

CHAPTER XXIX

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 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 a light like 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 that 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.