

CHAPTER XXX

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 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 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 astonishment. She felt, and he felt too, that the question as to how that gun went off was one which was best left uninquired 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."