

COLONEL QUARITCH, V.C.

By H. EIDER HAGGARD

CHAPTER I.

SAROLD QUARITCH MEDITATES.

There are some things and faces which, when felt or seen for the first time, project themselves upon the minds like a sun image on a sensitive plate and there remain unalterably fixed. To take the case of a face— we may never see it again, or it may become the companion of our life, but there the picture is just as we first knew it, the same smile, the same look, unaffected and unaltered, reminding us in the midst of change of the absolutely ineflectible nature of every experience and aspect of our life. For that which has been is, since the past knows no change and no corruption, but lives eternally in its traces and completed self.

These are somewhat large words to be born of a small mind, but they rose up spontaneously in the mind of a soldierly looking man who was leaning, on the particular evening when this history opens, over a gate in an eastern country lane, staring vacantly at a ripe field of corn.

He was a peculiar and rather battered-looking individual, apparently over forty years of age, and yet bearing upon that amiable stamp of dignity and well respect which, if it does not exceedify beauty, is yet one of the distinguishing attributes of the English gentleman. In fact he was ugly, no other word can express it. He was not the long mustaches, the almond eyes, the aristocratic air of the colonel of fiction—for our Quaritch was a colonel. These were—as that the truth should be plain—represented by somewhat scrubby, sausai-colored whiskers, small but kindly blue eyes, a low broad forehead, with a deep line running across it from side to side, something like that to be seen upon the bust of Julius Caesar, and a long, thin nose. One good feature, however, he did possess, a mouth of such sweetness and beauty that, set as it was above a very square and manly looking chin, it had the air of being indifferently out of place. "Ump!" said his old aunt, Mrs. Massey (who had just died and left him what she has), on the occasion of her first introduction to him five-and-thirty years before, "Ump! Nature meant to make a pretty girl of you, and changed her mind after she had finished you. Well, you'll never better be a plain man than this ugly woman. There, go along boy, take your ugly face."

Now was the old lady popular in this respect, for plain as the countenance of Col. Sarold Quaritch undoubtedly was, people thought it was quite as often upon the faces of men as upon those of women. Any person of discernment in looking at Col. Quaritch must have felt that he was in the presence of a good man, not a prig or milksop, but a man who had attained to virility by thought and struggle that had left their mark upon his face, a man whom it would not be safe to tamper with, and one to be respected by all, and feared of evil doers. Men felt this, and he was popular among those who knew him in his service, though not in any half-fellow-kind of way. But among women he was not popular. As a rule, they both feared and disliked him. His presence jarred upon the frivolity of the lighter members of their sex, who dimly realized that his nature was antagonistic, and the more solid ones could not understand him. Perhaps this was the reason why Col. Quaritch had never married, had never even had a love affair since he was five and twenty.

And yet it was of a woman's face that he was thinking as he leaned over the gate and looked at the field of yellowing corn, undulating like a golden sea beneath the pressure of the wind.

Col. Quaritch had twice in his life been at Honnham before the present time, when he had come to abide there for good and all, once ten and once four years ago. His old aunt, Mrs. Massey, had a place in the village—a small place—called Honnham cottage, or Honnham castle, and he had on these two occasions been down there with her. Now Mrs. Massey was dead and buried, and had left him the property, and he had given up his desire to return to land of further prospects, and come to live at Honnham. This was his first evening in the place, for he had arrived by the last train on the previous night. All day he had been busy trying to get the horse a little straight, and now, thoroughly tired of the task, he was refreshing himself by leaning over a gate. It is, though, a great many people will not believe it, one of the most delightful refreshments in the world.

And then it was, as he leaned over the gate, that the image of a woman's face rose before his mind as it had been continually rising for the last five years. It was five years since he had seen it, and those five years he had spent in India and Egypt. It seemed but the other day that he had been leaning over this very gate, and had turned to see a young girl dressed in blue, with a spray of honeysuckle stuck in her hair, and a stick in her hand, walking leisurely down the lane. There was something about the girl's air that had struck him while she was a long way off—a dignity and a grace and a set of the shoulders, and then as she came nearer he saw the soft dark eyes and the waving brown hair that contrasted so strangely and effectively with the pale and stony face. It was not a beautiful face, for the nose was too large, and the mouth was not as straight as it might have been but there was a power about the broad brow and a force and a decided dash stamped upon the features which had impressed him strangely. Just as she arrived opposite to where he was standing, a gust of wind, for there was a stiff breeze, had blown the lady's hat off, taking it right over the hedge, and as, in duty bound, had scrambled into the field and fetched it for her, and she had thanked him with a quick smile and a light up of the brown eyes, and then passed on with a bow.

Yes, with a little bow she had passed on, and he had watched her departing down the long level drift, till she melted into the stormy sunset light, and was gone. When he returned to the cottage he had described, to his old aunt, and asked who she might be, to learn that her name was Ida de la Mole, which sounded like a name out of a novel, the only daughter of the old squire who lived at Honnham castle. And then next day he had left for India, and saw Ida de la Mole no more.

And now he wondered what had become of her. Probably she was married, a striking man, and had come to India to attract the notice of men. And after all, who could it matter to him? He was not a marrying man, and women as a class had little attraction for him, indeed he disliked them. It had been said that he had never married, and never even had a love affair since he was five-and-twenty, and that was true enough. Though he was not married, he, once before he was five-and-twenty, had very nearly taken that step. It was twenty years ago, and nobody quite knew the history, for in twenty years many things are forgotten. But there was a history, and a scandal, and the marriage was broken off almost on the very day before it was to have taken place. And after that it leaked out in the neighborhood—it was in Egypt—that the young lady, who by the way was a large heiress, had gone off her head, presumably in grief, and was confined in an asylum, for she was believed still to remain.

It was the thought of this one face, the woman he had once seen down the drift, her figure limned against the stormy sky, that led him to the other face, the face hidden in a shawl, with a such or

rather a gross, he swung himself round from the gate, and began walking homeward as a break jaws.

Shaking himself clear of his bad thoughts, Harold Quaritch turned round at his front door to contemplate the scene. The long, single storied house stood, as has been said, at the top of the rising land, and to the south and west and east commanded as beautiful a view as is to be seen in that country. There, a mile or so away to the south, situated in the midst of grassy grazing grounds, frowned the massive gateway of the old Norman castle. To the west, almost at the foot of the Moinehill, the ground broke in a steep bank clothed with timber, which led the eye down by slow descents into the beautiful valley of the Ell. Here the silver river wound its gentle way through lush and popular bordered marshes, where the cattle stand knee-deep in flowers, past quiet woodland houses through Housham Old Common, wavy looking even now, and brightened here and there with a dozen of golden gorse, till it was lost in the picturesqueness of red and russet woods which marked the ancient town. Look where you will, in the eastern countries, nothing is finer enough in its own way, whatever people whose imaginations are so weak that they require a mountain and a torrent to excite them into activity, may choose to say to the contrary.

Beyond the house to the north there was no view, and for a great reason, for here, in the very middle of the tea-garden, rose a mound of large size and curious shape, which completely shut the landscape out. What this mound, which may perhaps have covered half an acre of ground, was nobody was told. Some learned folk said that it was a Saxon tumulus, a presumption to which its ancient name, "Dead Man's Mount," seemed to give color. Other folk, however, yet more learned, declared that it was an ancient druidic dwelling, and pointed triumphantly to a hollow at the top, wherein the ancient druids were supposed to have moved, lived and had their being. When must, urged the opposing party, have it been a very damp one. Thereon, the late Mrs. Massey, who was a British dowsing, promised to show him by building a huge mushroom-shaped stool over it, and thereby turning it into a summer house, which, owing to the unexpected difficulties in the construction of the roof, cost a great deal of money. But the stool was stated, and as it was found necessary to support it, the result did not clearly prove us to be a dwelling place before the Roman conquest. Nor did it make a very good summer house. Indeed, it now served as a store place for the gardeners' tools and rubbish generally.

CHAPTER II.

THE COLONEL MEETS THE SQUIRE.

As Col. Quaritch was contemplating these various scenes and reflecting that on the whole he had done well to come and live at Honnham castle, he was startled by a loud voice shouting him from about twenty yards distance with such a peculiar vigor that he fairly jumped.

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

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

"Ah, I thought it was you. Always sell a military man, you know. Excuse me, but I am resting for a minute; this last pull is an unusually 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 the visitor emerged from the shadow of the trees into the sunless light which was playing on the terrace before the house.

Col. Quaritch glanced up curiously to see who the owner of the great voice might be, and his eyes lighted upon as fine a specimen of humanity as he had seen for a long while. The man was old, as his white hair showed, 70 perhaps, but that was the only sign of de-

The colonel meets the squire.
The colonel, wearing a top hat and a patterned coat, walks towards the squire, who is also in a top hat and coat. They appear to be in a garden setting with trees in the background.

reased as strongly fixed in his memory although he had scarcely spoken to her on that one occasion five long years ago. Col. Quaritch had been in Egypt, and had been ill there, and had come back to England.

The squire 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 Mole," he said, merely adding, "I had the pleasure of seeing her once, a good many years ago, when I was staying here for a few days with my aunt."

"Oh, no, 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, Col. Quaritch, and my only son, but, very recklessly. Only a month or so before he died I wrote to him to be careful always to put a towel in his bed, and he answered, in that flippant sort of way that he had, that he was not going to turn himself in a dirty clothes bag, and that rather liked the man than otherwise. Well, he's gone, poor fellow, in the service of his country, like many of his ancestors before him, and leaves an end of him."

And again the old man sighed, heavily.

"And now, Col. Quaritch," he went on, shaking off his depression 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, and, I expect that old Mrs. Johnson whom my George tells me you have to look after you, will be glad enough to be rid of you for to-night. What do you say? Take this place as you find it, you know, I know that it 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 Bovingham to fetch it this morning. At least, that is what he said that he was going for, just an excuse to gossip and idle, I fancy."

"Well, really I 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 dare say. Besides, you have no time to dress. By Jove, it's 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 old military men, very particular about his dress and personal appearance, and objected to going out to dinner in a slovenly coat. But, all the same, notwithstanding a feeling that he did not quite understand it, he would have probably even an American avowed to analyze—something between restlessness and curiosity, with a dash of magnetic attraction thrown in—of the letter of his service, and he went.

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

"That's right," hallooed the squire after him. "I'll meet you at the gate of the house. We had better go through the flats."

The colonel, having informed his housekeeper that he should not want any dinner, and hastily brushed his not too luxuriant hair, rejoined Mr. de la Mole.

They strolled along, stopping now and again to admire some particular oak or vine, casting all the while in a discursive manner, which, though it was somewhat aimless, was by no means without its charm. The squire was a capital companion for a silent man like Harold Quaritch, who liked to hear other people talk.

In this way they got down the slope, and passing through a couple of wheat fields came to a succession of broad meadows, somewhat sparsely timbered, through which the footpath ran right up to the grim gateway of the ancient castle, which now looked before them, outlined in red haze of the sunset light which was playing on the terrace before the house.

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