

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD STORY.

"Here's a coal!" said John Garnet to himself, making an abortive effort to rouse that sufficiently convinced him he had overrated his strength.

"Why the devil couldn't I let her go on, and keep my own foolish tongue between my teeth? It's always the way with me. I speak, and then I'm sorry for it. Am I sorry for it now? I doubt if I am. She's the prettiest lass, for all her tawny skin, I've seen since I came out of the North, and there's no harm done after all. I wonder how long I shall be kept lying here? A week more, at least. Say a week. The time will pass all the quicker with this gipsy beauty to talk to, and if she do care for me a little more than is good for her, why I suppose she can't help it. No more can I. What eyes she has, and what hair! I could look in my heart to wish she was not quite handsome; but that's not my fault.

Lyn's a pretty name, though outlandish—much better than Waif. I shall call her Lyna when she comes back. It won't be long first, I'll wager a guinea!"

But he would have lost his guinea. Noon passed, and afternoon, and day drew to an end, but brought no Waif with its lengthening shadows. When his usual supper-time arrived, he began to grow fretful and impatient, as much perhaps from cravings of the stomach as the heart. A step in the passage, the bump of a tray against his door, restored him to good humor, but it was with a feeling of disappointment, keen enough to dull the vigorous appetites of convalescence, that he saw the skunt-cap and velvet gown of his host, instead of Waif with her scarlet draperies and getty gold-studded hair. When a girl has told a man she likes him, he always wants to hear the avowal again.

"My young friend," said Katerfelto, in a low grave voice to which he owed so much of his influence, "I have brought you to eat and drink, food plain and nourishing, drink that shall restore, and not inflame. The tongue is clean, the eye clear, the pulse full, if a little irregular. My coming into the room suddenly flurried you, no doubt. If you go on well through the night, to-morrow I shall pronounce you convalescent. I never speak without being sure. When Constantine Katerfelto uses the word 'convalescent,' a patient may order his boots to be blacked and his spurs cleaned."

"You've brought me through right well, Doctor," replied John Garnet, glancing at the door, you and Waif together. You must give the nurse some of the credit! Since been very careful and attentive. I think she has hardly let me for an hour at a time, till—till to-day.

How differently thirty and sixty look upon the absence of eighteen!

"Waif's a good girl," answered the Doctor, coolly, "and for a more child, shows a fair amount of intelligence. I am glad you are satisfied with her."

She does not ill to-day, I hope, he added the patient, eating, however, heartily enough, notwithstanding the anxiety to be inferred from his inquiry.

"Ah!" was the answer, "you know very little of Waif, or you would scarcely ask such a question. None of her race are over any more than the beasts of prey. They are, indeed, but it is like the wolf and the shekel, in some forest-den. Skill, science, experience, are of no avail. It's in the blood, nothing can cure them when they have once laid down. I've tried it a score of times, and failed."

"Is she a thoroughbred gipsy?" he asked, it was pleasant to talk of her, even to this unsympathizing old man.

"As the Queen of Sheba," assented the doctor. "Some day, when we are better acquainted, I may tell you more of her history; but I give not my friendship lightly," he added, with a scrutinizing glance from his eagle grey eyes, "it is offered only to those who owe me, or to whom I owe, a debt of gratitude."

"I am sure I ought to be grateful to you. I know Garnet, and so I am, but I can't seem to prove it till you get me off this bed, and out of this room. Then, Doctor, as up boldly. Say what you want, and you are my man!"

"You have laughed a noiseless laugh, peevishly at himself. "You owe me but little," said he, "perhaps you may live to repay me my debt than for the healing of a cough. Not that I mean to say the cough was a trifling one. I tell you honestly a surgeon would have given you up as hopeless, and you ought to be thankful, if you young men ever are thankful at you fell into my hands. No; for a treacherous fellow, in the prime of life, to let his fingers, as I guess, close about my pretty readily, I might do

whistle has cost us simply all we had, but not one of us ever complained; we bought our defeat too dear."

"I know you, John Garnet," answered Katerfelto. "You come of a trusty race."

"Know me!" repeated the other, "How did you find me out? I would have told you without hesitation, but you never asked my name—no more did Waif."

"I know a great many things," replied the charlatan. "In many ways you could not understand, unless you had studied, as I have, the hidden mysteries of Heaven and Earth, and of places under the Earth. I know that the Garnet lost titles and lands for the—for the Blackbird—we will say. I know that the last of them would leap from that bed, bandages and all, to burn powder and draw steel if the yellow beak did but so much as whistle from its garden in the South."

"You learned all that in the 'Annual Register' or the 'North Briton,'" said John Garnet, proudly, "but how did you guess I belonged to the family who have been so loyal, so constant, and proved themselves such—fools?"

Katerfelto smiled. "Fools," he replied, "are my special study. As the worm feeds the blackbird, so the fool feeds the philosopher. You are no fool notwithstanding, and yet I know all about you. There was a supper-party to-day—just—an altercation—a duel—without witnesses, mark you. When a man is killed under those circumstances, the law sometimes brings it in—murder!"

John Garnet turned pale. The truth of his host's surmises affected him no less than the consideration of the danger he had incurred. It did not strike him that Katerfelto's guesses, however shrewd, were the mere offspring of analogy and observation. A wounded man at midnight inferred an after-supper brawl, while the fact of his staggering into Deadman's Alley faint from loss of blood, alone and unassisted, argued the absence of seconds, one of whom would doubtless have conveyed his principal to a place of safety, while the identity of that principal must long since have become the talk of this town.

"You know everything," he murmured. "Everything—I wish you could tell me whether the poor fellow I ran through the bricket is alive."

For reasons of his own the charlatan was anxious to impress his patient with a conviction of his powerful character and superior intelligence.

"Not so," said he, with an air of extreme frankness. "I have no knowledge, for I have taken no trouble to learn. If I can spare the time to night, when the moon goes down, I will set those to work who shall bring me all the information I require in less than forty-eight hours."

John Garnet, though scarcely a model Christian, was a good Catholic. He crossed himself and faltered a feeble protest against the employment of evil spirits or unorthodox powers of the air.

"I had rather not get well at all," said he, "than be cured by magic or witchcraft! I would leave the house this minute if I believed you were more than a doctor! I'll wager a fair stake and risk my life any day, but I won't sit down to play for my soul!"

"Your soul!" echoed Katerfelto, with his characteristic laugh. "My young friend, what should I do with your soul if I won't? My concern is with men's bodies, their energies, their courage, and their intellect. I shall set you on your legs in a week, and you can carry your soul about with you, if you have one, wherever you like. In the meantime keep quiet, take your medicine, drugs of the veriest earth—curly; eat your food as I drink your post, prepared by no fairy hands, but those of a woman, real flesh and blood, with a human temper, worse, I dare say, than that of many average fends, and so get well. In a few days I will talk to you again on matters of business to our mutual advantage. Meantime I relegate you once more to the care of Waif."

His spirits rose at once, and he bade the charlatan good-night with an excess of cordiality not lost on that shrewd observer, who was as good as his word, for his voice could be heard in the passage bidding Waif hasten her house-work and watch by the patient till he slept, a mandate the gipsy girl obeyed to the letter, returning without delay to her former post, but taking up a station in the obscurity where John Garnet could not see her face. Neither did she vouchsafe a syllable of greeting or explanation, so that the patient felt uncomfortably hurt and perplexed.

"Have I offended you?" he asked at length, in an humble tone, contrasting preciously with the coldness of that in which she replied.

"Who am I, to be offended? My only business is to obey. The Patron bids me watch here till you sleep."

So he shut his eyes, yet not too tight, and scanned her the while covertly beneath their lids, thus detecting on her face, when she turned it towards him, a look of tender wistful longing, that told only too plainly the secret of her love.

seemed to say, "I am a match for the best of you, and profitable as is the victory, I am not sure but the real pleasure consists in the strife!"

The plot thickened with nightfall. He was hardly ready before a cautious tap made itself heard at the street door. Waif, watching her patient's slumbers, flew to admit the visitor, and was at her post again ere he had time to pay a single compliment on her good looks.

In his own opinion, this gentleman was a consummate judge of such matters. On the points of a horse, or a woman, he held no man so well qualified to give an opinion, and indeed had spent the greater part of his fortune in researches after speed and beauty. His accomplishments were those of his time and class. A better and bolder card-player than Lord Bellingher never held a trump. He cracked his bottle like an honest fellow without flinching, played tennis, danced a minuet to admiration, bowed and took snuff with inimitable grace, fenced beautifully, swore fearfully, and corrupted his mother tongue into a jargon only intelligible at Ranelagh or the Cocoa Tree.

When the cloak was thrown open in which this pargon was enveloped, Katerfelto did not fail to recognise in that worn, handsome face and attenuated form the most frequent and productive of his customers.

"Your lordship is welcome," said the Charlatan, with gracious dignity. "How liable is our poor glimmering of human science to error; the mistake of a decimal caused me to expect you nearly an hour ago."

"What? You know it!" replied the other, not without an oath. "Why, Katerfelto, you know everything! Yes, here I am. It's not very difficult to guess why. Have you found out anything more? Who is she? And what is she? How much longer am I to go on toasting her without so much as knowing her name, haunted by those clear, cold eyes, that proud, delicate face, that queenly shape and air? Tell me all about her, now at once! Here! I've brought you the staff in a bag. Look at it, man. Does it make your eyes shine and your mouth water? It cost me six hours' work to get that little purse together last night at the Cocoa Tree. Never were such cards! Never was such luck!"

"Fortune is a woman," answered the other. "Like all women, coy to be wooed, but grateful to be won."

"She hath played me more slippery tricks than I choose to count," laughed his lordship. "It may be that I solicit her too often, and trust her too fondly. Last night she did me a rare jade's turn! Look ye here, man; I had won a cool four thousand at piquet, and St. Leger wanted to leave off. I was always too strong for him at piquet. Well, sir, four thousand was no use to me, but eight would have taken my lady's diamonds out of pawn, and I offered him one more chance, double or quits."

"I know you did," observed Katerfelto with the utmost effrontery, "and left off the quits; I wish I had been at your lordship's elbow."

"I wish you had!" replied the other: "for I believe you are the devil himself, or in close league with him. However, I did not come here to prate about my luck, and I have little time to waste; my lady thinks I am at Ranelagh. She's to meet me there later. Now business is business, my good friend; what have you done for me?"

"Little and yet enough," answered the other. "You will meet somebody at Ranelagh to-night; you are to be wary and cautious. Do not seem to recognise her till you find her unattended. You may then speak three words, no more. It is her express stipulation. They will be answered in due time. She goes to Ranelagh early and remains only an hour."

"Then I had better be off!" exclaimed his lordship, pressing a purse into Katerfelto's hand. "What? are you so ceremonious? Must you needs come to the door yourself? Where's the pretty gipsy lass? I saw her not ten minutes ago. I say, Katerfelto, if ever you sell her back into bondage, let me have the refusal. By Jupiter! if I was to put that girl into velvet and brocade I could take the town by storm."

"Your lordship does her too much honor," answered Katerfelto, bowing profoundly while he opened the door, but there was a malicious twinkle in his eye, and a curl of scorn about the corners of his mouth, to belie the outward show of deference with which he dismissed his visitor.

The latter had been gone but a few minutes ere a sedan-chair was set down at the end of Deadman's Alley, and a lady closely veiled, carrying a riding mask, not over her face, but in her hand, alighted with some trepidation, peering up and down the passage, as if fearful of being observed, while she made for the red lamp in Katerfelto's window. This visitor was also admitted after a little cautious tap, but unlike her predecessor, looked with scorn rather than admiration on Waif's jark locks and flashing glances. "Tell the Doctor, child," said she, "that I am not to be disturbed while I consult him, and beware of eaves-

dropping. I do not wish to be overheard of a run of luck with the cards that should last a week."

"And I wore it out in a night," she complained. "Whist, ombre, piquet, and three-card loo, I have never risen a winner but once since I came here last. You dare not deceive me, Doctor; nay, you would not deceive a woman, I am sure. Can you—couldn't you put me in the way of winning a game or two? I protest I shall have to pawn my diamonds else."

No one knew better than the doctor that this expedient had been resorted to long ago, and her ladyship was at present wearing paste; but he did not say so.

"Are you willing to learn?" he asked, with his quiet sarcastic smile. "An hour's practice every day for ten days would make your ladyship independent of chance and all its fluctuations. Chance, forsooth! there's no such thing. Do you think I trust to chance when I direct your actions and forecast your future? Fate is the ruling power of the universe; but science and skill, the quick brain and the ready hand—these may control Fate."

On a weak mind so high-sounding a sentence, meaning nothing, took no small effect. She blushed, she smirked, she bit her lips, she hesitated.

"I should like it prodigiously," she said, with a nervous laugh, "if—if it wasn't dishonest, you know; and—and if it couldn't be found out!"

He took a pack of cards from a drawer. "Observe my fingers," he began, but she interrupted him with a scream.

"Not now!" she exclaimed; "some other time, Doctor. I'm so frightened! I'm sure I heard somebody at the door. It is cheating, you know. Besides, I must be at Ranelagh in an hour, and I have to dress, all but my head, that was done this morning. I wish I hadn't come. La! I know I could never find courage. Let me out, please. This is between ourselves, of course. Shall I find you to-morrow night at the same time?"

Assuring her that he never left his post, Katerfelto ushered her ladyship with much ceremony to the door, which was opened by Waif, on whom the departing visitor found nothing better to bestow than a look of supreme indifference and scorn.

Not so the next comer. Hardly had the chairman, who worked at each other as they took up their precious burden, moved a dozen paces, when a heavy step was heard in Deadman's Alley, and a burly figure, that seemed to ignore all considerations of secrecy and disguise, stopped at Katerfelto's door to thump till it shook again.

Undoing the fastening, hastily as she might, Waif found herself confronted by a stout, middle-aged person, in a rusty black riding suit, who looked as if he had been taking hasty refreshment, washed down by strong potations, as indeed was the case.

Parson Gale—for it was none other—had ridden post from Exmoor to London on receiving the news of his brother's death in a midnight brawl. Arrived in the metropolis, he lost no time in communicating with the officers of justice; and from the particulars thus furnished, satisfied himself that the affray took place without witnesses, and that the survivor had escaped. The Parson swore a great oath that he would avenge the crime, and if the perpetrator was above ground, hunt him down to death. His difficulty was to find out where John Garnet lay concealed. Every day, and all day long, he pursued his inquiries, without success. Tired and hungry, while sitting at his tavern supper he chanced to hear Katerfelto spoken of as a cunning man, for whom there were secrets in this world or the next; and having ascertained the locality of Deadman's Alley, finished his bottle, and started without delay on his search.

The apparition of Waif, in answer to his summons, may have surprised him a little; but when a pretty lass was in question, Parson Gale was never at a loss; he recovered his astonishment in time to chuck her under the chin, and bestow on her a most unwelcome caress. The girl's eyes glittered, and her lithe fingers stole to the knife at her girdle. He caught her by the wrist, and kissed her again. She disengaged herself, with one dexterous twirl, and pushed rather than ushered this unwelcome admirer into the presence of Katerfelto, muttering, in her own outlandish tongue, something that sounded less like a blessing than a curse.

When roused to wrath, it was her nature to resent an insult or an injury on the spot; but if immediate retaliation seemed impossible, to wait for an opportunity with untiring patience, not to be diverted from its purpose by any consideration of clemency or forgiveness.

"If I can learn something about you," she thought, "I shall know when and where to strike. Before our reckoning is over, you will wish your lips had been seared with a red-hot iron, rather than laid to mine against my will!" Then casting one loving look towards the chamber in which John Garnet was sleeping, she took up her post at the door of the surgery, and listened eagerly to the conversation within.

"I'm a plain man, Doctor," began Parson Gale, in his rough, frank notes. "I speak

of life and death."

For a bow drawn at a venture, it was a good shot, and the arrow reached its mark. "That's enough!" exclaimed the Parson. "You're the man to tell me what I want. Name your price. 'Tis blood-money, and I'm not going to stand for a guinea one way or the other!"

"Justice must be done first!" said Katerfelto with exceeding gravity. "Let me hear your own tale in your own words, and rely on my help."

Thus encouraged, the Parson embarked on a narrative of his brother's duel, but little exaggerated, nor indeed very different from the facts set forth above, interspersing his account with dire threats of vengeance and solemn oaths, whereat Waif's blood ran cold, that he would take no rest till he had discovered and hunted down the perpetrator of this murder, as he persisted in calling it, to the death!

Listening at the keyhole, she lost not a syllable of their conversation, and the gipsy-girl vowed in her heart to come between the avenger and his victim, even though she must steep her hands in blood, and swing for it on Tyburntree.

Little by little Katerfelto gathered enough from Parson Gale's repetitions, threats, and assertions, to feel sure that his patient in the next room was the individual whom the visitor wished to identify and bring to justice. In his plotting brain such a complication was simply a problem to be solved, a sum to be worked out, a plot to be elaborated for his own advantage. With a gravity not lost on the West-country parson, who, for all his mother wit, felt overawed by the other's assumption of superior intelligence, he promised to furnish the information required, as soon as he should himself have consulted those spiritual intelligences he held at command.

"You shall come again when the moon is full," said he, accepting the broad pieces which his visitor thrust on him clumsily enough. "Ere then I shall discover his hiding, though he have taken refuge forty fathoms deep, below the sea. But, mark you—I am not a man of blood, and I make no promise to deliver him into your hand."

Again Waif's fingers stole to her knife while the Parson's savage laugh grated on her ear.

"Show me where the deer is harbored," said he, passing into the street. "I can do all the rest myself. The Lord have mercy on him, for I will not, when once I set him up to bay."

CHAPTER VI.

MY LORD AND MY LADY.

They occupied separate apartments now. There had been a time indeed when Lord and Lady Bellingher might have competed for the fitch of Bacon at Dunmow, so well satisfied was each with the other, for weeks, nay months, after a marriage of vanity, with some little inclination. Was not my lord the best-dressed man at court? Had not my lady the finest hand, the tightest waist, the loftiest head-gear in London? Did not both exist only in the atmosphere of the great world, sacrificing to the airs and graces time, health, money, and reputation? Many tastes had they in common, some vices, not a few follies, prejudices and frivolities; yet they soon began to differ, and after passing through the customary phases of disappointment, pique, resentment and disgust, subsided into a sullen, stony indifference that was perhaps the most hopeless condition of all. Rarely meeting, except at meals, or in the presence of others, they had few opportunities for quarreling; when they did fall out, it is only fair to say that her ladyship usually took the initiative. Let us give her precedence, therefore, now.

She is seldom stirring before noon. The sun is already at mid-heaven when she rings for her chocolate, sighs, yawns, thrusts on her small feet her small slippers, wriggles into a much embroidered morning gown, and totters across the room to look at herself in the glass. The face she sees therein reflected affords, alas! a history and a moral.

Its features are delicate, and the smile that has now become rigid from force of habit was once very flexible and sweet, but late hours and false excitement have scored premature wrinkles round the eyes, and the free use of paint has served to deaden, and, as it were, rough-cast the surface of the skin. Lady Bellingher was never quite a pretty woman, though with the advantages of dress, manner, and candle-light she could hold her own in general society against many a professional beauty, and counted her ball-room conquests in numbers that, if they did not satisfy her rapacity, were quite enough for her reputation. This border-land between good looks and an ordinary exterior is, perhaps, the most dangerous ground of all. Vanity is excited, but not gratified. Wit, vivacity, freedom of gesture and conversation are called in to supplement the charms that nature has left imperfect. The player grows more reckless as the game goes on, and at last he stakes his whole position on the high-