

A VILLAGE STORY.

(From "Records of a good man's life," by the Rev. C. B. Taylor, M.A.)

(CONTINUED FROM OUR LAST.)

There had been many robberies in the neighbourhood, and the existence of a desperate gang was known. A few days after, a reward of some hundred pounds was offered by the county to any one who would bring the party of robbers to justice.

Martha knew not whether she had been discovered or not as she left the churchyard; but she had so firm a trust in God, and so much personal courage, that after laying all her perplexities before the only wise God, our Saviour she determined to make the best use of her own good sense.

After some consideration, it occurred to her that she ought to have been before the only wise and right way of acting. She saw her nephew go as usual that evening to Willis, soon after the hours of work were over in the village.

She soon followed him into the cottage, and up stairs, into the sick man's room; she walked up to the window, which was open, and taking her station there, she turned and looked calmly and gravely at the two men.

They had evidently expected no visitor. Willis was sitting up in bed intently occupied in showing her nephew how to make, what Martha saw instantly, was a gin for taking game.

An air-gun was lying on the bed, and in a corner of the room with a ballad on the chair before her, and a pheasant, which she was quietly picking for her husband's supper, sat Mrs. Willis, alternately looking over the ballad before her, and giving an eye to the pheasant.

"I am come," said Martha, looking Willis in the face, "as a friend. I shan't mince matters, but tell you at once, and in a plain, downright way, what I'm come for.

I am not the least afraid," she said, for she saw that Willis's eyes, which were always very winking and restless in their glances, fell on the gun.

"I am come without fear; one scream of mine would call John Mason, the constable over the way, and Dick Truman, next door, and a whole posse of neighbours, to my help.

Remember that, while I speak, and remember I'm no coward, and could master you, and your wife too, and perhaps Mister James also, if he was to meddle with me—I thought it best to be resolute," she said, "not that I could have touched a hair of Jim's head to hurt him, and as Martha spoke, for I had part of this from her own lips, the tears streamed down her brown cheeks.

"I'm not afraid of you, or any man or men either. I ever met with; but that you were poachers; but I have known a long while that you were poachers; but a few nights ago I was in the porch in Milford church during the storm, and I found out that you, both of you and some others, I knew you all, were robbers also, part of the gang that has been for the last few years about these parts.

I might have gone to the magistrate the next morning, (for I got safe home) and given in the names of you all, and had every one of you taken up, and claimed the reward that is offered for you, or I might have kept my secret safe, for I don't know that any of you saw me quit the porch."

Here Willis made an exclamation that betrayed him, though he checked himself immediately. "You need not check yourself," said Martha; "you saw me, did you? Well, it matters not; there I was, and could swear to any, and all of you; and here I now am, ready to promise, that if you will, with God's help, leave off your bad practices, and break up your gang, and try and get your bread in an honest way, nothing shall ever force me to say a word to any creature of what I saw or heard."

"During the time that Martha was speaking, her nephew looked very fierce and gloomy, and Mrs. Willis seemed very uncomfortable; but Willis composed his face, and said, in a demure voice, yet with a manner that was meant to look frank: "My good Mrs. Firman, I see 'tis useless to have any concealments from you, or as you say, to mince matters: and we might make it worth your while, my good friend, to hold your tongue: and as you are like me, Mrs. Firman, not so young as you once were, there are many little comforts—many a bit of game—"

"I had no patience to hear the old villain speak," said Martha; "I could not help crying out, Get thee hence, Satan! Don't pretend to misunderstand and wheedle me, you old villain," she cried out; "You it is who have been the ruin of half the young men in these parts, and a black account you will have to give after death, unless you pray God to change your heart. But answer me at once, both of you—Do you promise? or do you not? that's what I came to ask."—The promise was made.

enough, and is there worse to tell?" "No, not worse," he added; "and now that I have told you this:—"

"You will confess to God, and ask pardon," said Martha, "and I will help you to pay back all the corn to God's help, and stop at once. You are in slippery ways. But again I ask you—have you told me the worst? are you in a gang with these?" "I am in no gang—I don't know what you mean!"—and Susan, continued Martha, "my Susan does she know of your keeping bad company, and of your bad ways?" "She knows little, but she fears a great deal, and she has spoken to me more than once, and warned me in her sweet way."

Martha sighed deeply and then she stopped, and turning to George, (the night was not dark, but dull and grey and cloudy,) she said, "Listen! surely I hear voices, George!" and then, after a pause, in which they both listened, she said, "They are on the opposite hill behind us, and that's the reason I hear them so plainly. They are not so near as I thought; they have the meadow in the bottom, and the copse to cross before they come into this lane; and now, one word more: George!" she said, as they again went forward, and she spoke almost in a whisper.

"Did James Baker say anything about the path you should bring me?" "He did said George, "and I wondered he should tell me about the path to my own house; but he is always fond of laying down the law, and have every thing done in his way. He said, 'If you follow my advice, you will take me out through the lane and the farm-yard. She prefers that way, and you will have her as cross as may be, if you take her straight across the downs with the wind in her face.'"

"I had rather go over the downs," said Martha, in a faint voice, "and there is no wind to-night." "But we have passed the turnings," said George, "and there are persons behind us whom you seem to fear." "I do fear them," she whispered.

"My heart misgives me about those voices, and about James Baker, and his telling you that he wished you to take this path?" "Why should you fear anything?" he replied, for he felt her hand shaking on his arm. "You don't know all—I don't know what this is."

"I have to fear," she said in a low voice, but soon after, she added, "George, I was foolish to shake as I did just now, and to be so fearful.—Run on as fast as you can to Susan; if she is really ill, and perhaps she is, come back to meet me. If she is not, and we have been told a lie, take her and your sister that instant with you, and leave them at your father's; and then come back into this path where we now are, with your father and your brother, and any one else you like, and see after me.—Go now, for Susan is of the first consequence in her state, and I shall only flurry and frighten her if she sees me, and has not sent for her, besides; in that case, I would not have any of you found at the lone lodge to-night." "But all this is so strange!" said George. "I know what I am about," she said sharply. "I know what I fear: go at once, if you love your wife; I can take care of myself." George obeyed her.

All this Martha had said in a whisper, or an undertone, and she walked at a brisk rate. She now went on even faster, till she reached the farm-yard; still spoken of. It was merely a barn and some hay-stacks, and stood far away from any house; the lodge where George Woodman lived being the nearest habitation, and nearly a mile further. She stood still and listened. The air was perfectly still, and the same grey dusky light prevailed. Again she heard voices and even footsteps sounding on the dry clay of the lane.

Suddenly knowing why, she looked around her, determined, if possible, to find some hiding-place. She hurried to the hay-stacks, thinking she might stand unobserved in the dark shadow close under one of them, but when she reached it, and stood in the shadow, and saw everything so plainly, she felt that she might be discovered there, and crept quietly round to the other side. It happened that a short ladder had been left against this side of the stack, great part of which had been cut away. A sort of little platform was left on the top of the side against which the ladder was placed. Martha did not hesitate a moment. She climbed up the ladder to this little platform, and then drew the ladder up after her. Then quickly, and without any noise, she managed to hide herself and the ladder under the loose hay.—They are gone on quicker than I thought," were the first words Martha distinguished, as the persons whose voices she had heard, entered the farm-yard. "It's owing to you, you pious fool! You must always force yourself along with us." "Not always; but to-night I am wanted," said Willis, puffing and speaking with difficulty; "tis but a little way to-night, and you want an old head among you, boys!—Here's a comfortable place," he said; "I shall sit down here; and he seated himself under the hay-stack, pulling out some of the hay to sit upon, and resting his back against the stack. "Well! what is to be done, since we have missed them?" "Let me see," continued Willis.

"Two of you must go straight towards the lodge, and two must go back, and take the turning, and cross the downs to the lodge, and you may meet them there, and let my friend James and another stay with me." "And leave the young woman?" cried a voice, which Martha knew to be the voice of her nephew. "Leave her," he said, in a careless tone. "The hand and foot, if you choose. I'll go and see about her afterwards; but don't let the other two slip." "And now," said Willis, "let us consider how the thing may be best hid. One tongue must be silenced to-night, or 'tis all over with us. We have no time to lose, James!—Do as I tell you; the others will give you a helping hand when they come back. I wish I could handle a mattock or a spade, I would soon show you. Get the water out of part of that pool—you said you found it shallow near the barn—some of the clay will do it, with a few stones, and here and there a bit of hay—don't forget to slope the ground, and then set to work and dig as deep as you can." There was a silence of perhaps a quarter of an hour, broken only by the sound of the pickaxe and spade, which were in the hands of the two men.

(To be continued.)

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