

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## 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 dispatched 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, toward stanching 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, that he had been struck by about a hundred pellets out of the three hundred or so 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 the shot.

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

The colonel nodded. He had had some experience of shot wounds, and the present one 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 that 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 that she understood guns. It is a shocking accident."

Just then one of the doctors came running up the lawn carrying a box of instruments, and followed by Belle Quest; and in another minute was at work. He was a quick and skillful surgeon, and having announced that the patient was not dead, at once set to work 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 probable that he will. It will depend upon the extent of the injuries, and whether or not they have extended to the spine. If he does live he will probably be paralyzed to some extent, and he will certainly lose the hearing of the right ear."

When she heard this Belle sunk down upon a chair overwhelmed, and 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 and stood in front of her and 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 murderer, Belle," he said, solemnly. "And you are a lunger, 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 that this man will have to lie in this house until he recovers or dies, and that you will help to nurse him. Well, I will move none of your murderous weapons 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 I would injure a wounded man?"

"I do not know," he answered, with a shrug, "and so go 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 got Edward Cossey, dead or alive—and he looked more like death than life—up to the room prepared for him, the colonel, seeing that he could be of no further use, left him with a view of going at once 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. Finding 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 lots of 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 as yes. At any rate she covered her face with her hands.

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

Accordingly, having picked up his gun from the spot where it had fallen from the hands of Mrs. Quest, he started for the castle.

And then it was that for the first time there flashed upon his mind the extraordinary importance of this dreadful accident in its bearing upon his own affairs. If Cossey died he could not marry Ida, that was clear. That 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."

Now, Harold Quaritch was as simple and unsuspicious 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 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 for 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 had, he remembered, 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 God that he did not, for somehow we are not always as 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 had been known to happen, and it would be impossible to prove that it had not happened in this case. If it was an attempted murder it was very cleverly managed, because nobody could prove that it was not accidental. But could it be that that soft, beautiful, baby-faced woman had on the spur of the moment taken advantage of his wounded 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 was at the castle. The squire was out, but Ida was in, and he was shown into the drawing room with 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?

She came in and shook hands with him.

"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."

"What?" 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 he will die."

They looked at each other, and each read in the eyes of the other the thought which passed through their brain. 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, and to him also the story was told, and, to judge from the expression of his face, he thought it a serious one enough. If Edward Cossey died, the mortgages over the Honham property would, as he thought, of course 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 Mole well knew he had little mercy to expect. This was serious enough, and what was still more serious was that all the bright prospects in which he had for some days been basking, of the re-establishment of his family upon a surer basis than it had occupied for generations, would vanish like a vision. Now, he was not more worldly-minded than other men, but he did most fondly cherish the natural desire to see the family fortunes once more in the ascendant. The projected marriage between his daughter and Edward Cossey would have most fully brought this about, and however much he might in his secret heart distrust the man himself, and doubt whether the match was 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 signed and yielded. Dinner was rather a melancholy feast, for the squire was preoccupied with his own thoughts, and Ida had not much to say, while, so far as the colonel was concerned, the recollection of the tragedy which 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 would walk into Basingham to inquire how the wounded man was getting on, and shortly afterward he started, leaving his daughter and the colonel alone.

They went into the drawing room and talked about indifferent things. No word of love passed between them; no word, indeed, that could bear even an affectionate significance, and yet every sentence they said carried a message with it, and was as heavy with unuttered passion as a bee with honey. For they loved each other dearly, and love is a thing that cannot be concealed by lovers from each other. Like the air impalpable, it is like the air surrounding, and, to those who breathe it, it is necessary and real.

It was happiness to him merely to sit beside her and hear her speak, and watch the changes of her face, and the lamp light playing upon her hair, and it was happiness to her to know that he was sitting there and watching. For the most beautiful thing about deep affection is its accompanying sense of perfect companionship and rest, a sense that nothing else in this life can give, and which, like a lifting cloud, reveals a glimpse of the white peaks of that heavenly peace that we cannot hope to tread 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 entered.

"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 XXX.

## IDA RECAPT.

The two great doctors came, and the two great doctors pocketed their hundred guinea fee 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, and they both agreed that the treatment of their humble 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. While he was in the vestibule telling what he had to tell to Mr. de la Mole and Ida, a man whom he recognized as one of Mr. Quest's clerks rang the bell. 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 Mole, 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 with 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 unwilling, he did so.

"Dear sir," began the squire, reading the letter aloud—

"I enclose you will find the usual formal notices calling in the sum of thirty thousand pounds recently advanced upon mortgage of the Honham estate by Edward Cossey, Esq. These mortgages have passed into my possession for value received, and it is now my desire to realize 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 money, I shall be very glad to do so, 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 realize by foreclosure."

"I am, dear sir, yours truly,

"W. QUEST.

"James de la Mole, Esq., J. P."

"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 departing, saying that he would call in again in the 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 those mortgages when Cossey & 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 most 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."