

## CHAPTER II

### THE COLONEL MEETS THE SQUIRE

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

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

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

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

Colonel Quaritch glanced up curiously to see who the owner of the great voice might be, and his eyes lit upon as fine a specimen of humanity as he had seen for a long while. The man was old, as his

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir, a very heavy loss."

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

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

"Oh, no, not Ida, she is alive and well, thank God. Her brother James. He went all through that wretched war which we owe to Mr. Gladstone, as I say, though I don't know what your politics are, and then caught a fever, or as I think got touched by the sun, and died on his way home. Poor boy! He was a fine fellow, Colonel Quaritch, and my only son, but very reckless. Only a month or so before he died, I wrote to him to be careful always to put a towel in his helmet, and he answered, in that flippant sort of way he had, that he was not going to turn himself into a dirty clothes bag, and that he rather liked the heat than otherwise. Well, he's gone, poor fellow, in the service of his country, like many of his ancestors before him, and there's an end of him."

And again the old man sighed, heavily this time.

"And now, Colonel Quaritch," he went on, shaking off his oppression with a curious rapidity that was characteristic of him, "what do you say to coming up to the Castle for your dinner? You must be in a mess here, and I expect that old Mrs. Jobson, whom my man George tells me you have got to look after you, will be glad enough to be rid of you for to-night. What do you say?--take the place as you find it, you

know. I believe that there is a leg of mutton for dinner if there is nothing else, because instead of minding his own business I saw George going off to Boisingham to fetch it this morning. At least, that is what he said he was going for; just an excuse to gossip and idle, I fancy."

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

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

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

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

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

By the time that the Colonel, having informed his housekeeper that he should not want any dinner, and hastily brushed his not too luxuriant locks, had reached the garden which lay behind the house, the Squire was nowhere to be seen. Presently, however, a loud halloa from the top of the tumulus-like hill announced his whereabouts.

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

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

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

"That's right. Never cut down a good tree if you can help it. I'm

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

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

"By Jove," said the Squire, "I never thought of that. It would be worth doing. Hulloo, it is twenty minutes past seven, and we dine at half past. I shall catch it from Ida. Come on, Colonel Quaritch; you don't know what it is to have a daughter--a daughter when one is late for dinner is a serious thing for any man," and he started off down

the hill in a hurry.

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

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

"Ay, it's a fine old place, Colonel, isn't it?" said the Squire, catching the exclamation of admiration that broke from his companion's lips, as a sudden turn brought them into line with the Norman ruin.

"History--that's what it is; history in stone and mortar; this is historic ground, every inch of it. Those old de la Molles, my ancestors, and the Boisseys before them, were great folk in their day, and they kept up their position well. I will take you to see their tombs in the church yonder on Sunday. I always hoped to be buried beside them, but I can't manage it now, because of the Act. However, I mean to get as near to them as I can. I have a fancy for the companionship of those old Barons, though I expect that they were a



roughish lot in their lifetimes. Look how squarely those towers stand out against the sky. They always remind me of the men who built them-- sturdy, overbearing fellows, setting their shoulders against the sea of circumstance and caring neither for man nor devil till the priests got hold of them at the last. Well, God rest them, they helped to make England, whatever their faults. Queer place to choose for a castle, though, wasn't it? right out in an open plain."

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

"Ah, yes, of course they could. It is easy to see that you are a soldier. They were no fools, those old crusaders. My word, we must be getting on. They are hauling down the Union Jack on the west tower. I always have it hauled down at sunset," and he began walking briskly again.

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

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

"You see I have practically rebuilt those two towers," said the Squire, pausing underneath the Norman archway. "If I had not done it," he added apologetically, "they would have been in ruins by now, but it cost a pretty penny, I can tell you. Nobody knows what stuff that old flint masonry is to deal with, till he tries it. Well, they will stand now for many a long day. And here we are"--and he pushed open a porch door and then passed up some steps and through a passage into an oak-panelled vestibule, which was hung with tapestry originally taken, no doubt, from the old Castle, and decorated with coats of armour, spear heads, and ancient swords.

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