

Kate Coventry.

CHAPTER IX.

(CONTINUED.)

And where was Cousin Edward all the time? Why, at that particular instant, sword-point to sword-point with Colonel Bludger of the Dragoons, slightly wounded in two places—cool and wary, and seeming to enjoy, with a sort of fierce pleasure, such a safety-valve for excitement as a duel with one of the best fencers in Europe.

Cousin Edward was an altered man since he stood with the future Lady Horsingham in the moonlight. An evil counsellor is despair; and he had hugged that grim adviser to his heart. He had grown handsomer, indeed, than ever, but the wild eye, the haggard brow, and the deep lines about his mouth, spoke of days spent in fierce excitement—nights passed in reckless dissipation. He had never forgotten Lucy through it all, but even her image only goaded him to fresh extravagances—anything to deaden the sting of remembrance—anything to efface the maddening fact! So Cousin Edward, too became a Jacobite, and was there a daring scheme to be executed, a foolhardy exploit to be performed, life and limb to be risked without a question—who so ready and so reckless as handsome Ned Meredith?

In the course of their secret meetings and cabals, he became slightly acquainted with Sir Hugh Horsingham; and, with the inexplicable infatuation peculiar to a man in love, he took a pleasure in being near one so closely connected with Lucy, although that one was the very person who had deprived him of all he valued on earth. So it fell out that Sir Hugh Horsingham and Ned Meredith were supping at the Rose and Thistle, in close alliance, the table adjoining them being occupied by those staunch Hanoverians Colonel Bludger and Mr. Thornton.

Here's The Blackbird," said Cousin Edward, tossing off a huge goblet of Bordeaux, and looking round the room with an air of defiance as he proposed so well-known a toast. Sir Hugh was a man of a certain grim humor, as he drained his goblet and nodded to his companion, he added, "May the rats dance to his whistle, and the devil—that's you, Ned—take the hindmost!"

Colonel Bludger rose from his chair placed his cocked hat on his head, and turned the buckle of his sword belt in front. "The King!" he shouted, raising his hat with one hand and filling a bumper with the other. "The King!" he repeated, scowling fiercely at his two neighbors.

"Over the water!" roared Ned Meredith; and the Colonel, turning rapidly round, and mimicking his man, flung his cocked-hat right at Sir Hugh Horsingham's face. Swords were out in a second—thrust, parry, and return passed like lightning, but the bystanders separated the combatants; and Meredith, determining for the sake of Lucy that Sir Hugh should encounter no unnecessary danger, took the whole quarrel on himself, and arranged a meeting for the following morning with the redoubtable Colonel Bludger. Thus it was that while Lucy and her boy were basking in the summer sunshine, Cousin Edward was exhausting all his knowledge of swordsmanship in vain on leav-ers to get within that iron Colonel's guard. The duel was fought on the ground now occupied by Leicester Square, Sir Hugh and Mr. Thornton officiating as seconds, though, the latter being disabled from the effects of a recent encounter, they did not, as was usual in those days, fight to the death, merely *par se desarmurer*. Stripped to their shirts in breeches and silk stockings, with rapiers and pistols, and twice paused for breath by mutual consent, with no further damage than two slight wounds in Ned's sword arm.

"Very pretty practice," said Mr. Thornton, coolly taking a pinch of snuff, and offering his box to Sir Hugh; "I'm in despair at not being able to oblige you this fine morning."

"Some other time," replied Sir Hugh, with a grim smile, "I'd—ah—ah," he added, "Ned's down!"

"Sure enough, Cousin Edward was in the..."

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needed no longer to ask mamma 'what she was thinking of,' and the three would he seemed to a careless observer a happy family party—husband, wife and child. Oh, that it could but have been so!

In the meantime Sir Hugh was again, as usual, busied with his state intrigues and party politics, and absented himself for weeks together from the Hall; riding post to London night and day, returning at all sorts of unexpected hours, leaving again at a moment's notice, and otherwise comporting himself in his usual mysterious reserved manner. Yet those who knew him best opined there was something wrong about Sir Hugh. He was restless and preoccupied; his temper less easily excited about trifles than was his wont, but perfectly ungovernable when once he gave way to it. No man dared to question him. He had not a friend in the world who would have ventured to offer him a word of advice or consolation, but it was evident to his servants and his intimates that Sir Hugh was ill at ease. Who can tell the struggles that rent that strong, proud heart? Who could see beneath that cold surface, and read the intense feelings of love, hatred, jealousy, or revenge that smoldered below, stifled and kept down by the iron will, the stubborn indomitable pride? There is a deep meaning in the legend of that Spartan boy, who suffered the stolen fox to gnaw his very vitals, the while he covered him with his tunic, and preserved on his brave face a smile of unconcern. Most of us have a stolen fox somewhere; but the weak nature writhes and moans, and is delirious from its torment, while the bold unflinching spirit preserves a gallant bearing before the world, and scorns to be relieved from the tangle that are draining its very life away.

Whatever Sir Hugh saw or suspected, he said not a word to Lucy, nor was it until surmise had become certain that he forbade Cousin Edward the house. To him he would not condescend to explain his motives; he simply wrote to him to say, that on his return he should expect to find his guest had departed, and that he had sufficient reasons for requesting his visits might not be repeated. With his wife he was, if possible, more austere and morose than ever; so, once more, the Hall resumed its old aspect of cheerlessness and desolation, and its mistress went mooping about, more than ever miserable and broken-hearted. Such a state of things could not long go on; the visits forbidden openly took place by stealth, and the climax rapidly approached which was to result in the celebrated Dangerfield tragedy.

At this period there was set on foot another of those determined plots which, during the first two reigns of the house of Hanover, so constantly harassed that dynasty. Sir Hugh, of course, was a prime mover of the conspiracy, and was much in London and elsewhere, gathering intelligence, raising funds, and making converts to his opinions. Ned Meredith—having, it is to be presumed, all his energies occupied in his own private intrigues—had some-what withdrawn of late from the Jacobite party; and Sir Hugh heard, with his grim, unmoved smile, many a jest and innuendo levelled at the absentee.

One stormy winter's evening, the baronet, well armed, cloaked and booted, left his own house for the metropolis, accompanied by one trusty servant. He was bearing papers of importance, and was hurrying on to lay them, with the greatest despatch, before his fellow-conspirators. As the night was drawing on, Sir Hugh's horse shied away from a wild figure, looming like some specter in the fading light; and ere he had forced the animal back into the path, whom the rider at once recognized as an emissary he had often before employed to be the bearer of secret intelligence, and who, under an affectation of being half-witted, concealed much shrewdness of observation, and unimpeachable fidelity to the cause.

"Whip and spur, Sir Hugh—whip and spur," said the lad, who seemed flustered and confused with drink; "you may burst your best horse betwixt this and London, and all to get there before you're wanted. A dollar to drink, Sir Hugh, like Handsome Ned gave me this morning—a dollar to drink, and I'll save you a journey for the sake of the Bony White Rose, and the Bird with the Yellow Bill."

Sir Hugh scrutinised the lad with a piercing eye, flung him a crown from his purse, and...

of the drooping branches, and after removing his pistols from their holders, he spread his cloak over the heaving flanks of the heated animal. Habit is second nature, and he does not forget the good horse. He strides through the shrubberies, and across Lucy's garden, crushing with his heavy boot-heel the last flower that had lingered on into the winter. There is a light streaming from one of the windows in the gallery. Ha!—he may be right—he may not have returned in vain. For an instant a feeling of sickness comes over him, and he learns for the first time that he had cherished a hope he might be deceived.

He can let himself in by the garden-gate with his own pass-key. Ere he is aware he is tramping up the corridor in his heavy horseman's boots—his hand is on the door—there is a woman's shriek—and Sir Hugh's tall, dark figure fills the doorway of Lucy's sitting-room, where, alas! she is not alone, for the stern, angry husband is confronted by Ned Meredith!

Lucy cowers down in a corner of the room, with her face buried in her hands. Cousin Edward draws himself up to his full height, and looks his antagonist steadily in the face, but with an expression of calm despair, that seems to say Fate has now done her worst. Sir Hugh is cool, collected, and polite; nay, he can even smile; but he speaks strangely, almost in a whisper, and hisses through his set teeth. He has double-locked the door behind him, and turns to Cousin Edward with a grave, courteous bow.

"You have done me the honor of an unexpected visit, Mr. Meredith," he says; "I trust Lady Horsingham has entertained you hospitably! Pray do not stir, madam. Mr. Meredith, we are now quits; you saved my life when you encountered Colonel Bludger; I forbore from taking yours, when I had proofs that it was my right. We have now entered on a fresh account, but the game shall be fairly played. Mr. Meredith, you are a man of honor—yes, it shall be fairly played." Ned's lip quivered, but he bowed and stood perfectly still. "Lady Horsingham," continued Sir Hugh, "be good enough to hand me those tables; they contain a dice-box. Nay, Mr. Meredith, seeing Ned about to assist the helpless, frightened woman; 'when present at least, I expect my wife to obey me.' Lucy was forced to rise, and trembling in every limb, to present the tables to her lord. Sir Hugh placed the dice-box on the table, laid his pistols beside it, and, taking a seat, motioned to Cousin Edward to do the same. 'You are a man of honor, Mr. Meredith,' he repeated; 'we will throw three times, and the highest cast shall blow the other's brains out.' Lucy shrieked and rushed to the door; it was fast, and her husband forced her to sit down and watch the ghastly game.

"Good God, Sir Hugh!" exclaimed Cousin Edward, "this is too horrible—for your wife's sake—any reparation I can make, I will; but this is murder, deliberate murder!"

"You are a man of honor, Mr. Meredith," reiterated Sir Hugh. "I ask for no reparation but this—the chances are equal if the stakes are high. You are my guest, or rather, I should say, Lady Horsingham's guest. Begin." Cousin Edward's face turned ghastly pale; he took the box, shook it, hesitated, but the immovable eye was fixed on him; the stern lips repeated once more, "you are a man of honor," and he threw—'Four.' It was now Sir Hugh's turn. With a courteous bow he received the box, and threw—'Seven.' Again the adversaries cast, the one a six, the other a three; and now they were even in the ghastly match. Once more Cousin Edward shook the box, and the leaping dice turned up—'Eleven.' Lucy's white face stood out in the lamplight, as she watched with stony eyes that seemed to have lost the very power of sight.

"For God's sake, forego this frightful determination, Sir Hugh," pleaded Cousin Edward; "take my life in a fair field. I will offer no resistance; but you can hardly expect to outdo my throw, and nothing shall induce me to take advantage of it: think better of it, Sir Hugh, I entreat you."

"You are a man of honor, Mr. Meredith, and so am I," was the only reply, as Sir Hugh brandished the box aloft, and thundered it down on the table—'Sixes!' 'Good casting,' he remarked; and at the same instant, cocking the pistol nearest to him, discharged it full into his antagonist's bosom. The bullet sped through a delicate lace handkerchief, which he always wore there, straight and true into Cousin Edward's...

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successive generations; but guests and servants alike refuse to sleep again in that dreary wing, after the first trial. Every night, so surely as the old clock tolled out the hour of twelve, a rush of feet was heard along the passage—a window looking into the court was thrown open—a piercing scream from a woman's voice rang through the building—and those who were bold enough to look out averred that they beheld a white figure leap wildly into the air and disappear. Some even went so far as to affirm that drops of blood, freshly sprinkled, were found every morning on the pavement of the court. But no one ever doubted the Dangerfield ghost to be the nightly apparition of Lucy Lady Horsingham. At length, in my grandfather's time, certain boards being lifted to admit of fresh repairs in the accursed corridor, the silver-mounted guard of a rapier, stock and barrel a pistol, with a shred of lace, on which the letter 'L' was yet visible, were discovered by the workmen. They are in existence still. Whatever other remains accompanied them turned to dust immediately on exposure to the air. That dust was, however, religiously collected and buried in a mausoleum appropriated to the Horsinghams. Since then the ghost has been less troublesome; but most of his family have seen or heard it at least once in their lives. I confess, that if ever I lie awake at Dangerfield till the clock strikes twelve, I invariably stop my ears, and bury my head under the bed-clothes for at least a quarter of an hour. By these means I have hitherto avoided any personal acquaintance with the spectre; but nothing on earth would induce me to walk down that corridor at midnight, and risk a private interview with the Dangerfield ghost!

CHAPTER X.

As for spending a whole morning in the drawing-room with the ladies, it is what I cannot and will not submit to. Working and scandal and scandal and working, from half-past ten till two, is more than I can stand; so, the very first morning I was at Dangerfield, I resolved to break the chain at once, and do as I always meant to do for the future. Accordingly, immediately after breakfast I popped my bonnet on,—the lavender one, that had done a great deal of London work, but was still quite good enough for the country,—and started off for a walk all by myself, confiding my intentions to no one; as I well knew, if I did, I should have Aunt Deborah's 'Kate, pray don't overheat yourself, my dear. Do wrap yourself up, and take care not to catch cold,' and Lady Horsingham's sarcastic smile, and 'In my time, Miss Coventry, young ladies were not in the habit of trailing all over the country by themselves; but I expect soon to hear of their farming, and fishing, and shooting, I shouldn't wonder—not worse than hunting, at any rate. However, I say nothing,' and Cousin Amelia, with her lackadaisical sneer, and her avowal that 'she was not equal to walking,' and her offer to 'go as far as the garden with me in the afternoon.' So I tripped down the back of the staircase, and away to the stables, with a bit of sugar for Brilliant, who had arrived safely by the train, in company with White Stockings; and on through the kitchen-garden and the home-farm up to the free, fresh, breezy down.

I do enjoy a walk by myself, and it was the last chance I should have of one; for Cousin John was expected that very day, and when Cousin John and I are anywhere, of course we are inseparable. But I am sure an occasional stroll quite by one's self does one more good than anything. I think of such quantities of things that never occur to me at other times—fairies, brigands, knights, and damsels, and all sorts of wild adventures; and I feel so brave and determined, as if I could face anything in a right cause, and so good, and I make such excellent resolutions; and walk faster and faster, and get more and more romantic, like a goose, as I know I am.

Well, it was a beautiful morning, early in autumn—blue sky, light fleecy clouds, a sharp clear air from the north—the low country studded with corn-ricks, and alive with reapers, and cart-teams, cattle; a green valley below me, rich in fine old timber, and clothed with high thick hedgerows, concealing the sluggish river that stole softly away, and only gleamed out here and there to light up the distance; whilst above and around me stretched far and wide the vast expanse

situation. A man I had never seen but once in my life—and here I was lying in his arm (precious weight he must have found me), and looking up in his face like a child in its nurse's, and the usages of society making it incumbent on us both to attempt a sort of different conversation about the weather, and the country, and the beauty of the scenery, which the juxtaposition of our respective faces rendered ludicrous in the extreme.

'A tempting day for a walk, Miss—ah' (he didn't know my name—how should he?—and was now beginning to get very red, partly from the return of his constitutional shyness, and partly from the severity of his exertions). 'I hope your foot does not pain you quite so much; be good enough to lean a little more this way.' 'Four miles, how his arms must have ached! Whilst I replied somewhat in this fashion. 'Thank you, I'm better; I shall soon be able to walk, I think; this is indeed a lovely country. Don't you find me very heavy?' 'I think I could carry you a good many miles,' he said, quietly; and then seemed shocked at such an avowal, that he hardly opened his lips again, and put me down the very first time I asked him, and offered me his arm with an accession of confusion that made me feel quite awkward myself. Truth to tell, my ankle was not sprained, only twisted; and when the immediate pain wore off, I was pretty sound again, and managed, with the assistance of my new acquaintance's arm, to make a very good walk of it. So we plodded on quite sociably towards the Hall, and my friend took leave of me at the farm with a polite bow, and a sort of hesitating manner that most shy men possess, and which would lead one to infer they have always got something more to say that never is said. I knew I should be scolded if I avowed my accident to any of the family; besides, I did not quite fancy facing all the inquiries as to how I got home, and Cousin Amelia's sneers about errant damsel and wandering knights; so I stole quietly up to my room, bathed my foot in eau-de-cologne, and remained *perdu* till dinner-time, in despite of repeated messages from my aunts, and the arrival of Cousin John.

People may talk about country life, but it appears to me that a good many things are done, under the titles of pleasure and duty which belong in reality to neither, and that those who live entirely in the country inflict on themselves a great variety of unnecessary disagreeables, as they lose a great many of its quiet delights. Of all receipts for weariness, command me to a dinner-party of country neighbors by daylight—people who know each other just well enough to have opposite interests and secret jealousies—who arrive ill at ease in their smart dresses, to sit through a protracted meal with hot servants and forced conversation, till one young lady on her promotion being victimized at the pianoforte, enables them to yawningly observed; and welcome ten o'clock brings round the carriage and tipsy coachman, in order that they may enter on their long dark, drive home through lanes and byways which is only endurable from the consideration that the annual ordeal has been accomplished, and that they need not do it again till this time next year.

There was a dinner-party at Dangerfield regularly once a month, and this was a day Aunt Horsingham was great on these occasions, astonishing the neighbors as much with her London dresses as did Cousin Amelia with her London manners. We all assembled a few minutes earlier than usual in the drawing-room, so as to be ready to receive our guests, and great was the infliction of poor Aunt Deborah and my humble self. How they trooped in, one after another! Sir Brian and Lady Banneret, and Master Banneret, and two Misses Banneret. They were the great cards of the party, so Lady Horsingham kissed Lady Banneret and the young ladies, and opined Master Banneret was grown much to the indignation of the young gentleman, who, being an Oxonian, course considered himself a man. Sir Brian was a good-humored jolly old boy, with a loud laugh, and stood with his coat-tails tucked up, and his back to the empty fireplace, perfect ease and contentment: not so the lady; first she scrutinized everything Lady Horsingham had got on; then she took a view of the furniture, and specially marked one faded place in the carpet; lastly, she turned a curious and disappointed glance on myself. I accounted for the latter mark of displeasure by the becoming shade of a