

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XI.

A PECULIAR PEOPLE.

"You patter? What is that?" asked my lord.

"The sign that none of our people will be unmoved," said the gipsy; "that not one of the profession dare disregard, from the best galloping gentleman on the road to the poor fly-faker who pulls an old woman's petticoat off a hedge. I will set it for you at once."

"Thus speaking, he drew his knife from the scabbard, and cut three crosses, side by side, in the turf, north, south, east and west of the party. This done, the word was given to march, and in less than a minute these strange assailants, who seemed to have the faculty of deer and other wild animals in avoiding themselves of any irregularity in the ground, had disappeared from the surface of the downs, though a moon already near full was shining brightly above the horizon.

My lord looked after them in silence as they vanished. Then turning to his wife, observed, with a meaning smile, "They have left you your diamonds, my dear. I wonder where they learned to know brilliant from paste."

Her ladyship, an image of outraged dignity, was sitting bolt upright in the back of the coach.

"Their leader is a perfect gentleman," she replied, "and would no more rob a lady of her trinkets than he would allude to her misfortunes. There are noblemen of position who might take example by the gracious manners and high bearing of this mysterious gipsy."

"The taunt, if meant for such, was lost on her husband. 'Two hours,' he yawned; 'two hours all but five minutes at the best. How shall we get through two mortal hours? There is moonlight—that's a comfort, and our friends have left us the cards. I will sit in the coach, and play your ladyship a game at piquet.'

"What shall we play for?" said my lady.

"For love," said my lord, and began to deal.

CHAPTER XII.

MARY LEE.

"Threaded like a herd of red deer the night undulations of the down, it took the gipsies but a few minutes to withdraw from the scene of their late outrage. In less than an hour it had approached their own camping ground, where the tents were already pitched by wives and courtesans, the kettles already singing over the twinkling fire of their bivouac. They travelled fast, at a long swinging trot, shifting their bundles from one to another as they went. Fin Cooper and Waif remained in rear of the party, the former arguing that it was the best of danger, and, on this consideration, though she seemed unwilling to lag behind the others, insisting that the girl should bear him company.

Waif was anxious and preoccupied, strangely unlike herself. The black wardrobe had not failed to notice the change, and was it his nature to keep silence when aroused. Looking suspiciously in his companion's face, he saw a scrap of an old Romany ditty, that may be thus rendered:

In the month of flowers, between the showers,
The cuckoo sings all day.
But the maiden weeps while the Romany sleeps
and the Gorgio gallops away.
Too soon, too soon, they are fading in June,
and the cuckoo has changed his say.
And the maiden is dead, and the spring-time
is dead, when the Gorgio galloped away.

His voice was rich and mellow yet something of harshness in his tones betrayed the discord within.

"What do you mean?" asked Waif, her black eyebrows coming down in an angry scowl over her black eyes.

"You can interpret it yourself," was his answer. "Thyra, do you remember the red Quaintock hills, and the deep leafy gorges in the 'broopn pickers' country long ago?"

He spoke in Romany, and she replied in the same language. It stung him to observe that she could not express herself so readily in their own gipsy tongue as in that of the whites, with whom she had passed so many years.

"I remember," said Waif, earnestly. "What of that?"

"I looked hurt, and a fiercer gleam shot from his dark eyes."

"So long ago! and yet I see it as clear as if I had been but yesterday—the fire smouldering at the tent-door—the moonshine, silver-white on the Severn Sea—the old grandfather sitting within, shaping a wooden peg with his knife—and my little wife crouching in the corner with her black eyes wide open, like the red hind's calf I had noosed a week before in Clouatham Bull. Long ago! Yes Thyra, it is long ago; and every day that has gone by, every night that I have seen it all again in my dreams, scores and braids it deeper in my true gipsy heart. There is no 'long ago' for you and me, Thyra. We have been one ever since that night when you were promised me by the comely Lovelock over the camp-fire. Nothing but death can part us now. My sweet lass, I will be kind and true, for mine you surely are, and always will be."

To a woman whose heart was still in her own keeping, there would have been something inexplicably touching in the tender glance of those eyes, naturally so fierce and keen, in the gentle tones of that voice, usually so hard, imperious and clear. She could not but contrast the gipsy's absorbing devotion with John Garnet's joyous, good-humored carelessness, and shuddered to think how she loved the first and how she was beloved by the second! She temporized—she prevaricated—she said one thing and meant another. Was she not a woman, though a gipsy?

"There would be time enough," she protested, "to consider all these matters when the tribe moved farther West to take up their quarters in westerly country, amongst the Cornish tors and valleys. There was much to be done first, tents to strike, a long journey to be made, tonight a job to be effaced by a speedy change of quarters, and you know as well as I do, Fin," she added, smiling sweetly in his face, "that a storm is brewing down in the West where we are bound, and the same wind that brings the Kaulo-chirulo—the blackbird, as the Gorgios call him—back to his own nest, will blow many a 'balanser' of good red gold into the pockets of the Romany lad who runs his errands. For my part, I hope with all my heart he'll win."

"What matters it to us?" he replied. "Let the Gorgios fight it out among themselves, and cut each other's throats for a name, like fools as they are! King George, or King Charles, or King James, none of them will put a fowl in the Romany kettle, nor a broad piece in his palm but for service rendered and risk run. We must help ourselves, Thyra, take what we want, and keep all we can. Our hand may well be against every man, for is not every man's hand against us? For ages we have been a race apart, and we must continue so for ever. No Romany lad may wed with the noblest lady of the Gorgios; and for the Romany lass who listens to love in another tongue, we do not shame her before our people, but we conceal her, Thyra, we hide her away, where neither father nor mother, uncle nor aunt, Romany nor Gorgio, shall ever find her again!"

His voice had grown thick and hoarse, while drops of sweat stood on the tawny face, now turned to ashen gray. Waif trembled like a leaf.

"I know it," she said; "our people never forgive, Fin, and they never forget."

There was a ring of pride in the last sentence—tribute to the absent lover, whom even now she could not bring herself to wish she might put out of her mind.

They walked on in silence. She had taken his hand, and thus laden carried it with a step as free and untiring as his own. They were half a mile behind the other gipsies, pacing side by side in the moonshine over the lonely down. A light twinkled from a solitary farm many a mile away, and once only was the stillness broken by the honest bark of a sheep-dog. "The calm pure air, the sweet summer night, the quiet, the expanse, were all suggestive of those dreams which have so large a portion in life's reality. Her thoughts were far away beyond that western horizon, with the gray horse and its rider. She absolutely started when her companion's voice roused her from the abstraction in which she was plunged.

He had been watching her narrowly. Fin Cooper was as dexterous a gipsy as ever stalked a red-deer, noosed a hare, or swung a kettle. Versed in the lore, as in the mal-practices of his people, he knew how to tell fortunes by cards or palmistry; to interpret the pattern of his comrades, the signs of the zodiac, even the stars of heaven; but he could not read a woman's heart. This was the last moment he should have chosen to inculcate a lesson of fidelity and obedience on his promised wife.

"Thyra," said he, while she turned on him a pale and dreamy face, "did your people never tell you the story of Mary Lee?"

"I have heard something about her," she stammered, with a frightened look. "She died, didn't she? or was lost? I—I forget the rights of it."

"I will tell it you now," said he. "Take every word to heart, Thyra, and forget rather

before he had scarce washed his face or pulled his shirt on, she called him a fighting blackguard for his pains. We said in the tents that, gipsy or gentile, the man wasn't to be a man who could put the charm on Mary Lee.

"She did little work at home; and, except for hitting a kettle, or a tting a tent-peg, kept her hands as clean as a lady's; but when she went out by herself to fairs and races, dukking for the Gorgios and those who tell fortunes to the gentlefolks, and came back with gold in both hands. The old grandmother's kettle was never empty, and they gave her plenty of liberty to do what she liked. Sometimes she would stay away a month at a time.

One summer afternoon a little boy, who had been stealing nuts in a wood a mile or two from the camp, came back with a gentleman's riding-glove that he had picked up amongst the hazels. Mary laughed when she saw it, and bought it of the child for a crooked sixpence and a whistle. A week after, when they asked her what she had done with the glove, she said it was lost. That set some of our people thinking.

"Then she went off again about harvest; and after she'd been gone a week, Barney Smith came into the camp, with a strange story that he had seen a Gorgio lady, the living image of Mary Lee, sitting at an open window in 'the book-fellows' town' at the time of Oxford Races. Barney was doing a little business there with a pedlar's box on his own account. Though it was a hundred miles off, he came back directly; but when he talked of the pearls and satins she wore, and the black spots on her face, with powder in her hair, we all said Barney must have been drunk or dreaming. That night her uncle sat up to put new soles on his shoes, and next morning he left the camp at daybreak.

"I was but a lad, Thyra, and as busy as a squirrel. When a week passed, then a month, and still no tidings came of Mary Lee, I went across the Vinney Ridge to the tents of her people and watched. We were lingering in the 'swine-herd's country,' among the deer in the New Forest, and good times we had, I can tell you, with fat venison in the kettles, and firewood for the cutting. I harbored a buck in Bolderwood once, and watched him for seven hours on a stretch. I've watched longer than that for you, Thyra. I watched nearly as long on behalf of Mary Lee.

"The moon had gone down, and the false dawn was peeping between the stems of the old oaks, when I caught sight of a square, thick figure threading the track among the trees that led to the Lees' camp. I leaped up and took him by the hand. He was trembling all over. 'You are welcome back Uncle Hyley,' says I. 'You have made a long journey, uncle; have you returned empty handed, or did you find what you went to seek?'

"The shoes are worn from my feet, brother," was his answer. "For three days and three nights I have gone without food or rest; but I took what I wanted, Fin, and I can hold up my head once more among my people."

"Did you hear any news of Mary?" was my next question, and my heart rose to my mouth while I asked it, for he was a strong, fierce man, who would strike with fist or steel if he was angered, and never give you a chance. I could scarce believe it was Ryley Lee who answered in that weak, low voice, with a cheek that had turned gray, like the ashes of a woodfire in the dim morning light.

"It is well with her," was all he said, "but you will see Mary in our tents no more."

"She is dead!" burst from my lips, for there seemed a smell of blood in my nostrils and the pale streaks of dawn grew crimson between the trees.

"It is well with her," he repeated, turning from me into his tent. "Mary Lee has left her people—dead or alive we shall see her no more."

"Then I knew she had paid the price it costs the Romany maiden who loves a Gorgio too well!"

Waif had changed color more than once during the above recital; but though she looked very pale now, there was a firm, hard expression in her face that denoted some fixed purpose no consideration should set aside.

"The hawk does not mate with the barn-door fowl," said she, "and the Romany chalmarries with the Romany chi, for surely we are one people; but this affects neither you nor me, Fin. If gipsies cannot trust each other, how shall we hold our own against the Gentiles? Mary Lee was a good-for-nothing hussie; Uncle Ryley a cruel, blood-thirsty monster; and her we are at the camp. Take your bundle, Fin, I've carried it till I'm tired. Yes; I'll shake hands with you. Good-night!"

Extracting herself impatiently from the embrace of her affianced husband, who succeeded, however, in pressing his lips against her brow, she disappeared within one of the tents, leaving Fin Cooper outside, a prey to

sible attachment. Far into the night Fin Cooper tossed and turned from side to side, restless and sleepless, because of his wrongs, his memories, and his feverish longing to have his hand on John Garnet's throat.

Waif, too, was uneasy and wakeful. She had not listened to the story of Mary Lee, without accepting it as a warning to herself. Well she knew that in the bloody code of her people, to love a Gorgio was an offence punished by death. And she loved a Gorgio! Ay, loved him, as she thought with a thrill of pride, essentially womanly in the exquisite pleasure it evoked, the more deeply and dearly for the penalty. No pale-faced girl could care for him like that! When the time came, she would give him her life, as she had given him her love, without a murmur or a reproach.

Perhaps, at that moment, he was looking at the very star on which her eyes were fixed, as it twinkled through the gaps in her own brown weather-worn tent. Perhaps, who knows, in another life, to be spent up there amongst those stars, they might find them selves together? and so Waif's dark eyes closed in that other life, on which we enter every night, and the girl sank into a peaceful sleep, dreaming calmly of her love.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE SCENT.

Wittingly or unwittingly, nobody ever offended Katerfelto without regretting it. To do him justice, the Charlatan had every intention of screening John Garnet from the avenger of blood, when he started his patient on the Western Road, in pursuit of Lord Bellinger's ponderous coach-and-six. The Young man, he thought, would prove a useful tool enough, and he had no objection to do him a kindness into the bargain, providing it cost nothing, and would turn to his own advantage; but, when he discovered Waif was missing, too, before the good gray horse and its rider had been six hours out of London, he at once connected the girl's flight with his absence, whom she had nursed so tenderly, and in a quiet, remorseless way vouched vengeance upon both.

John Garnet's mission, if fulfilled at all, must be carried out within three days at farthest. When accomplished, it mattered little what had become of the messenger. Perhaps the sooner he was set aside the better. What was the cost of a man and horse, valuable as might be the latter, compared with the interest at stake, with the gains and losses of the great game in which every player waged life and fortune on the result?

Parson Gale, wearying sadly of London, and longing for his moorland hills, found himself no longer put off with mysterious hints, and unintelligible jargon; but, to use his own metaphor, was laid on the line, like a bloodhound resolving to track it, inch by inch, till he pinned his quarry by the throat.

Many misgivings had the Parson during this, perhaps the most unpeaceful week he ever spent in his life. Orthodox in his opinions, however lax in his practice, it went cruelly against the grain to believe that in seeking Katerfelto's assistance he was tampering with the powers of darkness. Many a time, after his coarse pot-house supper, was his sleep haunted by grotesque visions of the evil one, carrying to eternal torment a figure in boots, bands, and cassock, that he recognized for his own. His knees used to shako, and his short grizzled hair to stand on end, when the Charlatan, leading him into a dark room, bade him wait patiently, while inquiries were made of certain intelligences that ought to have done with things on earth, yet betrayed a marvellous interest in earthly trifles, early follies, and earthly cares. The minutes seemed lengthened into hours while he sat motionless, expecting every moment to behold the pale violet gleam of a corpse-light, to feel the faint flutter of spirit-fingers, catch the faint breath of spirit-whispers—worst of all, to be threatened with the person manifestation of some obtrusive spirit itself.

Katerfelto, who possessed a strong sense of humor, and enjoyed a joke for its own sake, even though he had none with whom to share it, used to describe at length the discipline, the gradations, the daily life, scenery, and vegetable productions of the spirit-world; counting its spheres, explaining its mysteries, and insisting strongly on the somewhat thick-witted good-nature of its inhabitants.

The Parson's nerves were of no sensitive fibre. He possessed his share of bull-dog courage. Give him a beef-steak, a tankard of ale, and,

"Had a Paynim host before him stood, He had charged them through and through;"

but he was not proof against dangers of which he had no experience, and could form no conception. The crowning dread of his life at this period was the apparition of some luminous figure, clad in misty robes of white prepared to answer his questions evasively in a hollow whisper, lift him bodily into space

"Now you're bawming me, Doctor," replied the other, good-humoredly. "But a man is entitled to his jest who gives such wine as this. My service to you. Yes, I'll take a second glass the more willingly, as I shall not have another chance. I leave London to-morrow at sunrise, weather permitting, and before high noon, as we say in the West, whether or no!"

"Is it purse or patience that you have worn out?" asked Katerfelto. "There are means of replenishing the one and repairing the other."

"Both!" answered the Parson. "A man had as well be in the Fleet prison, as the coffee-room of a Covent-garden hotel! I seem to pay hard money for every breath I draw, and not to breathe freely after all! I'm an early stirrer, Doctor! man and boy, winter and summer I've been used to see the sun rise. Ah! you can breathe in my country like a grampus, if you choose. Well, I come down to break my fast at a reasonable hour, and not a creature is afoot in the whole house but the cat and me. Presently steals in a slip shod drawer, unbraced, uncombed, unwashed, and scarce half-awake. The varlet fetches a toast and tankard, may be, with a knotch from the rusty end of a chine that the rats have gnawed in the night. I fling it at his head; I cuff him soundly; I kick him round the room in my stocking-foot, for the other knave will not have cleaned my boots till noon. Presently I drink my beer, and forgive him; but to make peace with the rogue costs me a crown. At last I get my coat and hat brushed, band fitted, boots blacked, and sally forth into the streets. They're full, Doctor, a man can scarce turn himself round, yet do I feel so lonely, that if I was a woman or a child, I should sit down and cry."

"I might ride through Exmoor half a summer's day and never set eyes on a human face, but the curlew seems to know me as he flits by, with a quiet call of greeting and a wave of his wide brown wing—the red hunds, leading their calves along the ridges, look kindly over their shoulders, and turn their handsome heads to gaze after me, till they disappear. Why, the very breeze, whispering among the rushes, has been piffing in my own garden, not so many miles away. You know no more than a blind man what the morning means till you've seen the sun rise in North Devon! I wish I was back there now. I will be back there next week if I'm alive!"

"But surely, Doctor," observed Katerfelto, with a covert smile, "a man of your presence finds no difficulty in making acquaintances and even friends. The Londoners are not an inhospitable people, and are said to be exceedingly kind to a stranger if he has but money in his pockets."

"King enough!" answered the other, "so long as it costs nothing. They'll find fair words, I grant, and plenty of them, at the rate of a guinea a-piece. It was but yesterday two ladies gave me good-morrow from their coach so heartily, I made sure I must have met them on Taunton race-course or may be in the Cathedral close at Exeter. 'Welcome to London, Doctor,' says one, 'how did you leave your friends in the West?' 'You don't remember me, Doctor,' laughs the other, as comely a wench as you'll see this side of Devizes, 'but I haven't forgotten you, and I wish I could.' So I off with my hat, and up into the coach without another word, thinking for sure I had fallen among friends at last, and would you believe it? the first was an old harridan that might have been my mother, and the second hussy had scarce a tooth in her head, besides being raddled with red paint, and smelling of brandy fit to knock you down! Nay, I have done with your London once for all. If I make good speed, I'll be home in time for Dulverton Feast. I'll have no need to look about for friends there, and I can tell you, Doctor, I've been parched with strong ale and heady port, till I long for a gallon of cider, if it costs me five shillings a quart. Now we'll go to business, by your leave. If you've any more to say in my matters, out with it! Any way, bad or good, let us settle up and part friends!"

"I have constrained those to do my bidding who can furnish the intelligence you require," answered Katerfelto solemnly.

"To-night, if you have the courage."

"Nay, nay!" interrupted the Parson, his jolly face blanching at the suggestion, "your word is quite enough, Doctor. I neither doubt you nor them. Name your price, and let us have done with it!"

"Go home, then," continued the Charlatan, "with what speed you can make. Amongst your own West-country hills you will find your enemy and the slayer of your kinsman, John Garnet by name; a proper youth, able-bodied and an expert swordsman. If I bade you spare him, would you listen one moment to my plea?"

He was not listening now. "John Garnet," he repeated, "John Garnet," grinding the syllables between his teeth as he branded the name into his memory.

"Look out, John Garnet, and keep your hands up the first time you come across