

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER VII.

READY AND WILLING.

I never shrink from a large stake, rejoined John Garnet, excitedly. "Deal out the cards, and leave me to play the hand!"

"That then is the game," continued his host. "Lord Bellinger took coach to-day for his last money in the West, carrying with him certain warrants from the Secretary of State, which must never reach their destination. You understand his lordship travels with his own horses, and can scarce perform the journey in less than a week. His ladyship accompanies her husband, and they sleep to-night at Hounslow, fourteen miles from here at the farthest. Such, my young friend, is the alacrity with which his servants obey the commands of King George. Without a boast, I think our side could give them a lesson in promptitude. I myself knew all about those warrants before the ink was dry. I could tell you now every word that passed between Lord Bellinger and the minister, far more accurately than my lord himself, who, to do him justice, has a retentive memory for trifles, but entertains the profoundest aversion to every kind of business. Briefly, these warrants must be destroyed before the end of a week, and I look to you for a speedy completion of the job."

John Garnet pondered. Pledged as he had been from boyhood, to the losing cause, compromised, by the fatal termination of his late brawl, with the laws of his country, and indebted for life, no less than the means of living, to this strange practitioner of many mysterious arts, the thought of shrinking from the task, thus thrust upon him, never entered his mind; but he could not conceal from himself that the undertaking was one of life and death, to be accepted resolutely indeed, but not without every precaution to insure success.

"My lord travels in his own coach, you say," he observed, thoughtfully. "How many servants does he take, and are they well armed?"

"Three or four at most," replied Katerfelto, "without counting her ladyship's waiting-maid, and one of these rides on ahead to prepare for his reception, stage by stage, during the journey. They carry a blunderbuss and two brace of pistols among them, no more."

"How far will he proceed in a day?" asked the other. "The roads are at their best just now and the night at their shortest."

"From twenty to thirty miles," answered Katerfelto. "His lordship travels in a light coach with six good horses. You had better not overtake him till to-morrow night. But these details I confide to your own wisdom and discernment. In this purse are a hundred guineas. In that cupboard a saddle, bridle, and brace of pistols. Spend the money, fonder the horse, use the weapons at your discretion, but the warrants must be in the fire before his lordship crosses the borders of Somerset, and the gentleman named in them must be warned, at all risks of life and death."

"I understand," said John Garnet, "though I do not yet see how to set about the job."

"It can be done in three ways," observed Katerfelto. "The warrants will be carefully looked after. To put them in your own pocket, you must corrupt the servants, make love to my lady, or rob my lord."

John Garnet considered a moment before he answered. "I think the best plan will be to rob my lord."

CHAPTER VIII.

A HEAVY STAKE.

The travellers spent their first night agreeably enough. The weather was fine, the inn at Hounslow roomy and luxurious. My lady seemed pleased with the fresh eggs, the country cream. My lord found amusement in the airs and graces of his hostess, who was more than flattered by the notice of so fine a gentleman. Even the servants were good enough to express approval of the ale, and lodging, and the change. Our whole party started next morning in good humor, and the very waiting-maid, who had been in tears for the last six miles out of London, protested that under certain conditions the country might be almost tolerable.

My lord's best footman, a stout high-colored personage in charge of the blunderbuss, was particularly in his attention, and

was keen-eyed to. Unkindness I have put up with many a long day, patient and forbearing, while my heart was broke, but I have a spirit of you have indeed," muttered his lordship, though you try your best to crush it, and all usage I will submit to it no longer."

It is possible her husband might have entered a more energetic protest than the "d-d nonsense" he whispered under his breath, but that his attention was diverted at this juncture to the beauty and action of a horse passing at a gallop, ridden by a young man whose seat and bearing did justice to the animal he bestrode. When Lord Bellinger, who thrust himself half out of the carriage to follow the pair with his eyes, subsided into seat, he had forgotten all about their dispute in this new excitement; my lady, however, with her face buried in a handkerchief, continued to sob at intervals, till they reached their destination for the night.

This was a hostelry enough, yet lacking many of the luxuries that rendered the inn at Hounslow so agreeable a resting-place. Mistress Rachel, alighting with a hand on the shoulder of her admirer, expressed alarm lest it might be haunted by ghosts; whereat the latter's comely cheek turned pale, while he resolved incontinently to fortify his courage with beer. The new arrivals had no reason to complain of their reception. The servants were amply regaled in the kitchen, a good supper was served for my lord and my lady in the parlor. The choicer meats vanished in profound silence, which Lord Bellinger tried more than once to break; but, finding his efforts ineffectual, and knowing by experience the obstinacy of his wife's reserve when she was "out of spirits," he gave up the attempt, and applied himself to the Burgundy his host brought in person. He finished the bottle as her ladyship, in dignified silence, retired to bed; and ringing the bell for another, felt creeping over him the accustomed longing for cards, dice, company—some excitement in which to spend the evening.

"Landlord," said he, as that stout and stolid personage entered the room with a cobwebbed bottle and a cork-screw, "can you play piquet?"

The landlord smiled foolishly. He did not know what his lordship was driving at.

"Fetch a pack of cards," continued my lord, "and I will teach you."

The landlord excused himself in considerable alarm. "It was too much honor," he said; "he doubted he was too old to learn. Would his lordship like a toast of bread and an olive with his wine?"

"I had rather deal than drink," answered Lord Bellinger, "though I'm in the humor for both. If there's nobody in the house to play a game at whist or ombre, send round to the stable, and tell the ostler I will try my luck with him at all-fours."

The landlord stared; but a bright thought struck him and he observed: "There's a gentleman who wouldn't object to a game of cards, or anything in that way."

"Bravo, Boniface," was the answer. "Carry him my respects—Lord Bellinger's respects—with a bottle of your best, and say, if he is at leisure I shall be happy to wait on him at once."

The landlord delivered his message with alacrity, in less than five minutes John Garnet answered it in person at his lordship's door. He had come to his hostelry for the very purpose of obtaining the introduction he now found so easy; and rather regretted the amount of truth he had wasted after supper in considering how he should make Lord Bellinger's acquaintance, and gain his confidence sufficiently to betray it. With his best bow and pleasant smile, "plain John Garnet" stood on the threshold, and assured the other that no consideration would have induced him to permit his lordship to ascend to the Sunflower till he had himself come down to conduct him upstairs, if he would so far honor his humble apartment, where he would at once direct preparations to be made for the reception of his noble visitor.

"Zounds, man!" answered the other, who at this period of the evening was seldom disposed to stand on ceremony, "we want nothing but a bottle Burgundy and a pack of cards. They are both on the table. Let us sit down at once and make the most of our time."

"Agreed," replied his guest; "and your lordship shall choose the game and the stake."

"What say you to piquet?" asked the nobleman, opening the Burgundy, "Ten guineas a game. Twenty—fifty, if you like?"

John Garnet, reflecting that he knew nothing of his adversary's force, and was himself no great performer, modestly chose the lowest stake, and proceeded to play his hand with as much care as his own preoccupation and the strange position in which he found himself permitted. Piquet is a game requiring no less than skill and practice,

won a hundred guineas; and John Garnet was at the end of his resources.

"My lord," said he, "a man does not journey a-horse-back with the Bank of England in his pocket. I have lost to your lordship as much as I can afford to pay."

He spoke with some all-humor, and rose from the table as though to take his leave.

"One more game," pleaded Lord Bellinger, who would have paid his last guinea rather than go to bed before midnight. "Sit down again, my good sir, if we cannot play for money, we can play for money's worth."

John Garnet obeyed, with a forced smile. To be a good loser was considered one of the essentials in the character of a gentleman; and he would have sunk in his own, no less than in his companion's esteem, had he declared the unequal contest for so paltry an excuse as want of means.

"That is a fine horse you rode here," continued his lordship, shuffling the cards. "If you like to put a price on him, I will stake the sum named against the animal."

"Five hundred!" answered John Garnet. "Agreed," said the other, though the five hundred guineas he had borrowed from Katerfelto constituted all the funds he possessed in the world.

So they played one more game, and again fortune smiled on Lord Bellinger, who emptied his glass with a smack, having despoiled his adversary of the gray horse and one hundred guineas in gold.

It seemed an unpromising beginning, but John Garnet's courage rose with the exigencies of his position. He pulled a purse from his pocket, and counted down on the table one hundred guineas, piece by piece, with a good-humored smile.

"No doubt," said he, "your lordship will give me my revenge at some future time. I shall leave the horse in charge of your lordship's servants to-morrow morning. I can pledge you my word he is as good as his looks."

"What do you call him?" asked the other, carelessly. "Katerfelto," answered John Garnet, taken by surprise, and blurring out the word that first occurred to him, because it would have seemed so strange to hesitate at the name of his own horse.

Lord Bellinger started. "Do you know Katerfelto?" said he. "I have always believed that man must be the devil in person!"

"I got the horse with that name," answered John Garnet, "and his new owner can alter it at pleasure; but as I must be a-foot, early to-morrow morning, I will now take my leave, and wish your lordship good-night."

So, with many profound bows, the pair separated, and the loser, to his extreme disgust, heard Lord Bellinger's door carefully locked on the inside.

CHAPTER IX.

STRONG AS DEATH.

To have lost a hundred guineas after supper was bad enough, but to yield possession of the best horse he ever owned, and pursue Lord Bellinger into the West on foot, or by the tardy progress of a stage-wagon, was not to be thought of.

He never intended permanently to part with either, or John Garnet would have been more loth to risk his horse and to pay up his gold. The money must be recovered, and Katerfelto, as he now determined to call the animal, must be retained at all hazards. Pondering these matters deeply, the unlucky card-player only waited till the lights were out and the hotel became quiet, to put his plans in execution. An hour after midnight he had drawn off his boots, and satisfied himself that his lordship's door was securely fastened. He must find another opportunity of taking by violence that which he now despaired of gaining by artifice; and he stole out to the stable, there to saddle his horse and effect his escape. Though by no means satisfied with his night's work, he did not consider he had entirely wasted time or money. In the course of conversation, he had made himself acquainted with Lord Bellinger's intended movements, and could prepare for a bold stroke. "If I had been more fortunate with the cards," he thought, "I might have improved my acquaintance sufficiently to join them as a travelling-companion, perhaps accompanying my lord and my lady in their coach. It would have been easier then to effect my purpose, though I do not think I could have found it in me to make love to her ladyship any more than to her waiting-maid. But I never held a card!"

That hundred guineas I paid down on the table I must have back again, as surely as I do not mount part with my good gray horse. There is only one way. I must seize the warrants, and recover my money with the strong hand. Some unknown highwayman may bear the blame, and if I can but get my time in gaining the

lyth front. Oentry and escape were alike impossible; but his hand opened as if it had grasped a hot iron, when a hair-stiffed voice, that he remembered only too well, murmured, "Hold! do not hurt me. I am here to serve you. I will follow you to the end of the world."

"Waif!" he exclaimed in an accent that, smothered as it was, did not convey the very extremity of surprise; but while he spoke, the figure slid through the dark stable out into the night.

For a few seconds John Garnet was persuaded that he must be dreaming—the meeting had been so sudden, so unexpected, and so soon over. When he realized the fact, his surprise amounted to dismay. That this unpracticable gipsy-girl should have followed him, watched him, and made herself acquainted with his movements, seemed a fatal climax to the disasters of the night. For one disheartening minute he thought of riding back to London, returning Katerfelto to his former owner, and abandoning the whole project. Then he reflected, that under any circumstances he must make his escape before daylight, and so saddled his horse with what alacrity he might. Dawn was breaking as he led the animal out of the court-yard softly and at a walk, though its tramp was smothered in the snores of a stalwart ostler who slept in a loft above, for protection of the stables, and a red streak of sunrise bouned the eastern horizon, to which he looked back on emerging from a belt of coppice that skirted the high-road a mile from the inn. Bold as he was, Katerfelto shied at an object moving in the brushwood, while a slim boyish figure sprang out, laid its hand on the horse's shoulder, and looked wistfully up in the rider's face.

Waif—for it was none other—attired as a country lad, and only the more beautiful for her disguise, seemed to anticipate no less affectionate greeting than she was prepared to offer. But already she knew every change of the face she had studied so fatally, and her own fell, while she marked the displeasure that settled on the brows and about the lips she loved.

"Speak to me," she murmured, "for pity's sake. I tracked you so patiently, and followed you so far!"

"Waif, why are you here?" he asked, while his heart smote him to think of the distance travelled by that slender form, those shapely delicate limbs.

"I could not bear you to go away," replied the girl, laying his hand to her heart and pressing her cheek against Katerfelto's warm shoulder. "I could not live without you; and for the matter of that, you could not live without me. If I had let you go by yourself, every mile you rode was a mile towards your grave."

They were pacing on together, Waif walking at his stirrup with a free untiring step, that the good horse must have fairly broken into a trot to leave behind. John Garnet looked at her with an astonishment in which there was no little interest and admiration.

"What mean you?" said he, and how came the Doctor to let you go?"

"I never asked the Patron's leave," was her answer, "because, if he had forbidden me, I should have lain down to die. No; when you rode out of London, I was scarcely half an hour behind. The Patron must have been very angry when he found me gone. What do I care? I care for nobody but you. I knew where to get these clothes well enough. Do you like me in them? I might have had a horse from our people before I had done a day's journey, but I thought I could be nearer you on foot, and I've walked all the way. I'm not tired. I'd walk as far again only to hear your voice."

John Garnet was in utter perplexity. Such a phase in his affairs he had never contemplated, yet there seemed something so ridiculous in his position, bound on a political adventure thus attended, that he could not forbear a laugh.

"Nonsense, my lass!" said he kindly enough. "You must go back; indeed you must. I won't have you come a step farther. You ought never to have followed me at all."

The tears were in Waif's dark eyes, and she raised them to his face with the pleading, reproachful look of a dog that you chide when he knows he is doing right.

"Not follow you!" she repeated. "How am I not to follow you, when you are going into danger? I can share it even if I cannot keep it off; and you tell me I must go back to London! You cannot mean it. I don't think you quite understand."

"That's the truest word you have said yet," was his answer; "but I do understand that, for your own sake, you ought not to be here now. Still, if you persist in accompanying a beggar on horseback, you ought to have your share of the saddle, till you get down."

With these words, he took her by the hand, and placed his foot in the stirrup to

and resolved that now was the time to explain all she had done, all she intended to do in John Garnet's behalf. Even those women, whose station renders them slaves of custom, like other slaves, assume the wild est freedom when they have elected to throw off the yoke; but this gipsy-girl, an unsophisticated child of nature, had no scruples to vanquish, no social laws to break, found nothing to restrain the ardent expression of her feelings, save the innate delicacy of a proud and loving heart.

It was not, therefore, without such a blush and downward glance, as few men could have withstood, and none, perhaps, less firmly than John Garnet, that she announced her resolution.

"I shall never desert you till you have performed your task in safety. It is right you should know it. But—but—I cannot expect to accompany you like this. Only promise that you will not try to leave me behind, and never fear, but I can find my way from place to place, and be at hand when I am wanted, without shaming you by my presence. The gipsy-girl is proud to give her life for you, though you may blush to acknowledge one of my people as your friend!"

"Blush!" repeated John Garnet, and perhaps because their faces were so near together, the blushing seemed all on the other side. "I would never blush to own a true friend; and Waif, my pretty lass, you have proved yourself more than a friend to-day. You say that I am in danger; I know well enough that I soon shall be; but my head is out of the halter as yet, and I see not how you could help if it were in!"

"Out of the halter!" said Waif. "How little you fear and how little you seem to care! Do you think I was not listening at the door when Abner Gale came to the Patron thirsting for the man's blood who took his brother's life? You know not our people, John Garnet, nor the gifts that nature bestows on us, instead of health and home, bed and board, gold and silver, houses and land. Do you believe the gipsy can forget a path once trod, a voice once heard, a face once seen? I was dancing in Taunton Fair, when Abner Gale, one of your priests, as you call them, tossed me a bit of silver, with a coarse laugh and a brutal jest. The gipsy has no feelings to wound, no character to sustain, no honor to defend, but she has the instincts and the memory of a dog for friend or foe! Parson Gale had better have bitten his tongue through and kept his silver in his pocket. I know his home, his habits, his haunts, his vices, as I know my own ten fingers. I listened because I hated him. But when I heard more, I listened on, because—because—I loved you!"

It was wrong, no doubt, scandalous, shocking, if not entirely without excuse; but something in the proximity of those two young faces again made the girl blush deeper than before.

"There are no secrets too close for the Patron," continued Waif, "and as you have seen, people come from far and near to consult his art. This man's errand was to discover your hiding-place and hunt you down to death. He gave the Patron money—golden guineas—I heard them jingle. He was in earnest—bitter earnest, and so am I!"

"But what said the Patron?" asked her listener. "I thought he was my friend."

"The Patron is every man's friend," answered Waif, "who is willing to do him service, or to pay him gold. He promised to betray you when the moon was full, but that very night he set you out of London on his own affairs, and I followed close, lest evil should befall, for I knew you were journeying to the West."

Laughing lightly, he asked if that was a dangerous quarter, and whether the Wise Men, who come there from the East, were ancestors of her own?

But Waif scorned to enter on the subject of genealogy with one who could neither believe nor understand her claims to a descent coeval with the earliest history of man. Her tone was grave and almost stern, while she looked him steadfastly in the face and proceeded with her warning.

"When a stag goes down to the water, where an enemy waits to take away his life, the voice of a child, or the wail of a woman's hand, is enough to turn him back into the moor. Abner Gale lives in the very country to which you are bound. I know the man, John Garnet, and I will save you from his vengeance, though I swing for it—there! Now will you let me come with you and help you as best I can?"

John Garnet did not hesitate long. True, he was unable to stifle certain scruples, while he reflected on the dangers into which this wilful girl was running of her own accord, on her loss of character, if indeed she had any character to lose, and the inconvenience he would himself experience in accounting for such a travelling companion, however well disguised; above all, on the advantage he was taking of a professed devotion that he could not but