

CHAPTER XL

BUT NOT TO BED

Harold glanced at the clock; it was nearly one in the morning, time to go to bed if he was going. But he did not feel inclined to go to bed. If he did, with this great discovery on his mind he should not sleep. There was another thing; it was Christmas Eve, or rather Christmas Day, the day of Ida's answer. If any succour was to be given at all, it must be given at once, before the fortress had capitulated. Once let the engagement be renewed, and even if the money should subsequently be forthcoming, the difficulties would be doubled. But he was building his hopes upon sand, and he knew it. Even supposing that he held in his hand the key to the hiding place of the long-lost treasure, who knew whether it would still be there, or whether rumour had not enormously added to its proportions? He was allowing his imagination to carry him away.

Still he could not sleep, and he had a mind to see if anything could be made of it. Going to the gun-room he put on a pair of shooting-boots, an old coat, and an ulster. Next he provided himself with a dark lantern and the key of the summer-house at the top of Dead Man's Mount, and silently unlocking the back door started out into the garden. The night was very rough, for the great gale was now rising fast, and bitterly cold, so cold that he hesitated for a moment before making up his mind to go on. However, he did go on, and in another two

minutes was climbing the steep sides of the tumulus. There was a wan moon in the cold sky--the wind whistled most drearily through the naked boughs of the great oaks, which groaned in answer like things in pain. Harold was not a nervous or impressionable man, but the place had a spectral look about it, and he could not help thinking of the evil reputation it had borne for all those ages. There was scarcely a man in Honham, or in Boisingham either, who could have been persuaded to stay half an hour by himself on Dead Man's Mount after the sun was well down. Harold had at different times asked one or two of them what they saw to be afraid of, and they had answered that it was not what they saw so much as what they felt. He had laughed at the time, but now he admitted to himself that he was anything but comfortable, though if he had been obliged to put his feelings into words he could probably not have described them better than by saying that he had a general impression of somebody being behind him.

However, he was not going to be frightened by this nonsense, so consigning all superstitions to their father the Devil, he marched on boldly and unlocked the summer-house door. Now, though this curious edifice had been designed for a summer-house, and for that purpose lined throughout with encaustic tiles, nobody as a matter of fact had ever dreamed of using it to sit in. To begin with, it roofed over a great depression some thirty feet or more in diameter, for the top of the mount was hollowed out like one of those wooden cups in which jugglers catch balls. But notwithstanding all the encaustic tiles in the world, damp will gather in a hollow like this, and the damp alone

was an objection. The real fact was, however, that the spot had an evil reputation, and even those who were sufficiently well educated to know the folly of this sort of thing would not willingly have gone there for purposes of enjoyment. So it had suffered the general fate of disused places, having fallen more or less out of repair and become a receptacle for garden tools, broken cucumber frames and lumber of various sorts.

Harold pushed the door open and entered, shutting it behind him. It was, if anything, more disagreeable in the empty silence of the wide place than it had been outside, for the space roofed over was considerable, and the question at once arose in his mind, what was he to do now that he had got there? If the treasure was there at all, probably it was deep down in the bowels of the great mound. Well, as he was on the spot, he thought that he might as well try to dig, though probably nothing would come of it. In the corner were a pickaxe and some spades and shovels. Harold got them, advanced to the centre of the space and, half laughing at his own folly, set to work. First, having lit another lantern which was kept there, he removed with the sharp end of the pickaxe a large patch of the encaustic tiles exactly in the centre of the depression. Then having loosened the soil beneath with the pick he took off his ulster and fell to digging with a will. The soil proved to be very sandy and easy to work. Indeed, from its appearance, he soon came to the conclusion that it was not virgin earth, but worked soil which had been thrown there.

Presently his spade struck against something hard; he picked it up and held it to the lantern. It proved to be an ancient spear-head, and near it were some bones, though whether or no they were human he could not at the time determine. This was very interesting, but it was scarcely what he wanted, so he dug on manfully until he found himself chest deep in a kind of grave. He had been digging for an hour now, and was getting very tired. Cold as it was the perspiration poured from him. As he paused for breath he heard the church clock strike two, and very solemnly it sounded down the wild ways of the wind-torn winter night. He dug on a little more, and then seriously thought of giving up what he was somewhat ashamed of having undertaken. How was he to account for this great hole to his gardener on the following morning? Then and there he made up his mind that he would not account for it. The gardener, in common with the rest of the village, believed that the place was haunted. Let him set down the hole to the "spooks" and their spiritual activity.

Still he dug on at the grave for a little longer. It was by now becoming a matter of exceeding labour to throw the shovelfuls of soil clear of the hole. Then he determined to stop, and with this view scrambled, not without difficulty, out of the amateur tomb. Once out, his eyes fell on a stout iron crowbar which was standing among the other tools, such an implement as is used to make holes in the earth wherein to set hurdles and stakes. It occurred to him that it would not be a bad idea to drive this crowbar into the bottom of the grave which he had dug, in order to ascertain if there was anything within

its reach. So he once more descended into the hole and began to work with the iron crow, driving it down with all his strength. When he had got it almost as deep as it would go, that is about two feet, it struck something--something hard--there was no doubt of it. He worked away in great excitement, widening the hole as much as he could.

Yes, it was masonry, or if it was not masonry it was something uncommonly like it. He drew the crow out of the hole, and, seizing the shovel, commenced to dig again with renewed vigour. As he could no longer conveniently throw the earth from the hole he took a "skep" or leaf basket, which lay handy, and, placing it beside him, put as much of the sandy soil as he could carry into it, and then lifting shot it on the edge of the pit. For three-quarters of an hour he laboured thus most manfully, till at last he came down on the stonework. He cleared a patch of it and examined it attentively, by the light of the dark lantern. It appeared to be rubble work built in the form of an arch. He struck it with the iron crow and it gave back a hollow sound. There was a cavity of some sort underneath.

His excitement and curiosity redoubled. By great efforts he widened the spot of stonework already laid bare. Luckily the soil, or rather sand, was so friable that there was very little exertion required to loosen it. This done he took the iron crow, and inserting it beneath a loose flat stone levered it up. Here was a beginning, and having got rid of the large flat stone he struck down again and again with all his strength, driving the sharp point of the heavy crow into the

rubble work beneath. It began to give, he could hear bits of it falling into the cavity below. There! it went with a crash, more than a square foot of it.

He leant over the hole at his feet, devoutly hoping that the ground on which he was standing would not give way also, and tried to look down. Next second he threw his head back coughing and gasping. The foul air rushing up from the cavity or chamber, or whatever it was, had half poisoned him. Then not without difficulty he climbed out of the grave and sat down on the pile of sand he had thrown up. Clearly he must allow the air in the place to sweeten a little. Clearly also he must have assistance if he was to descend into the great hole. He could not undertake this by himself.

He sat upon the edge of the pit wondering who there was that he might trust. Not his own gardener. To begin with he would never come near the place at night, and besides such people talk. The Squire? No, he could not rouse him at this hour, and also, for obvious reasons, they had not met lately. Ah, he had it. George was the man! To begin with he could be relied upon to hold his tongue. The episode of the production of the real Mrs. Quest had taught him that George was a person of no common powers. He could think and he could act also.

Harold threw on his coat, extinguished the large stable lantern, and passing out, locked the door of the summer-house and started down the mount at a trot. The wind had risen steadily during his hours of work,

and was now blowing a furious gale. It was about a quarter to four in the morning and the stars shone brightly in the hard clean-blown sky. By their light and that of the waning moon he struggled on in the teeth of the raging tempest. As he passed under one of the oaks he heard a mighty crack overhead, and guessing what it was ran like a hare. He was none too soon. A circular gust of more than usual fierceness had twisted the top right out of the great tree, and down it came upon the turf with a rending crashing sound that made his blood turn cold. After this escape he avoided the neighbourhood of the groaning trees.

George lived in a neat little farmhouse about a quarter of a mile away. There was a short cut to it across the fields, and this he took, breathlessly fighting his way against the gale, which roared and howled in its splendid might as it swept across the ocean from its birthplace in the distances of air. Even the stiff hawthorn fences bowed before its breath, and the tall poplars on the skyline bent like a rod beneath the first rush of a salmon.

Excited as he was, the immensity and grandeur of the sight and sounds struck upon him with a strange force. Never before had he felt so far apart from man and so near to that dread Spirit round Whose feet thousands of rolling worlds rush on, at Whose word they are, endure, and are not.

He struggled forward until at last he reached the house. It was quite

silent, but in one of the windows a light was burning. No doubt its occupants found it impossible to sleep in that wild gale. The next thing to consider was how to make himself heard. To knock at the door would be useless in that turmoil. There was only one thing to be done --throw stones at the window. He found a good-sized pebble, and standing underneath, threw it with such goodwill that it went right through the glass. It lit, as he afterwards heard, full upon the sleeping Mrs. George's nose, and nearly frightened that good woman, whose nerves were already shaken by the gale, into a fit. Next minute a red nightcap appeared at the window.

"George!" roared the Colonel, in a lull of the gale.

"Who's there?" came the faint answer.

"I--Colonel Quaritch. Come down. I want to speak to you."

The head was withdrawn and a couple of minutes afterwards Harold saw the front door begin to open slowly. He waited till there was space enough, and then slipped in, and together they forced it to.

"Stop a bit, sir," said George; "I'll light the lamp;" and he did.

Next minute he stepped back in amazement.

"Why, what on arth hev you bin after, Colonel?" he said, contemplating

Harold's filth-begrimed face, and hands, and clothes. "Is anything wrong up at the Castle, or is the cottage blown down?"

"No, no," said Harold; "listen. You've heard tell of the treasure that old Sir James de la Molle buried in the time of the Roundheads?"

"Yes, yes. I've heard tell of that. Hev the gale blown it up?"

"No, but by heaven I believe that I am in a fair way to find it."

George took another step back, remembering the tales that Mrs. Jobson had told, and not being by any means sure but that the Colonel was in a dangerous condition of lunacy.

"Give me a glass of something to drink, water or milk, and I'll tell you. I've been digging all night, and my throat's like a limeskin."

"Digging, why where?"

"Where? In Dead Man's Mount!"

"In Dead Man's Mount?" said George. "Well, blow me, if that ain't a funny place to dig at on a night like this," and, too amazed to say anything more, he went off to get the milk.

Harold drank three glasses of milk, and then sat down to tell as much

of his moving tale as he thought desirable.