CHAPTER XXXIX

THE COLONEL GOES TO SLEEP

The state of mind is difficult to picture which could induce a peaceable christian-natured individual, who had moreover in the course of his career been mixed up with enough bloodshed to have acquired a thorough horror of it, to offer to fight a duel. Yet this state had been reached by Harold Quaritch.

Edward Cossey wisely enough declined to entertain the idea, but the Colonel had been perfectly in earnest about it. Odd as it may appear in the latter end of this nineteenth century, nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to put his life against that of his unworthy rival. Of course, it was foolish and wrong, but human nature is the same in all ages, and in the last extremity we fall back by instinct on those methods which men have from the beginning adopted to save themselves from intolerable wrong and dishonour, or, be it admitted, to bring the same upon others.

But Cossey utterly declined to fight. As he said, he had had enough of being shot, and so there was an end of it. Indeed, in after days the Colonel frequently looked back upon this episode in his career with shame not unmingled with amusement, reflecting when he did so on the strange potency of that passion which can bring men to seriously entertain the idea of such extravagances.

Well, there was nothing more to be done. He might, it is true, have seen Ida, and working upon her love and natural inclinations have tried to persuade her to cut the knot by marrying him off-hand. Perhaps he would have succeeded, for in these affairs women are apt to find the arguments advanced by their lovers weighty and well worthy of consideration. But he was not the man to adopt such a course. He did the only thing he could do--answered her letter by saying that what must be must be. He had learnt that on the day subsequent to his interview with his rival the Squire had written to Edward Cossey informing him that a decided answer would be given to him on Christmas Day, and that thereon all vexatious proceedings on the part of that gentleman's lawyers had been stayed for the time. He could now no longer doubt what the answer would be. There was only one way out of the trouble, the way which Ida had made up her mind to adopt.

So he set to work to make his preparations for leaving Honham and this country for good and all. He wrote to land agents and put Molehill upon their books to be sold or let on lease, and also to various influential friends to obtain introductions to the leading men in New Zealand. But these matters did not take up all his time, and the rest of it hung heavily on his hands. He mooned about the place until he was tired. He tried to occupy himself in his garden, but it was weary work sowing crops for strange hands to reap, and so he gave it up.

Somehow the time wore on until at last it was Christmas Eve; the eve,

too, of the fatal day of Ida's decision. He dined alone that night as usual, and shortly after dinner some waits came to the house and began to sing their cheerful carols outside. The carols did not chime in at all well with his condition of mind, and he sent five shillings out to the singers with a request that they would go away as he had a headache.

Accordingly they went; and shortly after their departure the great gale for which that night is still famous began to rise. Then he fell to pacing up and down the quaint old oak-panelled parlour, thinking until his brain ached. The hour was at hand, the evil was upon him and her whom he loved. Was there no way out of it, no possible way? Alas! there was but one way and that a golden one; but where was the money to come from? He had it not, and as land stood it was impossible to raise it. Ah, if only that great treasure which old Sir James de la Molle had hid away and died rather than reveal, could be brought to light, now in the hour of his house's sorest need! But the treasure was very mythical, and if it had ever really existed it was not now to be found. He went to his dispatch box and took from it the copy he had made of the entry in the Bible which had been in Sir James's pocket when he was murdered in the courtyard. The whole story was a very strange one. Why did the brave old man wish that his Bible should be sent to his son, and why did he write that somewhat peculiar message in it?

Suppose Ida was right and that it contained a cypher or cryptograph

which would give a clue to the whereabouts of the treasure? If so it was obvious that it would be one of the simplest nature. A man confined by himself in a dungeon and under sentence of immediate death would not have been likely to pause to invent anything complicated. It would, indeed, be curious that he should have invented anything at all under such circumstances, and when he could have so little hope that the riddle would be solved. But, on the other hand, his position was desperate; he was quite surrounded by foes; there was no chance of his being able to convey the secret in any other way, and he /might/ have done so.

Harold placed the piece of paper upon the mantelpiece, and sitting down in an arm-chair opposite began to contemplate it earnestly, as indeed he had often done before. In case its exact wording should not be remembered, it is repeated here. It ran: "/Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly and wickedly done to death by rebel murderers, for nought happeneth but according to God's will. And now farewell, Edward, till we shall meet in heaven. My moneys have I hid, and on account thereof I die unto this world, knowing that not one piece shall Cromwell touch. To whom God shall appoint shall all my treasure be, for nought can I communicate./"

Harold stared and stared at this inscription. He read it forwards, backwards, crossways, and in every other way, but absolutely without result. At last, wearied out with misery of mind and the pursuit of a futile occupation, he dropped off sound asleep in his chair. This

happened about a quarter to eleven o'clock. The next thing he knew was that he suddenly woke up; woke up completely, passing as quickly from a condition of deep sleep to one of wakefulness as though he had never shut his eyes. He used to say afterwards that he felt as though somebody had come and aroused him; it was not like a natural waking. Indeed, so unaccustomed was the sensation, that for a moment the idea flashed through his brain that he had died in his sleep, and was now awakening to a new state of existence.

This soon passed, however. Evidently he must have slept some time, for the lamp was out and the fire dying. He got up and hunted about in the dark for some matches, which at last he found. He struck a light, standing exactly opposite to the bit of paper with the copy of Sir James de la Molle's dying message on it. This message was neatly copied long-ways upon a half-sheet of large writing paper, such as the Squire generally used. It's first line ran as it was copied:

"/Do not grieve for me, Edward, my son, that I am thus suddenly and wickedly done./"

Now, as the match burnt up, by some curious chance, connected probably with the darkness and the sudden striking of light upon his eyeballs, it came to pass that Harold, happening to glance thereon, was only able to read four letters of this first line of writing. All the rest seemed to him but as a blue connecting those four letters. They were:

D.....E.....a.....d

being respectively the initials of the first, the sixth, the eleventh, and the sixteenth words of the line given above.

The match burnt out, and he began to hunt about for another.

"D-E-A-D," he said aloud, repeating the letters almost automatically. "Why it spells '/Dead/.' That is rather curious."

Something about this accidental spelling awakened his interest very sharply--it was an odd coincidence. He lit some candles, and hurriedly examined the line. The first thing which struck him was that the four letters which went to make up the word "dead" were about equi-distant in the line of writing. Could it be? He hurriedly counted the words in the line. There were sixteen of them. That is after the first, one of the letters occurred at the commencement of every fifth word.

This was certainly curious. Trembling with nervousness he took a pencil and wrote down the initial letter of every fifth word in the message, thus:

Do not grieve for me, Edward my son, that I am thus suddenly and
D E a

wickedly done to death by rebel murderers, for naught happeneth

d m

but according to God's will. And now farewell, Edward, till we

a n

shall meet in heaven. My moneys have I hid, and on account thereof

s m o

I die unto this world, knowing that not one piece shall Cromwell

u n

touch. To whom God shall appoint shall all my treasure be, for

t a b

nought can I communicate.

c

When he had done he wrote these initials in a line:

DEadmansmountabc

He stared at them for a little--then he saw.

/Great heaven! he had hit upon the reading of the riddle./

The answer was:

"/Dead Man's Mount,"

followed by the mysterious letters A.B.C.

Breathless with excitement, he checked the letters again to see if by any chance he had made an error. No, it was perfectly correct.

"Dead Man's Mount." That was and had been for centuries the name of the curious tumulus or mound in his own back garden. It was this mount that learned antiquarians had discussed the origin of so fiercely, and which his aunt, the late Mrs. Massey, had roofed at the cost of two hundred and fifty pounds, in order to prove that the hollow in the top had once been the agreeable country seat of an ancient British family.

Could it then be but a coincidence that after the first word the initial of every fifth word in the message should spell out the name of this remarkable place, or was it so arranged? He sat down to think it over, trembling like a frightened child. Obviously, it was /not/ accident; obviously, the prisoner of more than two centuries ago had,

in his helplessness, invented this simple cryptograph in the hope that his son or, if not his son, some one of his descendants would discover it, and thereby become master of the hidden wealth. What place would be more likely for the old knight to have chosen to secrete the gold than one that even in those days had the uncanny reputation of being haunted? Who would ever think of looking for modern treasure in the burying place of the ancient dead? In those days, too, Molehill, or Dead Man's Mount, belonged to the de la Molle family, who had re-acquired it on the break up of the Abbey. It was only at the Restoration, when the Dofferleigh branch came into possession under the will of the second and last baronet, Edward de la Molle, who died in exile, that they failed to recover this portion of the property.
And if this was so, and Sir James, the murdered man, had buried his treasure in the mount, what did the mysterious letters A.B.C. mean? Were they, perhaps, directions as to the line to be taken to discover it? Harold could not imagine, nor, as a matter of fact, did he or anybody else ever find out either then or thereafter.

Ida, indeed, used afterwards to laughingly declare that old Sir James meant to indicate that he considered the whole thing as plain as A.B.C., but this was an explanation which did not commend itself to Harold's practical mind.