

Colonel Quaritch

By

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COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

A TALE OF COUNTRY LIFE

CHAPTER I

HAROLD QUARITCH MEDITATES

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

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

He was a peculiar and rather battered looking individual, apparently over forty years of age, and yet bearing upon him that unmistakable stamp of dignity and self-respect which, if it does not exclusively belong to, is still one of the distinguishing attributes of the English gentleman. In face he was ugly, no other word can express it.

Here were not the long mustachios, the almond eyes, the aristocratic air of the Colonel of fiction--for our dreamer was a Colonel. These were--alas! that the truth should be so plain--represented by somewhat scrubby sandy-coloured whiskers, small but kindly blue eyes, a low broad forehead, with a deep line running across it from side to side, something like that to be seen upon the busts of Julius Caesar, and a long thin nose. One good feature, however, he did possess, a mouth of such sweetness and beauty that set, as it was, above a very square and manly-looking chin, it had the air of being ludicrously out of place.

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

Nor was the old lady peculiar in this respect, for plain as the countenance of Colonel Harold Quaritch undoubtedly was, people found something very taking about it, when once they became accustomed to its rugged air and stern regulated expression. What that something was it would be hard to define, but perhaps the nearest approach to the truth would be to describe it as a light of purity which, notwithstanding the popular idea to the contrary, is quite as often to be found upon the faces of men as upon those of women. Any person of discernment looking on Colonel Quaritch must have felt that he was in the presence of a good man--not a prig or a milksop, but a man who had

attained by virtue of thought and struggle that had left their marks upon him, a man whom it would not be well to tamper with, one to be respected by all, and feared of evildoers. Men felt this, and he was popular among those who knew him in his service, though not in any hail-fellow-well-met kind of way. But among women he was not popular. As a rule they both feared and disliked him. His presence jarred upon the frivolity of the lighter members of their sex, who dimly realised that his nature was antagonistic, and the more solid ones could not understand him. Perhaps this was the reason why Colonel Quaritch had never married, had never even had a love affair since he was five-and-twenty.

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

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

himself by leaning over a gate. It is, though a great many people will not believe it, one of the most delightful and certainly one of the cheapest refreshments in the world.

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

It had risen before him in all sorts of places and at all sorts of times; in his sleep, in his waking moments, at mess, out shooting, and even once in the hot rush of battle. He remembered it well--it was at El Teb. It happened that stern necessity forced him to shoot a man with his pistol. The bullet cut through his enemy, and with a few convulsions he died. He watched him die, he could not help doing so, there was some fascination in following the act of his own hand to its dreadful conclusion, and indeed conclusion and commencement were very near together. The terror of the sight, the terror of what in defence of his own life he was forced to do, revolted him even in the heat of the fight, and even then, over that ghastly and distorted face, another face spread itself like a mask, blotting it out from view--that woman's face. And now again it re-rose, inspiring him with the rather recondite reflections as to the immutability of things and impressions with which this domestic record opens.

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

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

Yes, with a little bow she had passed on, and he watched her walking

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

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

Perhaps it was the thought of this one woman's face, the woman he had once seen walking down the drift, her figure limned out against the

stormy sky, that led him to think of the other face, the face hidden in the madhouse. At any rate, with a sigh, or rather a groan, he swung himself round from the gate and began to walk homeward at a brisk pace.

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

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

Colonel Quaritch followed this drift till he came to the high road, and then turned. A few minutes' walk brought him to a drive opening out of the main road on the left as he faced towards Boisingham. This drive, which was some three hundred yards long, led up a rather sharp slope to his own place, Honham Cottage, or Molehill, as the villagers called it, a title calculated to give a keen impression of a neat

spick and span red brick villa with a slate roof. In fact, however, it was nothing of the sort, being a building of the fifteenth century, as a glance at its massive flint walls was sufficient to show. In ancient times there had been a large Abbey at Boisingham, two miles away, which, the records tell, suffered terribly from an outbreak of the plague in the fifteenth century. After this the monks obtained ten acres of land, known as Molehill, by grant from the de la Molle of the day, and so named either on account of their resemblance to a molehill (of which more presently) or after the family. On this elevated spot, which was supposed to be peculiarly healthy, they built the little house now called Honham Cottage, whereto to fly when next the plague should visit them.

And as they built it, so, with some slight additions, it had remained to this day, for in those ages men did not skimp their flint, and oak, and mortar. It was a beautiful little spot, situated upon the flat top of a swelling hill, which comprised the ten acres of grazing ground originally granted, and was, strange to say, still the most magnificently-timbered piece of ground in the country side. For on the ten acres of grass land there stood over fifty great oaks, some of them pollards of the most enormous antiquity, and others which had, no doubt, originally grown very close together, fine upstanding trees with a wonderful length and girth of bole. This place, Colonel Quaritch's aunt, old Mrs. Massey, had bought nearly thirty years before when she became a widow, and now, together with a modest income of two hundred a year, it had passed to him under her will.

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

Behind the house to the north there was no view, and for a good reason, for here in the very middle of the back garden rose a mound of large size and curious shape, which completely shut out the landscape. What this mound, which may perhaps have covered half an acre of

ground, was, nobody had any idea. Some learned folk write it down a Saxon tumulus, a presumption to which its ancient name, "Dead Man's Mount," seemed to give colour. Other folk, however, yet more learned, declared it to be an ancient British dwelling, and pointed triumphantly to a hollow at the top, wherein the ancient Britishers were supposed to have moved, lived, and had their being--which must, urged the opposing party, have been a very damp one. Thereon the late Mrs. Massey, who was a British dwellingite, proceeded to show with much triumph /how/ they had lived in the hole by building a huge mushroom-shaped roof over it, and thereby turning it into a summer-house, which, owing to unexpected difficulties in the construction of the roof, cost a great deal of money. But as the roof was slated, and as it was found necessary to pave the hollow with tiles and cut surface drains in it, the result did not clearly prove its use as a dwelling place before the Roman conquest. Nor did it make a very good summer house. Indeed it now served as a store place for the gardener's tools and for rubbish generally.