

MATT.

A TALE OF A CARAVAN.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE CARAVAN.

The afternoon was still very warm, but a gray mist drifting from the Irish Channel, and sailing eastward over the low-lying Island of Anglesea, was beginning to scatter a thin, penetrating drizzle on the driver of the caravan.

To the right and left of the highway stretched a bleak and bare prospect of marshland and moorland, closed to the west by a sky of ever-deepening redness, and relieved here and there by black clumps of stunted woodland. Here and there peeped a solitary farmhouse, with outlying fields of swampy greenness, where lean and spectral cattle were lugubriously grazing; and ever and anon came a glimpse of some lonely lake or tarn, fringed all round with thick sedges and dotted with water lilies. The road was as desolate as the prospect, with not a living soul upon it, far as the eye could see. To all this, however, the driver of the caravan paid little attention, owing to the simple fact that he was asleep.

He was roused by a sudden jolting and swaying of the clumsy vehicle, combined with a sound of splashing water, and, opening his eyes sleepily, he perceived that the gray mare had turned aside from the centre of the road, and, having placidly entered a stagnant pond on the road-side was floundering and struggling in the mud thereof, with the caravan rocking behind her. At the same moment a head was thrust round the back part of the vehicle, and an angry voice exclaimed:

"Tim, you scoundrel, where the devil are you driving to? Wake up, or I'll break every bone in your skin."

Thus addressed, Tim woke himself with an effort, and looking round with an insinuating smile, replied:

"Begorra, Master Charles, I thought it was an earthquake entirely. Come out of that now. Is it wanting to drown yourself you are? G-r-r-r! Sh! Aisy now, aisy!"

The latter portion of the above sentence was addressed to the mare, which was at last persuaded to wade out of the cool mud and return to the dusty track, where she stood quivering and panting. No sooner was the return to terra firma accomplished than a light agile figure descended the steps at the back of the caravan, and ran round to the front. An excited colloquy, angry on the one side, and apologetic on the other, ensued, and did not cease, even when the driver, with a flick of his whip, put the caravan again in motion, while the other strode alongside on foot.

It was just such a caravan as may be seen any summer day forming part of the camp on an English common, with the swart face of a gypsy woman looking out at the door, and half a dozen ragged imps and elves rolling on the grass beneath; as may be observed, smothered in wickerwork of all descriptions, or glittering pots and pans, moving from door to door in some sleepy country town, guided by a gloomy gentleman in a velvet coat and hareskin cap, and attended by a brawny hussy, also smothered in wickerwork or pots and pans; as, furthermore, may be descried, forming part of the procession of a travelling circus, and drawn by a pie-bald horse which, whenever a good "pitch" is found, will complete its day's labors by performances in the ring. A caravan of the good old English kind; with small windows, ornamented by white muslin curtains, with a chimney atop for the smoke to come through from the fire side; with a door behind, ornamented with a knocker, and only lacking a door plate to make it quite complete; in short, a house on wheels.

The driver, though rough enough, and red with sun and wind, had nothing in common with the ordinary drivers of such vehicles, and, in point of fact, he was neither a gypsy nor a travelling tinker, nor a circus performer. Though it was summer time he wore a large frieze coat, descending almost to his heels, and on his head a wideawake hat—underneath which his lazy, beardless and somewhat sheepish face shone with idolent good humor. His companion, Master Charles, as he was called, bore still less resemblance to the Bohemians of English lanes and woodlands. He was a slight, handsome, fair-haired young fellow, of two or three and twenty, in the tweed attire of an ordinary tourist, and every movement he made, every word he spoke, implied the "gentleman born."

Presently, at a signal from his master (or such he was), Tim drew rein again. By this time the sun was setting fiery red, far away to the west, and the thin drizzle was becoming more persistent.

"How far did you say it was to Pencross?"

"Ten miles, sor."

"The mare is tired out, I think. We shall have to camp by the road-side."

"All right, Master Charles. There's a handy shelter beyant there where you see the trees," Tim added, pointing up the road with his whip. The young man looked in that direction, and saw, about a quarter of a mile away, that the highway entered a dark clump of woodland. He nodded assent and walked rapidly forward, while the caravan followed slowly in his rear.

Reaching the point where the wood began, and entering the shadow of the trees, he soon found a spot well fitted for his purpose. To the left the road widened out into a grassy patch of common, adorned with one or two bushes of stunted brown, and stretched out a dusty arm, to touch a large white gate, which opened on a gloomy, grass-grown avenue winding right

through the heart of the wood. The caravan, coming slowly up, was soon placed in a snug position, not far from the gate, the horse was taken out and suffered to graze, while Tim, searching about, found some dry sticks and began to light a fire. Diving into the caravan, the young man emerged with a camp stool, on which he sat down, lighted a meerscham pipe, and began to smoke. They could hear the rain faintly pattering in the boughs above them, but the spot they had chosen was quite sheltered and dry.

The fire soon blazed up. Entering the caravan in his turn Tim brought out a tin kettle full of water and placed it on the fire, preparatory to making tea. He was thus engaged when the sound of a horse's hoofs was heard along the highway, and presently the figure of a horseman appeared approaching at a rapid trot. As it came near to the group on the wayside the horse shied violently, springing from one side of the road to the other, so that its rider, a dark, middle-aged man, in an old-fashioned cloak, was almost thrown from the saddle. Uttering a fierce oath, he recovered himself, and, reigning in the frightened animal, looked angrily around; then, seeing the cause of his mischance, he forced his horse, with no small difficulty, to approach the figures by the fire.

"Who are you?" he demanded, in harsh peremptory tones. "What are you doing here?"

The young man, pipe in mouth, looked up at him with a smile, but made no reply.

"What are you? Vagrants? Do you know this place is private?" And he pointed with his riding whip to a printed "Notice!" fixed close to the gate upon the stem of a large fir tree.

"I beg your pardon," said the young man, with the utmost sangfroid: "we are, I imagine, on the Queen's highway, and there, with your permission, we purpose to remain for the night."

Struck by the superior manner of the speaker, the new-comer looked at him in some surprise, but with no abatement of his haughty manner. He then glanced at Tim, who was busy with the kettle, from Tim to the gray mare and from the gray mare to the house on wheels. The scowl on his face deepened and he turned his fierce eyes again on the young man.

"Let me warn you that these grounds are private. I suffer no wandering vagabonds to pass that gate."

"May I ask your name?" said the young man, in the same cool tone and with the same quiet smile.

"What is my name to you?"

"Well, not much, only I should like to know the title of so amiable a person."

The other condescended to no reply, but walked his horse towards the gate.

"Here, fellow!" he cried, addressing Tim. "Open this gate for me!"

"Don't stir," said his master. "Let our amiable friend open the gate for himself."

With an angry exclamation the rider leaped from his saddle, and, still holding his horse's reins, threw the gate wide open. Then, still leading his horse, he strode over towards the young man, who, looking up, saw that he was nearly six feet high and very powerfully built.

"My name is Monk, of Monkshurst," he said. "I've a good mind to teach you to remember it."

"Don't be afraid," was the reply. "Monk, of Monkshurst! I shall be certain not to forget it, Mr. Monk, of Monkshurst! Tim, is the water boiling?"

For a moment Mr. Monk, as he called himself, seemed ready to draw his riding whip across the young man's face, but, conquering himself he surveyed him from head to foot with savage anger. Nothing daunted, the young man returned his stare with something like supreme contempt. At last, muttering beneath his breath, Mr. Monk turned away, and, leading his horse into the avenue, closed the gate and remounted; but even then he did not depart, but remained some minutes seated in the saddle, scowling over at the encampment.

Thus occupied, his face and figure set in the gloomy framework of the trees, he looked even more forbidding than before. His face, though naturally handsome, was dark and tempestuous with passions, his eyes deep-set and fierce, his clean-shaven jaw square and determined. For the rest, his black hair, which was thickly mixed with iron-gray, fell almost to his shoulders, and his upper lip was covered with an iron-gray moustache.

At last, as if satiated with his scrutiny, Mr. Monk turned his horse round with a fierce jerk of the rein and rode rapidly away in the shadow of the wood.

CHAPTER II.

LEAVES FROM A YOUNG GENTLEMAN'S JOURNAL.

"Before setting forth on this memorable pilgrimage to nowhere, I promised a certain friend of mine, in literary Bohemia, to keep notes of my adventures, with a view of future publication, illustrated by my own brilliant sketches. I fear the promise was a rash one—firstly, because I am constitutionally lazy and adverse to literary exertion, and, secondly, because I have, as yet, met with no adventures worth writing about. Not that I have altogether lost my first enthusiasm for the idea. There would be novelty in the title at any rate, 'Cruises in a Caravan,' by Charles Brinkley, with illustrations by the author, photographic frontispiece, the caravan with Tim as large as life, smiling self-consciously in delight at having his picture taken. My friend B— has promised to find me a publisher, if I will only persevere. Well, we shall see. If the book does not progress it will be entirely my own fault; for I have any amount of time on my hands."

"CLEAR HAVANA CIGARS"

"La Cadena" and "La Flora." Insist upon having these brands.

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Head's Sarsaparilla has won unequalled SUCCESS.

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