

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XXII.

A WELLS TABLE DEER.

"Then, when the rattling burst is over, and the hounds are buying round a good fox who has just turned his head from the distant covert that killing pace alone forbade him to turn, how fond the curlew laid by staid glove on reeking neck, how proudly affectionate the muttered words of praise, a generous animal interprets by their tone. 'You're the best horse in England. I never was so well carried in my life!'"

But of all forest creatures hunted by our forefathers and ourselves, the stag had been considered from time immemorial the noblest beast of chase. His nature has been the study of princes, his pursuit the sport of kings. The education of royalty itself would once have been thought incomplete without a thorough knowledge of his haunts and habits, whose looks were written, and authorities quoted, on the formalities with which his courteous prosecutors deemed it becoming that he should be hunted to death. To this day the royal and gallant sport flourishes in West Somerset and North Devon with its former vigor. When George the Third was king, that wild, romantic western country was already famous for staunch hounds, valiant horses, and daring riders, no less than for the strength, size, and lasting qualities of its red deer.

An animal that easily twenty miles on end for life, and die with its back to a rock, unmounted in defeat, a true gentleman to the last, is surely no unworthy object of pursuit.

But what are these shadows that cross the bath by moonlight, with the water dripping like molten silver off their sides as they emerge one by one from the glistening stream to disappear again in the black night of its overhanging woods? And is not that the stag who laps behind, with beam and bladders of those wide spread horns flashing in points of white as he stoops his crowned head to drink, and passes on? No shadow this, but a stately beast in all the strength and beauty of its prime. A stag of size and substance, with goodly fat on his ribs and many lines on his antlers. Thickening, too, somewhat in the neck, for already the clear air of an autumn night tells of early frosts, and soon the peaceful majesty of his repose will change to turmoil and love and war. In the meantime he feeds lazily on, turning without apparent object in a different direction from the herd.

Thus he wanders over a broad surface of country now cropping the rank grasses that border the Exe, ere he dashes through its wood and shallow stream as though disdainful of a bath that only reaches to his knees. And dallying with the standing oats, that pierce thin and scanty on a bare hill farm, by the verge of the forest, then crossing the swampy skirts of Exmoor at his long, jerked trot, to rouse the udder and the curlew from their rest, he makes his way by many a broken path and devious sward-track to the magnificent coppices and sheep-wounded declivities of Cloutsham Ball. It is an hour or two before dawn when he reaches this well-known haunt, and the kindly beast, penetrating to its innermost recess, lays himself down with the intention of sleeping undisturbed till late in the day.

With an indolent heart of his haunches, that hardly seemed an effort, he has cleared the level ground bank round his resting-place in a spring that covered some five or six yards, but left imbedded in the yielding clay a distinct impression of his cloven feet. Therefore Red Rube, stooping over the spot at day-break, chuckles inwardly, and obsequiously to his flask a warrantable deer! kneeling down to examine the imprint more closely, and measure its width by the fingers of his own brown hand. Then he takes a wide circuit, embracing several favorite passes for deer, and satisfies himself that, save a light hart or "brocket," as he calls it, that in the autumn of the species is this moorland harbored in Cloutsham Ball.

The stag hounds are to meet some two or three miles eastward. It must be traveling that distance with the sun in his eyes that causes Red Rube to blink and grin and occasionally hiccough all the way to their accustomed trysting-place.

He is there, botanic with his broken kneed pony, yet two riders have appeared before him. Rube chuckles and slides up to them.

Your servant, Mistress Carew—your servant, your honor," says he, in a deferential tone. The spurs had need be sharp to-day, mister. I'll warrant that'll be wicket and

Cowslip and Katerfelto raised their heads at the same time, with pointed ears and eager, solemn eyes, the gray indulging in a snort of approval and delight.

The cavalcade, consisting of huntsman, hounds, a whapper-in, and half a score of sportsmen, were to be seen filing across the moor in slanting line down the opposite hill.

John Garnet tightened his girths. "It won't be long before the fun begins," observed this impatient young man.

Nelly laughed. "When you know our country better, said she, you will find out that a mile in distance with a combe to cross, sometimes means a good half hour's ride. Let us go and meet them," she added putting Cowslip into the center. Here comes my aversion, Master Gale."

The Parson, mounted on his staunch black nag, was within a bow-shot, trotting softly through the heather, husbanding strength for the exertions of the day. Even to John Garnet's eyes, prejudiced as he was by Nelly's dislike, there seemed much to admire in the bearing of man and horse. The free, stealing action, the close and easy seat, the light hand, the well-bitted mouth, the confidence of the one, the docility of the other, and the good understanding prevailing between them, argued a partnership that prided itself on encountering difficulties and setting danger at defiance in concert.

"He looks like business, that parson of yours," said John Garnet to his companion, as they bounded away together; "if he is half as good in the pulpit as he seems in the saddle they ought to make him a bishop!"

Nelly's only answer was a little grimace of disgust, followed by a loving smile.

Meeting the assemblage of stag-hunting sportsmen, already increased by fresh arrivals, who turned up from every quarter as if they were the natural growth of the moor, John Garnet could not but observe that many a practiced eye travelled approvingly over the symmetrical shape of Katerfelto ere it rested on the better known beauty of Mistress Carew. The honest squire whiskered each other with nods, winks, and looks of intelligence.

"'Tis a rare bit of horse flesh!" said one in a faded scarlet hunting-troick with tanshied face. "Strong as a yoke of bullocks, and light as a January brocket. Seems to me neighbor, I've seen that nag before."

"Like enough," was the answer. "That I never thought to clap eyes on's rider again. That's the indolent Sir Humphrey and his three valets single-handed a twelve-month gone last Whitsuntide, by Upcot Sheep wash, and showered six hours afterwards in the market at Taunton town. It's fifty miles, squire, if it's a furlong, Ah, ay, a good horse, neighbor, and a bad trade."

"I heard tell he was hanged!" said the listener, opening round eyes of astonishment.

"He did ought to have been," replied the other. "But Galluping Jack had good friends in the West, and a good friend he's been himself, not so long ago, neither, to one or two honest fellows you and me would be main vexed to see called to account. Live and let live," says I, "but if we find a right stag in yonder hazels who knows his way to the sea, why, that gray horse and his rider are bound to be at one end of the hunt, and I leave it to you, neighbor, to say which!"

With these words he dismounted heavily to adjust girths and bridle, for Red Rube was already in close confabulation with the huntsman, and business seemed about to begin.

The harbored looked more than half-drunk, yet not for an instant was that sagacity of his at fault which partook rather of animal instinct than human experience.

"The old stag will move the brocket," said he, with a laborious wink, "and it's your business to drive him to the moor, Abel. I'll warrant I bring you within a land yard of 'un, and all as you've got to do is to catch 'un if you can!"

"Tancered and Tarquin will do that much, replied Abel," a man of few words, and in less than a minute those venerable "tufters" were uncoupled and at his horse's heels, forcing their way through the tangled underwood.

To control twenty couple of hounds hunting different lines is no easy matter. One or two or held in command without difficulty, so that their staunch pursuit may be transferred from scent to scent till they have forced the right deer into the open, when they can be stopped, while the body of the pack are brought up and laid on. Thus far the crash, the chorus, and the jubilee! Hark together! Hark! and Forward away!"

The brocket's heart beats fast at the first note of the "tufters," and well it may. Tancered and Tarquin are two majestic black-and-tan hounds, six and twenty inches high, with sweeping ears, pendant jaws, and large, lengthy frame, nearly as heavy as himself. For one rapid trotting moment the well-kept

glade, and emerges stately and triumphant on the open moor.

Standing erect upon an eminence against the sky, he pauses one instant, as if to afford his pursuers an opportunity of noting his grand proportions and noble width of head. All eyes are turned towards him in admiration and delight.

"Beautiful!" exclaims Parson Gale, forgetting the existence of John Garnet and the terms of his own wicked oath.

"Beautiful!" whispers the lovers, exchanging a lover's glance, while Katerfelto's rider feels a thrill of delight creep through his whole frame with the consciousness of his horse's speed and endurance, nor can Nelly herself spare him more than half her attention, so taken up as she with the gallant appearance of the deer.

"Beautiful!" echo the honest squire and yeomen, already speculating on the line, and anticipating the severity of the chase, while Red Rube, with his hand pressing Abel's knee, who is laying on his hounds with a cheer, thus delivers himself.

"Brow, Day, and Tray, I tel'ee, with four on the top! All his rights, as I am a living sinner, a warrantable deer, if ever there was one, or I'll eat 'un, horns and all!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT FAULT.

In the first ten minutes of a run with hounds everything else must needs be forgotten, for in these minutes men cast to the winds all earthly considerations but one, viz., how to get as close to the chase as possible, and keep there! It is not too much to say that a league of heather had been traversed at speed ere Parson Gale found he could spare a thought for anything but the holding together of Cassock, and the making the most of that good horse's powers.

His skilful riding, however, and intimate knowledge of the country, soon enabled him to draw rein on a slope of rising ground, while the line of chase, bending towards him where he stood, afforded a general survey of the whole pageant as it swept on.

The hounds, stringing in file through its tall luxuriant heather, threaded the deep, dim combe he had skirted so judiciously, in a sinuous line, like some spotted serpent of gigantic length. Seen from the vantage ground above, they seemed to be running at no great pace, though with much energy and determination, but John Garnet, who had plunged into the valley at their start, could have told a different tale. It taxed even Katerfelto's powers to keep on terms with them as they rose the opposite hill, Tarquin and Tancered swinging along at head with a steady persistency that implied endurance till the close of day. Except the stranger on the gray horse, not another rider was within a mile of the pack. Abel had adopted the same line, though not so skilfully, thought the Parson, as himself, and was leading his active, cat-like horse up a precipitous ascent to regain the ground he had lost. Mistress Nelly could be seen on the white pony, a speck in the distance, making for some rocks on the moor, where her experience taught her the deer was likely to pass, and was followed by no inconsiderable cavalcade. Other sportsmen rode at speed for other points, some in bold relief against the sky-line, some mere spots of red on the brown expanse of moor, all with their horses' heads in different directions, yet each persuaded that his own line was the best, and would eventually land him alone with the hounds!

Alas for the facilities of experience itself when pitted against chance! Alas for the caution of age and the cunning of woodcraft! Alas for the heavy weight rider and the horse that knew not how to gallop! After this one turn, of which the Parson so readily took advantage, the stag never paused nor wavered, but sped across the open straight as an arrow, six miles on end, without halt or hindrance, and hounds ran him without a check.

"Curse him! curse him! how he rides!" muttered the Parson, watching that gray horse sail over the moor, in smooth and easy stride, like the stroke of a bird's wing, while John Garnet sat home in the saddle, and chose his ground with the judgment of one bred in the West. Katerfelto carried his master without difficulty alongside of the hounds, Parson Gale, half-a-mile off, with no immediate prospect of getting nearer, admired and envied the daring rider, even while he swore to have his blood.

Half-a-mile astern, in an enclosed country as bad enough, but to be half-a-mile behind a good horse crossing Exmoor at speed with a pack of hounds in front, is virtually to be in another kingdom! To save his life, the Parson could not come within hailing distance of his foe, do what he would.

by the tension of anxiety or distress. His nostrils are spread to catch the taint of an enemy in the breeze, and his mouth is open, while he is yet fresh and full of strength. When he closes it, there will be many a recking flank besides his own, for wind and hub will have tailed at last, and the only force left him then will be the courage to die. In the meantime he is all energy, vitality, and speed. To be hunted is but a generous rivalry that tests the powers in which his spirit takes pride, that wages his own endurance and sagacity against the hostile instinct of his natural enemy the bound. Speeding over the moor, it seems that he can mock at the untiring hate of Tarquin, Tancered, and their comrades, yelling on his track, fierce, busy, and persevering, but many a mile long in the rear.

Badgeworthy woods and copses frown darkling before him. Badgeworthy water breaks in forming jets and rippling eddies at his feet. The covert would seem to offer safety and concealment, the river to afford at least refreshment and temporary respite from pursuit. With a strange and wilful pertinacity, for which Parson Gale, laboring hopelessly behind, is at a loss to account, he shoots away from this tempting refuge of wood and water, coasting a precipitous hill that overhangs the stream, to speed along its dangerous incline at a pace that seems but to increase with the prospect of fresh exertions in an open country, unbroken by combe, covert or ravine for miles.

Even John Garnet, standing in his stirrups and ensing Katerfelto, who has not yet demanded any such indulgence, begins to ask himself how long this kind of thing can last.

The sun is already high in a blue, cloudless heaven—blant, gray boulders studding the steep hill side stand out in high relief, shilt and shingle glitter on the bare tops above, and bushy tufts of heather fade to a dusky purple below, but here and there green moss lies dark and soft round many a bubbling spring, while a breeze from the north fills lungs and nostrils with its cool, clear air, so that the deer, taking the wind sideways as it takes the hill, bounds on with ever-increasing speed, refreshed, invigorated, full of strength, and running still! The dark, impervious glades, the deep, precipitous ravines of Widdecombe are frowning yonder in the distance, though many a mile of moorland intervenes, they seem to offer a secure retreat, and even if he should be driven through that stronghold, and forced into the open once more, shall he not make his point in the cliffs beyond Combe Martin, steering for yonder thread of blue on the horizon, that promises death or freedom in the Severn Sea?

Who shall say that all this calculation, this strategy, this reflection, is so far below reason as to be called instinct? Even Red Rube, many a mile behind on his pony, taxing his resources of intellect and cunning, backed by the observation of fifty years, that he may arrive somehow at the finish in time to hear the "bay," confesses he is but a fool when his wits are pitted against those of a deer driven to its last shifts.

He is riding slowly and doggedly, due west without a soul in sight. He could not explain why he should have chosen this direction, but some mysterious instinct of the hunter tells him that thus only has he the slightest chance of seeing any more of the chase.

In the meantime, vexation, confusion and distress prevail for many a weary mile of rocky steep, tangled heather and holding swamp. Here a good horse, floundering to the girths, emerges from the mire with a throbbing flank and starting eye that tell too plainly their own sad tale. His master, pretty well exhausted also in the struggle, standing hopelessly on foot, while friends and neighbors, in but little better plight, come laboring past, each man riding faster than his horse, and pointing eagerly forward to that distance he must never hope to reach.

The last of the string, whose powers are dying out like the flame of a candle, sinks from a false and laboring trot to a reeling walk, which soon collapses in a dead stop.

"I've shot my bolt too, neighbor!" says the defeated sportsman to his comrade in distress. "It's many a long day since we've seen such a brush as this over Exmoor and I'd try to finish the run now in my boots, only I've grown so playfully lousy for climbing these hills!"

So they lead their horses homeward despondently enough, with many a longing, lingering look at those lessening forms that are yet far in the rear of the actual chase, and many a speculation as to whom it will end, what direction it will take, and who are the lucky ones with the hounds.

There can be no run so good in reality as that which we lose in imagination when beaten off by exigencies of country or pace. Tancered and Tarquin are leading no long-

right hand whither at the wrist if I make it out the fuller and dadder for every horn it is delayed!

John Garnet, speeding away in front, on excellent terms with the bounds, and as happy as a king, little thought of the malice and hatred following in his track, little thought, indeed, of anything—unless it were Nelly Carew's blue eyes—but the keen enjoyment of his favorite pursuit. He was far too practised a horseman, however, to forget in his enthusiasm the normal rules of his art, and reflected more than once that although he had never ridden an animal to be compared with him, yet Katerfelto was but a horse after all, and so far like other horses that at last his long powerful gallop must come to an end. Therefore he spared him as much as was compatible with his resolution not to leave the hounds, and kept his eye forward with considerable judgment and sagacity, so that when opportunity offered he might never throw a chance away.

Thus, while the pack, guided by Tancered's grandson, who bore the imposing name of Thunder, dived into a precipitous ravine, he rode judiciously along its edge, and pulled his horse to a trot, while he watched them swarming and bustling through the gigantic growth of heather that fringed several hundred feet of an almost perpendicular incline. From thence he scanned the ground in front to find a more practicable descent, and down it he plunged without hesitation so soon as the hounds, giving tongue freely, dashed into the water below. It was a shallow, darkling stream, breaking and brawling over ledges of granite between high, steep banks, clothed in tangled underwood, and John Garnet could not but hope that now the deer had taken soul, and soon would burst on his ear that loud and welcome chorus called the "bay." It disappointed him a little to observe the pack cross the stream, borne downward by its current, wading, swimming, shaking their ears and sides, while Thunderer informed them loudly that he was in possession of the scent.

It disappointed him still more when the gray horse had splashed and struggled through from bank to bank, that the hounds, whose noses had never yet been off the line for an instant, should be looking about them on the further side with heads up and wistful faces gazing in his own as though half-ashamed of failure, half-pleading for assistance. There was no doubt they had come to a check, and appealed to the horseman for help he was unable to afford. The ground rose steep and high, the darkling copse that clothed these abrupt hill sides shut out the light of the day. John Garnet was at a loss. Had the deer lain down? or was it forward still, and in which direction? He naturally looked for Tancered to inform him, but Tancered was nowhere to be seen.

The Parson, meanwhile, laboring doggedly on, had caught a distant glimpse of the hounds even as they disappeared over the brink of the precipitous combe, in time to play a bold stroke and merited success. He determined not to cross the valley at all, but to steer for that side of it on which the line of chase now seemed to lie, and so hoped to come in on the deer, refreshed by the bath he never doubted it had indulged in, as it rose the hill side once more and made for the open moor. Urging Cassock to farther effort, he increased the pace for a stretch of another mile, but when he halted his good horse—who stopped willingly enough at the wished-for station—not a living object was to be seen deting the brown expanse, not a sound to be heard but the wail of the curlew flitting softly over the waste. Deer and hounds and John Garnet must have sunk into the earth! The solitude seemed unbroken. The chase had come to a standstill, and the Parson was at fault!

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT BAY.

Tancered, a marvel of canine sagacity, had good reason for deserting his comrades, to engage in some quiet researches of his own. It is unnecessary to inform those who love stag-hunting—and those who do not will hardly care to learn—that scent often hangs over running water, and travels downwards with the moving stream; therefore the deer wading craftily towards the river's source, emerged on its farther bank, refreshed and strengthened by the bath, at some considerable distance above the place where it plunged in. Such tactics were only in accordance with the calculation and reflection we call instinct; but Tancered was possessed of instinct too, and remembered, no doubt, many a cast he had made on similar occasions with successful result. The old hound,