to-night. You've saved the old place from that banker chap, that's what you've done; and you'll hev Miss Ida, and I'm durned glad on it, that I am. Lord! won't this make the Squire open his eyes," and the honest fellow brushed away a tear and fairly capered with joy, his red nightcap waving on the wind.

It was a strange and beautiful sight to see the solemn George capering thus in the midst of that storm-swept desolation.

Harold was too moved to answer, so he shouldered his last load of treasure and limped off with it to the house. Mrs. Jobson and her talkative niece were up now, but they did not happen to see him, and he reached his room unnoticed. He poured the last bagful of gold into the chest, smoothed it down, shut the lid and locked it. Then as he was, covered with filth and grime, bruised and bleeding, his hair flying wildly about his face, he sat down upon it, and from his heart thanked heaven for the wonderful thing that had happened to him.

So exhausted was he that he nearly fell asleep

as he sat, but remembering himself rose, and taking the parchment from his pocket cut the faded silk with which it was tied and opened it.

On it was a short inscription in the same crabbed writing which he had seen in the old Bible that Ida had found.

It ran as follows:

“Seeing that the times be so troublous that no man can be sure of his own, I, Sir James de la Molle, have brought together all my substance in money from wheresoever it lay at interest, and have hid the same in this sepulchre, to which I found the entry by a chance, till such time as peace come back to this unhappy England. This have I done on the early morn of Christmas Day, in the year of our Lord 1643, having ended the hiding of the gold while the great gale was blowing.

“JAMES DE LA MOLLE.”

Thus on a long gone Christmas Day, in the hour of a great wind, was the gold hid, and now on this Christmas Day, when another great wind raged overhead, it was found again, in time to save a daughter of the house of de la Molle from a fate sore as death.

CHAPTER XX.

IDA GOES TO MEET HER FATE.

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

whom we had cherished struck us with a serpent-fang of treachery and left the poison to creep upon our heart. One way or another it has been with most of us, that long night of utter woe, and all will own that it is a ghastly thing to face.

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

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

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

Ida turned and closed the shutters; the sight of the tempest affected her strained nerves almost beyond bearing. She began to walk up and down the big room, flitting like a ghost from end to end and back again, and again back. What could she do? What should she do? Her fate was upon her: she could no longer resist the inevitable—she must marry him. And yet her whole soul revolted from the act with an overwhelming fierceness which astonished even herself. She had known two girls who had married people whom they did not like, being at the time, or pretending to be, attached to somebody else, and she had observed that they accommodated themselves to their fate with considerable ease. But it was not so with her; she was fashioned of another clay, and it made her faint to think of what was before her. And yet the prospect was one on which she could expect little sympathy. Her own father, although personally he disliked the man whom she must marry, was clearly filled with amazement that she should prefer Colonel Quaritch, middle-aged, poor, and plain, to Edward Cossey—handsome, young, and rich as Croesus. He

could not comprehend or measure the extraordinary gulf which her love dug between the two. If, therefore, this was so with her own father, how would it be with the rest of the world?

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

She did not know—how should she?—that at this very moment her prayer was being answered, and that her lover was then, even as she prayed, lifting the broken stone and revealing the hoard of ruddy gold. But so it was; she prayed in despair and agony of mind, and the prayer carried on the wild wings of the night brought a fulfilment with it. Not in vain were her tears and supplications, for even now the deliverer delved among

“The dust and awful treasures of the dead,”

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

And then, chilled and numb in body and mind,

she crept into her bed again and at last lost herself in sleep.

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

Presently her father came in.

"What a gale," he said, "what a gale! Upon my word I began to think that the old place was coming down about our ears, and the wreck among the trees is dreadful. I don't think there can have been such a wind since the time of King Charles I., when the top of the tower was blown right off the church. You remember I was showing you the entry

about it in the registers the other day, the one signed by the parson and old Sir James de la Molle. The boy who has just come up with the letters tells me he hears that poor old Mrs. Massey's summer-house on the top of Dead Man's Mount has been blown away, which is a good riddance for Colonel Quaritch. Why, what's the matter with you, dear? How pale you look!"

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

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

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

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

She made no answer but busied herself about

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

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

"Ten o'clock?" she said faintly.

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

She lifted her head and looked him full in the face, and then paused. He had a cup of tea in his hand, and held it in the air half way to his mouth, while his whole face showed the over-mastering anxiety with which he was awaiting her reply.

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't quite understand you," he said; "these things are generally considered matters for congratulation."

But for all he might say and all that he might urge in his mind to the contrary, he did more or less understand what her outburst meant. He could not but know that it was the last outcry of a broken spirit. In his heart he realised then, if he had never clearly realised it before, that this proposed marriage was a thing hateful to his daughter, and his conscience pricked him sorely. And yet—and yet—it

was but a woman's fancy—a passing fancy. She would become reconciled to the inevitable as women do, and when her children came she would grow accustomed to her sorrow, and her trouble would be forgotten in their laughter. And if not, well it was but one woman's life which would be affected, and the very existence of his race and the very cradle that had nursed them from century to century were now at stake. Was all this to be at the mercy of a girl's whim? No! let the individual suffer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In the vestibule, sir."

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

The maid went.

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

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

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

CHAPTER XXI.

GEORGE IS SEEN TO LAUGH.

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

a start, and a sudden flush of colour came upon his pale face.

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

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

“I understand, Mr. Cossey, that you have come to hear my daughter’s final decision on the matter of the proposal of marriage which you have made and renewed to her. Now, of course, this is a very important question, very important indeed, and it is one with which I cannot presume even to seem to interfere. Therefore, I shall without comment leave my daughter to speak for herself.”

“One moment before she does so,” Mr. Cossey interrupted, drawing indeed but a poor augury of success from Ida’s icy looks. “I have come to renew my offer and to take my final answer, and I beg Miss de la Molle to consider how deep and sincere

must be that affection which has endured through so many rebuffs. I know, or at least I fear, that I do not occupy the place in her feelings that I should wish to, but I look to time to change this; at any rate I am willing to take my chance. As regards money, I repeat the offer which I have already made."

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

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

"Absolutely."

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

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

"You are really most generous," went on Ida, in the same bitter tone, the irony of which made her father wince, for he understood her mood better than did her lover. "I only regret that I cannot

appreciate such generosity more than I do. But it is at least in my power to give you the return which you deserve. So I can no longer hesitate, but once and for all——”

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

“What the dickens——” began the Squire, and at that moment George, who was leading, knocked at the door.

“You can’t come in now,” roared the Squire; “don’t you see that we are engaged?”

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

“I tell you that it must keep, sir,” said the old gentleman, working himself into a rage. “Am I not to be allowed a moment’s privacy in my own house? I wonder at your conduct, Colonel Quaritch,

in forcing your presence upon me when I tell you that it is not wanted."

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

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

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

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

By this time Ida had recovered herself. She seemed to feel that her lover had something to say which concerned her deeply—probably she read it in his eyes.

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

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

"Oh, very well, since my daughter insists on it,

pray come in," and he bowed. "If such an intrusion falls in with your ideas of decency it is not for me to complain."

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

There was a general gasp of astonishment.

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

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

Ida had sunk into a chair.

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

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

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

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

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

"But I have," answered the Colonel quietly. "I remember right, the last of the original de la Molles left a will in which he specially devised this treasure, hidden by his father, to your ancestor. That it is the identical treasure I am fortunately in a position to prove by this parchment," and he laid upon the table the writing he had found with the gold.

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

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

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

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

Here Harold and George turned to go. She waved them back imperiously, and began speaking

before any one could interfere, taking up her speech where she had broken it off when she caught sight of the Colonel and George coming up the steps.

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

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

"Listen," said Ida, rising from her chair, her dark eyes flashing as the shadow of all the shame and agony that she had undergone rose up within her mind. "Listen, Mr. Cossey," and she pointed her finger at him; "this is the history of our connection. Some months ago I was so foolish as to ask your help in the matter of the mortgages which your bank was calling in. You then practically made terms that if it should at any time be your wish I should become engaged to you; and I, seeing no option, accepted. Then, in the interval, while it was inconvenient to you to enforce those terms, I gave my affection elsewhere. But when you, having deserted the lady who stood in your way—no, do not interrupt me, I know it, I know it all, I know it from her own lips—came forward and claimed my promise, I was forced to consent. But a loophole

of escape presented itself and I availed myself of it. What followed? You again became possessed of power over my father and this place, you insulted the man I loved, you resorted to every expedient that the law would allow to torture my father and myself. You set your lawyers upon us like dogs upon a hare, you held ruin over us and again and again you offered me money, as much money as I wished, if only I would sell myself to you. And then you bided your time, leaving despair to do its work.

“I saw the toils closing round us. I knew that if I did not yield my father would be driven from his home in his old age, and that the place he loved would pass to strangers — would pass to you. No, father, do not stop me, I *will* speak my mind!

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

knowing you for what you are, I—I despise you. That is all I have to say.”

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

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

As for Edward Cossey, he had shrunk back involuntarily beneath the volume of her scorn, till he stood with his back against the panelled wall. His face was white as a sheet; despair and fury shone in his dark eyes. Never had he desired this woman more fiercely than he did now, in the moment when he knew that she had escaped him for ever. In a sense he was to be pitied, for passion tore his heart in twain. For a moment he stood thus. Then with a spring rather than a step, he advanced across the room till he was face to face with Harold, who, with Ida still half fainting in his arms, and her head upon his shoulder, was standing on the further side of the fireplace.

“Damn you,” he said, “I owe this to you—you

half-pay adventurer," and he lifted his arm as though to strike him.

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Cossey," answered the Squire, with his politest and most old-fashioned bow, "whatever sympathy I may have felt for you is being rapidly alienated by your manner. I told you that my daughter must speak for herself. She has spoken

very clearly indeed, and, in short, I have absolutely nothing to add to her words."

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

Again the Squire bowed, and his bow was a study in itself. You do not see such bows now-a-days.

"One minute, Mr. Cossey," he said very quietly, for it was one of his peculiarities to become abnormally quiet in circumstances of real emergency, "and then I think that we may close this painful

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

it. Perhaps as we grow old we grow worldly also, and you and your agents pressed me very hard, Mr. Cossey. Still I have always told you that my daughter was a free agent and must decide for herself, and therefore I owe you no apology on this score. So much then for the question of your engagement to Miss de la Molle. It is done with.

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

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

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

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

“What are you making that noise about?” asked his master sternly. “This is no laughing matter.”

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

“Now, look here,” said the Squire, “don’t you stand talking all day about things you don’t understand. That’s the way you waste time. You be off and look after this gold; it should not be left alone, you know. We will come down presently to Molehill,

for I suppose that is where it is. No, I can't stop to hear the story now, and besides I want Colonel Quaritch to tell it to me."

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

"George," halloed his master after him, but George did not stop. He had a trick of deafness when the Squire was calling, that is if he wanted to go somewhere else.

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

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

"Beg pardon, Squire."

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

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

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

"Same to you, Squire, I'm sure, same to you," said George, pulling off his cap. "Yes, yes, we've

had some bad years, what with poor Mr. James and that Quest and Cossey (he's the master varmint of the lot he is), and the bad times, and Janter, and the Moat Farm and all. But, bless you, Squire, now that there'll be some ready money and no debts, why, if I don't make out somehow so that you all get a good living out of the place I'm a Dutchman. Why, yes, it's been a bad time and we're a-getting old, but there, that's how it is, the sky almost allus clears toward night-fall. God Almighty hev a mind to let one down easy, I suppose."

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

And the honest fellow went.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHRISTMAS CHIMES.

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

On reaching the vestibule he found Harold and Ida standing side by side as though they were being drilled. It was impossible to resist the conclusion

that they had suddenly assumed that attitude because it happened to be the first position into which they could conveniently fall.

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

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

"Quaritch," answered the Squire, "I have already in your presence told Mr. Cossey under what circumstances I was favourably inclined to his proposal, so I need not repeat all that. As regards your means, although they would have been quite insufficient to avert the ruin which threatened us, still you have, I believe, a competence, and owing to your wonderful and most providential discovery the fear of ruin seems to have passed away. It is owing to you that this discovery, which by the way I want to hear all about, has been made; had it not been for you it never would have been made at all, and therefore I certainly have no right to say anything more about

your means. As to your age, well, after all forty-four is not the limit of life, and if Ida does not object to marrying a man of those years, I cannot object to her doing so. With reference to your want of occupation, I think that if you marry Ida this place will, as times are, keep your hands pretty full, especially when you have an obstinate donkey like that fellow George to deal with. I am getting too old and stupid to look after it myself, and besides things are so topsy-turvy that I can't understand them. There is one thing more that I want to say: I forbade you the house. Well, you are a generous-minded man, and it is human to err, so I think that perhaps you will understand my action and not bear me a grudge on that account. Also, I dare say that at the time, and possibly at other times, I said things I should be sorry for if I could remember what they were, which I can't, and if so, I apologise to you as a gentleman ought when he finds himself in the wrong. And so I say God bless you both, and I hope you will be happy in life together; and now come here, Ida, my love, and give me a kiss. You have been a good daughter all your life, and so Quaritch may be sure that you will be a good wife too."

Ida did as she was bid. Then she went over to her lover and took his hand, and he kissed her on

the forehead. And thus after all their troubles they finally ratified the contract.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

But when he goes the country side will lose a man of whom they will not see the like again, for the breed is dead or dying; a man whose very prejudices, inconsistencies, and occasional wrong-headed violence will be held, when he is no longer here, to have been endearing qualities. And for manliness, for downright English God-fearing virtues, for love of Queen, country, family and home, they may search in vain to find his equal among the cosmo-

politan Englishmen of the dawning twentieth century. His faults were many, and at one time he went near to sacrificing his daughter to save his house, but he would not have been the man he was without them.

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

* * * * *

They kissed, and it was done.

Out from the church tower in the meadows broke with clash and clangour a glad sound of Christmas bells. Out it swept over layer, pittle and fallow, over river, plantain, grove and wood. It floated down the valley of the Ell, it beat against Dead Man's Mount (henceforth to the vulgar mind more haunted than ever), it echoed up the castle's Norman towers and down the oak-clad vestibule. Away over the common went the glad message of Earth's Saviour, away high into the air, startling the

rooks upon their airy courses, as though the iron notes of the World's rejoicing would fain float to the throned feet of the World's Everlasting King.

Peace and goodwill! Ay and happiness to the children of men while their span is, and hope for the Beyond, and heaven's blessing on holy love and all good things that are. This was what those liquid notes seemed to say to the most happy pair who stood hand in hand in the vestibule and thought on all they had escaped and all that they had won.

* * * * *

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

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

"Upon my word," said the Squire when he had done, "I think I am beginning to grow superstitious in my old age. Hang me if I don't believe it was the finger of Providence itself that pointed out those letters to you. Anyway, I'm off to see the spoil.

Run and get your hat, Ida, my dear, and we will all go together."

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

CONCLUSION.

GOOD-BYE.

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

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

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

Thus was the gold safely housed. Upon being weighed its value was found to be about fifty-three thousand pounds of modern money. But as some of the coins were exceedingly rare, and of great worth to museums and collectors, this value was considerably increased, and the treasure was ultimately sold for fifty-six thousand two hundred and fifty-four pounds. Only Ida kept back enough of the choicest coins to make a gold waistband or girdle and a necklace for herself, destined no doubt in future days to form the most cherished heirloom of the Quaritch family.

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

claims, and the property in the gold passed to the Squire, subject to the payment of the succession duty which he would have been called upon to meet had he inherited a like sum from a cousin at the present time.

And so it came to pass that when the mortgage money was due it was paid to the last farthing, capital and interest, and Edward Cossey lost his hold upon Honham for ever.

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

If after leaving the gilded saloons aforesaid you should happen to wander through the London streets, you may meet another character in the history. You may see a sweet pale face, still stamped with a childlike roundness and simplicity, but half hidden

in the coarse hood of the nun. You may see her, and if you care to follow you may find what is the work wherein she seeks her peace. It would shock you; but it is her work of mercy and loving kindness and she does it unflinchingly. Among her sister nuns there is no one more beloved than sister Agnes. So good-bye to her also.

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

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

Quaritch.

VERIFICAT
2007



VERIFICAT
2017

VERIFICAT
1987

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

BIBLIOTECA
CENTRALĂ
UNIVERSITARĂ "CAROL I"
BUCUREȘTI