

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HILL OF EGYPT.

Yet even now, the dark eyes beneath their happy brows sparkled with intelligence and fire; the deep voice, in which he passed his just or troiled his chorus, spoke of health and strength and vital energies unimpaired by age. He had removed the pipe from his mouth, and was plugging Parson Gale for the twentieth time, when Walf stepped into the firelight, bowed her head in a graceful salutation, and stood silent before him with her arms crossed on her breast.

The old man stared at this beautiful apparition for some seconds without a word, obviously congratulating himself, the tribe, and the Romany people in general, on the possession of so favorable a specimen of their race. Presently he chuckled, took a pull at his flagon, and spoke out:

"Ay, ay," said he, "it's you, is it, my pretty lass? No need to tell me who you are, my rinkyety tawny, my delicate brown beauty! There's not such another face as that in the tribe, nor there hasn't been since Lavinia tripped over the border out of Cumberland to be an old man's wife, who had one too many already. And that's a score of years ago, and more. Parson Gale! Parson Gale, I say, can your Reverence show us such a pair of eyes in North Devon? I dare you to do it; or such a walk, such a shape, such a foot and ankle as that? We have but one Thyras in the tribe, Parson, and there she stands. Don't be shame-faced, man! Look at her well!"

But for an impatient tap of the little foot, Walf might have been a statue, so immovably did she retain the posture of humility that the etiquette of Duke Michael's court prescribed on a first presentation. Even among the gipsies their rose a murmur of admiration, called forth by her unusual beauty and assured bearing, suggestive of modesty and self-respect. The Parson, a veteran toper, was still sober enough, notwithstanding his potations, to recognize the girl he had seen and insulted at Katerfelto's door. He was also wise enough to reflect that here, amongst her friends and kinsmen, any allusion to that meeting would be injudicious and unsafe. The gipsies were ready with their knives, their blood was heated with drinking, the coombe was lonely and secluded; his horse stood tethered two hundred yards off, and he was a long way from home. He glanced respectfully, almost impudently, in Walf's face, while he replied with a discretion for which he deserved some credit:

"There's many a likely lass in North Devon, my lord duke, though I won't say they come up to the beauty and wisdom of the Egyptian, but I'm no great judge of such matters myself. They don't belong to my cloth and my calling. I know a good deal when I see him, or a game-cock; I can tell the points of a pacing nag, or the slot of a warrantable deer, but when you talk of black eyes and blue, chestnut hair and brown, I'm at fault—that's where I am. No, no, I'm a far better judge of your strong al."

"Well said, Larson!" exclaimed the duke, "you're one of my sort, I see, and a right good fellow, too. Ah! if your Reverence and I could make the world again, wouldn't we? At fewer women in it, and more drink? We, your ways, my lass," he added, nodding to Walf, "you're black enough, and comely enough, to turn an older head than mine, and I guess I'm not far from a hundred. My service to you, Parson, we'll trouble no more of us at the potticave. The night is young, and that cask 'till half empty yet."

But Walf, while she stared, bestowed on Abner Gale a glance of such deep meaning as to puzzle him exceedingly. While he passed the cup and the jest with his entertainers, discussed the past wrestling-bout, of which he was good enough to express approval, and even condescended to sing a song in praise of that manly exercise, his thoughts persistently reverted to the tawny delicate face, with its mournful beauty, the large dark eyes that looked into his own so sad and wistful, yet with fierce impatient longing, like those of some wild animal from whom man had taken away its young.

CHAPTER XIX.

TEMPTED SORE.

There were few better horses in the West of England than Parson's Gale's black nag, a sleek, a beast on which he had performed many surprising feats of speed and endurance for trifling wages amongst his friends. It speaks well for the favorable impression made by their clerical guest on his entertainers that the gipsies allowed him to retain

as he lay down to sleep in his tattered blanket, "if he is to leave the Romany no richer than he came, these tent? I could have chored that gey, that good black nag, ay, stolen it twenty times over, while they cupped their ears by the fire, and sold it back again, as likely as not, to the Parson himself fresh and sober, at Barnstaple Fair before harvest was done. And now I should like to know how any one of us is the better for this visit? Though he sings a good song, I'll not deny, and takes his drink as free as old Michael himself." Then, hearing the game-cock he had stolen stirring in its coop, "I'm thought better of his grievances and dropped asleep, soothed by the reflection that the hospitality of his people had not been without some return, nor his ingenuity wholly thrown away.

In the meantime Parson Gale, sitting rather loose in the saddle, was rounding the head of the coombe in which he had been so hospitably treated, with a wandering eye, flushed cheek, and brain dizzy, from the strength of his potations. A harvest moon high in heaven, flooded the moor with light, so that the good horse picked his way through the heather, avoiding the level patches of bog as easily as at noonday. Cassock had learned from a foal to mind his own footsteps, to look out for himself in the scanty pastures he shared with the mountain sheep or wild red-deer on the hills where he was bred, and could climb the rush-grown swamps around the Black Pits of Exmoor, safe and swift as the very bittern that flitted across those lonely haunts. Going freely from his shoulders, but collected and prepared for effort behind the saddle, with head low, ears point, and the froth flying lightly from his bit, as he swayed at every stride to the turn of his rider's hand, he could sweep around at a gallop over ground where an unaccustomed horse would have stuck fast up to the girths before it had gone fifty yards. That sense, too, which we call instinct in the brute, because of its superiority to the power we call reason in the man, forbade him to venture on any surface wholly incapable of affording foothold; and it would have required all the persuasions of consummate horsemanship from his rider to beguile Cassock into a real, unmitigated, faithless Devonshire bog. The horse was bred on the moor, and on the moor had never yet met his match. To-night he seemed more careful than usual, edging from side to side under his burden, as though conscious that on him, the drinker of water, must devolve the duty of balancing his master, the drinker of ale. He knew his way home, too, and could have found it like a dog; nor would he have objected to increase the pace considerably had he received the slightest inclination that his lord was inclined for a gallop.

The Parson, however, had fallen into a meditative mood; such a mood as might possess a rough imaginative nature amongst the fairest scenes in England on a mellow autumn night. He paced along the sheep-track Cassock had selected at a walk, now stroking his horse's neck with maudlin kindness, now looking about him over the moonlight heather in affable approval; anon sighing deeply, and raising his eyes to heaven, with a meaningless smile.

Yet was his brain busy too, busy with stirring memories, morbid fancies, wild speculations—all the grotesque ideas that crowd into a man's mind when imagination is stimulated and judgment warped by the influence of strong drink. He seemed lifted, as it were, out of himself, and incorporated with that external nature of which he was perhaps a more faithful worshipper than he knew. He felt as if he could ride the moonbeam with the fairies join in its moan with the spirit of the water-lily, swept aloft with the spirit of the air or chase over its mountain ridges the spirit of the moor. Speaking words of encouragement to Cassock, he started at the sound of his own voice. The brushing of his horse's legs, knee deep in heather, made his blood run cold, for it seemed to him that some phantom rider was at his heels. What if the devil in person, on a coal-black steed, were to come along side and accost him, daring him to some break-neck gallop over rocks and precipices, that his own dead body and horse's might be found, crushed and mangled in their fall, when the sun rose? He had heard of such things, and said to himself he would scorn to refuse the challenge, and would defy the devil then and there, less in the confidence of a good conscience than in the evil courage of despair. He wished, though, that he had filled his flask down yonder before he left the gipsy-tents. A nip of brandy would do him a world of good just now, and keep out the night air. Then, with the inconsistency of his condition, he threw open his waistcoat and loosened the kerchief round his throat.

Presently the man within the man, the working partner in the firm, who never sleeps, never gets drunk, never loses his consciousness nor his identity, even when confused by alcohol have numbered to insensibility his associate's weaker brain; the man who reproves us when we are wined, who laughs at us when we are fools; to whom we make apologies for weakness, and excuses for crime, began to separate himself, as it were, from the corporeal Parson Gale, and take him to task with half-indu-

he is but a ten-stone man. It won't do, Abner Gale—it can't go on! You will be coming your nerve next, and what is to become of you then? Cassock, my boy, you'll hardly know your master when he's afraid to ride! But it hasn't come to that yet. Take a pull, my lad, before it's too late. You've seen many a man as sober as a judge, who is as happy as a king! It wouldn't be such a bad life, after all, to shoot, and hunt, and fish, where you know every hazel in the copse, every tuft on the heather, every pebble in the stream; to look after your parish, speak a kind word to your poor, and come back at night, hungry and happy, to meet a loving welcome in your own home. Pull yourself together, Abner Gale; for all your reddened face and grizzled hair, there's many an older man than you goes wooing still. What more should a girl want than bone and muscle, a good heart, and an easy temper—your temper is easy enough when you're not put out—a joint at the kitchen fire, and a slate roof over her head? So why should the like best lass in all the West Country say nay? Abner Gale! Abner Gale! there was one chance left, and may-be you lost it to-day, getting drunk with a parcel of tinkers and gipsies on the open moor."

Then the outer man reined in his horse; and while Cassock croaked the luxuriant leather under his nose, looked long and wistfully over a waste of uplands to where the moonlight broke in glints of gold upon the Severn Sea. Below him yonder lay the sweep of Porlock Bay, and not a stone's throw from its edge, lulled by the lap and ripple of the tide, slept the only woman on earth he wished to call his wife.

But was it too late? Each by each, he recapitulated, with a certain grim humor (for the night-air had not yet thoroughly sobered him), the advances he had hazarded, the rebuffs he had received. Were these not sufficiently explicit? Were those but the resources of maidenly reserve and shame?—Or was there somebody she liked better?

Bright and clear as the coloring of a picture came back the scene he had witnessed when he found the stranger, sitting on the rocks by her side. She had been more silent than common, he remembered, after the new visitor took his leave; but he never thought her so beautiful, never noted so deep a lustre in her eye, so rich a color in her cheek. Was it possible? Such things had happened before. Could it be that she already loved this come-by-chance, and that he, Parson Gale, must be worsted in the one object of his life; must run second in the race he would barter his very soul to win?

And now, had the devil been, indeed, following on his track, had he ridden alongside, stirrup to stirrup, and offered him his fiendish assistance, the evil spirit could not have more fully possessed the man than while he ground a savage curse between his teeth, on himself, his horse, his fellows, the brute creation, all nature, animate and inanimate, to think that he should have lost Nelly Carew, the girl he had coveted from her childhood, to an unknown stranger, the acquaintance of a day. Somebody must pay for it. There should be no mistake about that! Perhaps it was less Nelly's fault than her new friend's, this young springing, who came into the West forsooth, with his town-bred manners and his town-made clothes, to rob honest men of their own. But town or country, the best of them should not perch on Parson Gale's moor without hearing of it. He only wished he could find out something more about him, that was all. If the devil himself offered to back him up now, he would drive no hard bargain, but pay fair market price for his help!

Cassock started violently, with a loud and prolonged snort. A more sober rider might have been both alarmed and unsteady, so suddenly did the animal swerve aside from a dusky figure that rose against the sky out of its very path; but a good horseman's balance seems little influenced by unsteadiness of brain, and the Parson felt a thrill of triumph rather than fear, in the wild fancy that his awful wish had been granted, and the powers of evil had consented to afford him the assistance he required.

"Speak up!" he exclaimed in a fierce and threatening voice, the more angrily, perhaps, that he felt his flesh creep with superstitious dread. "If you come straight from hell, I'll have a word with you before you go back. Steady, Cassock, my lad! What, you know her, do ye? and it's only the little gipsy-lass after all!"

The figure, dim and phantom-like as it stood there beneath the moon, threw back its scarlet hood, and revealed to the Parson's excited senses, no spirit from below, but Walf's tangible beauty, pale indeed, and careworn, yet strangely attractive still, with its wild, sad eyes, and wealth of raven hair.

She laid her hand on Cassock's neck, and the horse tolerated her caress, though his restless, backward-moving ear showed he was only half reassured.

"I know you," said Walf. "I've seen you before. I watched you from our tents, and waited here to make sure, Parson Gale, I can tell you something you would give ten years of your life to know."

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dered to think that for the compassing of his own eternal destruction, the Prince of Darkness, who this accosted him face to face. He had seen a Romish priest cross himself under a similar error. He would have liked now to make the holy sign, and wondered would it be any use?

Walf, it also understood his despatched his hesitation. "I can give you what you want," she said, "and I ask nothing in return." Though spoken in a low voice, almost a whisper, every syllable passed through her drum-set lips, hard, cruel, and distinct.

With returning confidence rose the coarse overbearing manner that had nearly lost this man so many friends. "Nothing for nothing," said he with a brutal laugh. "Come, lass, exchange is no robbery; speak what you have to say, and take a kiss from an honest fellow in return."

Her delicate face expressed a loathing that the vainest of men must have observed; but Walf had a task to perform, and she went through with it systematically, to the bitter end.

"The man you seek," she said, "is in your reach. The man who slew your brother sleeps to-night within three leagues of you, in the hamlet by Porlock Bay. When you stand face to face with John Garnet, tell him that the gipsy-girl he betrayed delivered him into your hand."

The words were hardly spoken before she disappeared behind the abrupt ridge of moor that overhung the coombe, with a rapidity that seemed, indeed, like the vanishing of a ghost. The Parson could realize the startling fact, that this stranger, whom he already hated with an instinctive hatred, was the man he had sought in vain for weeks, swearing to hunt him down to death in atonement for a brother's blood—she was gone; and he rubbed his eyes in sheer amazement, almost doubting, even now, whether this had been a vision of fancy, or a creature of real flesh and blood.

None the less did he resolve to take advantage of her communication, and riding homeward across the moor, completely sobered by this mysterious interview, determined to lose no time in setting about the destruction of his enemy.

But Walf, traversing aimlessly up and down, wandered through the woods till the moon set, regardless of cold, discomfort, or fatigue, callous even to the weight of misery that benumbed her brain, causing her to move unconsciously, here and there, with smooth mechanical gait, like one who walks abroad, having mind and senses fettered in the thralldom of a dream.

CHAPTER XX.

THE COLD SHOULDER.

Lady Bellinger at least was pleased. When her lord, reflecting that the robbery he had sustained would render abortive his journey to the West, ordered the horse's heads to be turned for London, his wife accepted this alteration in their plans with a fervor of gratitude that sufficiently indicated her dread of a prolonged tete-a-tete with her husband. Nor was his lordship unwilling to resume the dissipations of the town, though entertaining shrewd misgivings as to the reception he was likely to meet with from the sovereign and his ministers. In war, in politics, or in love—in public affairs, as in private, there is no excuse for failure! Success does not necessarily imply merit; but merit, in the eyes of mankind, is a less valuable quality than success. There has been shrewd and prosperous managers of the world's most important matters, who have gone so far as to lay down the practical rule: "Never employ an unlucky man!"

Lady Bellinger was not obliged to have recourse to her drops more than half-a-dozen times between Hounslow and London on the return journey. She contradicted my lord hardly twice as often, and was good enough to express a qualified approval of the scenery, the weather, even the roads, which last were execrable. Mistress Rachel, too, seemed pleased to think she was on her way back to civilized life, fresh from an adventure that made her a heroine in her own eyes. The champion with the bland-brush was already reinstated in her favor; the other servants, by dint of frequent excuses for their pottrooney, and by talking the matter over till they had multiplied a hundred-fold the number and weapons of their assailants, were assured they had shown a fair amount of courage; and the whole party, with the exception of its chief, drove back in the highest spirits through the leafy glades of Kensington, to their town residence in Leicester square. But Lord Bellinger's heart sank as he approached his home. Even for a man of pleasure there is something exceedingly fascinating in a political career, and here had he failed the very first time he was put to trial! It is hard to fall and break one's neck from the very lowest round of the ladder! Had he managed his business discreetly and well, no doubt his name would have been entered on that mysterious roll which prime ministers are

man; and observing a knot of members conversing in the corner, one of whom he had the scanty sheet of the North Briton in his hand, felt persuaded they must be engaged in discussing his politics, his shortcomings, his inefficiency as a lord-lieutenant, and even his character as a gentleman. There was something of disappointment mingled with a sense of relief to observe that his arrival caused no break in their conversation, created no more sensation than if one of the waiters had entered and withdrawn. It is unpleasant, no doubt, to occupy public attention only to be abused; but it is more unpleasant still to be ignored entirely, and to find that when we thought the world was talking about us, our name has never been mentioned at all.

"I'll be judged by Bellinger!" exclaimed the gentleman who held the paper, looking at the now-corner over the others' heads. "Bellinger knows; Bellinger shall decide; Bellinger never leaves town even for a day. Five guineas, Bellinger gives it in my favor!"

"Done!" said a little man in a plum-colored suit, with enormous ruffles at his wrists, offering his snuff-box to the referee, who looked from one to the other in vague surprise.

"The fact is this," said the little man; "our friend Sir Alexander, there, has been reading an account in the North Briton of a fellow who lives somewhere near Covent Garden, and keeps a kind of prophecy shop, where half the ladies in town go to learn each other's secrets, and tell their own. The newspaper affirms that he has been doing this trade for years; and though all the while the prophet, or whatever he calls himself, is a spy from over the water, that our ministry never found it out, Sir Alexander vows it's impossible, and appeals to you, my lord, as knowing more of the town and its wicked ways than any man in this room. What say you, Bellinger? I have only five guineas on it; but if I had five hundred, I would abide by your award!"

Lord Bellinger's presence of mind rarely deserted him; and although with the topic thus broached, the possibility of Katerfelto's treachery flashed across his brain, he answered quietly: "You do me too much honor, my lord; I cannot give an opinion. I have been in the country more than a week."

"The country!" repeated half-a-dozen voices, in tones of surprise and incredulity. "Bellinger in the country! What, in the name of all that is innocent, should take you to the country? You who have never slept a night out of town since you came of age. Think of the risks! You might have caught the milk-fever or chicken-pox! We must believe it, my lord, because your lordship says so."

"It only shows how little a fellow is missed!" replied Lord Bellinger, not too well pleased to find his absence had been unnoticed by those among whom he considered himself a man of mark. "Did you never hear of my coach being robbed; money and papers carried off; myself, my lady, and my servants made prisoners on parole by a band of gipsies; and a highwayman riding a gray horse?—On my honor, gentlemen, I believe not one of you cares a brass farthing for any earthly thing that takes place beyond ten miles from London, or two from Newmarket!"

He spoke bitterly, and with an energy so unlike his usual careless manner, and the man in the plum-colored coat gazed at him in undisguised astonishment.

"A gray horse!" repeated this nobleman, tapping his snuff-box. "The best-acted, horse I ever saw in my life was a gray, and belonged to a highwayman—a fellow they called Galloping Jack. It must have been the very man!"

"Two to one against him!" interrupted a bystander. "Ten guineas to five, my lord, that no gentleman of the road would show such bad taste as to rob Bellinger, or such deplorable ignorance as to suppose his purse was worth taking."

"I'll go you halves," said a tall youth. "I remember the gray horse, and the man in the mask who rode him; what became of the horse I never heard, but the man was hanged at Tyburn last November!"

In the confusion of tongues created by this statement, offering, as it did, a wide field of speculation, and originating many wagers on the personal identity of the robber in the mask, Bellinger felt an arm thrust under his own to withdraw him from the noisy circle into the recess of a bay-window fronting the street, while a friendly voice whispered in his ear: "Welcome back, my lord. I knew you had left the town, if no one else did. I wish from my soul these gipsies and robbers, and other scoundrels had turned you back before you reached Kensington!"

It was Harry St. Leger who spoke, his comrade and associate in many a scene of pleasure and dissipation little removed from vice, yet a staunch friend nevertheless—not to be detached by misfortune, nor daunted by disgrace. Such cases are less rare than those who hold by the laws of ethics might suppose. The growth of the bog-myrtle is fresh and fair, its fibres are tough and clinging, though it takes root in the blackest and