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CLARA CHILLINGTON;
OR,
THE PRIDE OF THE CLIFF.
A STORY OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.
BY
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CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARATIONS COMMENCED.

The threats of Sir Harry Chillington being conveyed by Clara to Charles Freeman, he thought them to be only bluster, and took no further heed of them. Indeed, for all the feeling manifested by the baronet, he fondly hoped that time or circumstances would reduce his opposition, and that ultimately a reconciliation might be effected. They made no secret of their engagement, and the rage of the baronet he heard only as the sound of distant thunder, with no thought that the storm would collect and burst upon him. He knew the man could threaten fiercely, but he had never heard him spoken of as being famous for courage. That he would make an attempt on his life he had no thought, and apart from this he had no apprehension of danger.

Yet although Charles Freeman was fearless, it was otherwise with his friends, and Jacob Winter was in a high state of nervous agitation on the matter. The old man would on no account advise his protégé to lower his flag to the enemy, nor to abandon the prize he had taken in tow; he loved the exercise of pluck, and would rather he should fight so long as his timbers could hold together; but still he thought it only a matter of prudence to keep a good lookout, and never to set sail but under a convoy. Could the old captain have had his own way, his young friend would have walked about watched and guarded, as though he were a lunatic.

These fears on the part of his friends only made him more careless in his manner; for he hoped that by practising a fearless nonchalance he should ultimately destroy the anxious dread they entertained for his welfare.

Uncle Jacob was not alone in his anxiety for the safety of Charles Freeman, and when he little thought of it the eyes of the guardian of his boyhood were following him from place to place. Dick Backstay was one with his rival in caring for their common friend, and the annoyances which at different times they had indulged in were lost sight of in their mutual efforts. In watching for his welfare, the old men became reconciled; and as both of them were positively nervous on the subject, they became equally worried by the threats of Sir Harry. The eyes of Dick Backstay having become dimmed from age, and this fact destroying his power to see at such a long range as formerly, that he might not be prevented watching, Uncle Jacob bought and presented to him a powerful telescope.

Could Charles Freeman have known the espionage under which he moved about, it would possibly have produced a severe altercation between himself and his friends. But this was adroitly kept from him, and, while living in perfect liberty, he existed beneath the most watchful interest.

The night was dark when the skipper of the *Nancy* visited the camp of Jethro Lee. Having arranged matters on the French side of the channel, his object in visiting the gypsy was to capture and carry off their victim. The smuggler had told such of his crew as he thought it best to make acquainted with the subject, and had won their silence and the promise of aid by reward. All that remained now was to devise a plan for bringing him into their toils.

Affairs being set in motion, it became necessary that their future conduct should be marked out in detail. That their prey was in the neighbourhood they knew, for the gypsies seldom lost sight of him. To produce the course they must pursue rested with Jethro. He was equal to the task; his life had been one of perpetual scheming; it was the distinctive feature of his clan; and more serious work than that now occupying his mind had been effected by him. The two men, therefore, sitting in front of the tent, the smuggler began:

"Well, Jethro, and what is to be the plan for seizing this young fellow? We have put our hand to the job, and must now go on."
"You house-dwellers are wise," replied the gypsy.

"Humbug! You have always that slang on the tip of your tongue."
"We are only gypsies."

"That's true; but, being gypsies, this sort of thing is more in your line than mine."
"What is your plan?"

"I have none."
"Have none!"

"No; I can fight and work and steer the *Nancy* with any man along the coast, but I'm no schemer."

"Good; then you will give yourself up to my direction."

"If you don't form a plan, there will be none made by me."

"Your part on this side the water is easy to perform."

"The easier the better."

"This is your work; let your vessel be in readiness in Eastweor Bay to-morrow night by eleven o'clock. Be sure you are there, and have a small boat near the shore, that when you hear the well-known whistle you may run in, and taking the prisoner on board convey him to the *Nancy*."

"Is this all I shall have to do?"

"Are you not satisfied?"

"Yes, and am glad enough there is nothing more."

"Well, that is all your part of the work here, the rest I must undertake myself. You have made it right on the other side?"

"Quite so."

"Then let me advise you to get back to your home as quickly as you can, and take care that no one sees you; to be detected in this matter would be to produce a strange sensation in the throat."

Having drained another mug of brandy, and lighting his pipe, the smuggler took his departure. When he had gone, Jethro became profoundly abstracted. Thoughts unpleasant were chasing each other through his brain. His only daughter must be engaged in this affair; there was no help for it, and reluctant as he was she should become mixed up in it, he knew that her own repugnance would be greater. "That child, my only one, has never been of a gypsy disposition; she has the features and form, but she has not the soul of the tribe. Yet she must do it; there is no alternative, and I must now see her." Having spoken thus to himself, he arose and sought her tent. For a long time the gypsy remained there, and until the morning star became blotted out by approaching day.

The gypsy's daughter was tall, graceful, a complexion deeply olive-tinted, eyes dark and brilliant, which shot forth irresistible determination, and a contour that was perfectly beautiful. The majestic air with which she swept through the camp, and the reverence her presence imposed on that lawless crew, gave to her the appearance of being some princess of ancient Egypt receiving the homage of her subjects. The daughter of Jethro was the pride of her tribe, and justly were they proud of her, for not only was she beautiful in person, but she possessed an intelligence and moral capability far beyond her associates. Nor was she wanting in the noblest courage, while in delicacy of taste and refinement of habit, she was not to be surpassed. This young gypsy was the idol of her mother, and in the pride of her heart at the appearance she presented she surmised her the Princess. Seldom did she leave the camp, and whenever she did it was to perform some work that others of less delicate taste and skill could not discharge.

It required a good deal of persuasion to enlist the Princess into the service of her father, and when she yielded her consent it was more from a sense of duty than from any inclination she had for the work.

On the morning after the night the smuggler had been at the camp, Rachel might have been seen going in the direction of the Priory in company with the Princess. That his daughter should visit the Priory formed part of the plan of Jethro, and thither she was now directing her footsteps. The design of this visit was, if it were possible, to obtain an interview with Clara, and to elicit from the servants anything they might know of communications passing between herself and Charles Freeman.

This latter effort was left to Rachel, who went directly to the servant's hall, a place she was quite familiar with. The Princess remained in the pathway where Clara frequently walked and where she was most likely to meet her alone. Nor had she long to wait, for the beautiful morning had tempted her forth, and passing on, bearing in her hand a volume of a favourite author, she sought the shadow of a noble oak, where she might sit and read undisturbed.

The beauty of the surrounding scenery as it lay bathed in the morning sun, filled the soul of Clara with delight, and placing her hand on the gnarled stem of the tree, she became abstracted as in a delicious dream. The gypsy, who watched her approach, having waited until the servant, placing a seat for her mistress, had retired, and Clara had become absorbed in her reading, stealthily drew nigh to where the latter was sitting. Noiselessly she approached, and as she stood looking on the beautiful Saxon, a pity for her fate passed through her soul. Could nature have taken its own course, those two would have been friends, and the Princess would have told the plot formed for crushing her happiness, and ranged herself on the side of the defence. But that conflicting interest of mankind which so often deadens the heart's purest

and noblest feelings, and so frequently leads the human race to consider each other as natural foes, restrained her.

A sound purposely made by the gypsy on the grass now aroused the attention of Clara, who gazed in wonder at the beautiful form approaching her. A person more beautiful, she thought, she had never seen; and as she approached, with her long black hair falling in luxuriant tresses and partly covering her half-bared bosom, a passing thought that she was some naiad from a neighbouring stream entered her mind. On seeing the eyes of Clara fixed on her, the gypsy bent herself with a perfect grace, and then, as with a downcast look she still advanced, in the low tones of a rich musical voice she began:

"Pardon me, my lady, in thus intruding on your retreat, but it is an errand of mercy which prompts me."

The silvery tones in which the gypsy spoke arrested the ear of Clara and enchanted her, while the graceful manner in which she stood before her, and the fact that the errand which brought her there was mercy, at once disarmed her of all prejudice and fear.

"What is it you require of me?" she enquired.

"It is this: One of our tribe, and a dear friend of mine, is suddenly seized with a sickness which baffles our skill, and knowing that my lady has influence with the physician of the district, I have come to you requesting a note of introduction to him."

"Why not go to him yourself?"

"I would, but our tribe is in disrepute with the faculty, and none of them care to approach us."

"I know not if I should be justified in responding to your request."

"Do you imagine that it will be a matter of cost that you are unwilling to confer this favour? Should such be your thoughts, I am ready to deposit with you what is of far more value than the physician's fee."

"Such are not my thoughts."

"My lady fears, and justly, too, that such an act will expose her to being suspected of having dealings with the gypsies. Why was I born an outcast! Pardon me, but was your young heart ever enamoured by affection?"

"Why do you ask me such a question?"

"Because if such were ever the case you can sympathize with one who sees the object of her love withering before her eyes under the force of disease, and without the power to command the hand of science to stretch forth itself for his deliverance."

The feeling with which the gypsy spoke these words aroused the sympathy of Clara, and enlisted her kindness.

"How long is it since your friend was taken sick?"

"A week since, my lady."

"And a physician has not yet visited him?"

"We have employed the skill of our tribe, and that has failed."

"Does your tribe practice the art of healing?"

"We have the knowledge of those simples which are ordinarily effective, but this is a case which baffles our skill."

"Follow me; and, laying aside her book, she arose and hastened toward the Priory. Having written a note to her own physician, requesting him, as a personal favour, to visit the dying gypsy, she delivered it into the hand of the dark-skinned beauty.

"Thank you," she replied, on receiving the note; and as she looked into the face of Clara she heaved a sigh, and the tear-drop floated in her large black eyes.

"You are welcome," said the heiress of the Priory, more than ever interested in the gypsy.

"May I offer you this golden band in security for the payment of the physician's fee?" As the gypsy spoke she drew from beneath her cloak a belt of ancient make, worked most curiously and in the most delicate taste with thread of gold. The attention of Clara was excited by that thing of beauty; the gypsy saw it, and continued: "This article is an heirloom to the leader of our tribe; its antiquity is great, and tradition assigns it a place when we were not a fugitive race, despised and rejected. With us it is an article of great value, but I will leave it with you as a pledge for the payment of all expenses incurred through your kindness."

"By no means. I admire the beauty of the article, but I will not receive it."

"Have I then found one who can trust to the honor of a gypsy?"

"I will to yours," replied Clara, confidently.

"Thank you, my lady," said the gypsy, as with a grace she took her departure.

"How sad!" sighed Clara, as she resumed her seat and her book, "that one so beautiful should be thus associated. She must be faithful; a countenance of that type can never be deceptive."

"How sad!" sighed the gypsy, when she had got beyond hearing, "that one so beautiful should be tossed on the waves of sorrow." And as she spoke she loathed herself that she had been practising deceit on one so good.

Rachel was waiting for her daughter, and instantly she saw her, she enquired:

"My Princess, have you succeeded? Have you obtained the note, and does she keep the girdle?"

"I have obtained what you sent me for; and here is your treasure."

"I knew she would not retain the girdle; it would have been a bad job had she done so; but offering it to her gave a colour to the deception.

I should think you are well pleased with your morning's work?"

"I am not; nor with myself for doing it."

"My Princess, you have no heart for deception."

"None, truly; and I wish that my lot had fallen among the humblest house-dwellers rather than where it is."

"The interest of our tribe demands this kind of practice, and the house-dweller is our common foe."

"They may well think so."

"We are a peculiar people, my Princess."

"I would that we were more common."

"You will not show to the tribe your disapproval of this work?"

"I know my duty, but I loathe myself for the deceit I have practised on one so good and beautiful."

"You must set aside your finer feelings for the good of the community."

"Tush!" was all the answer the gypsy girl deigned to bestow on the very questionable counsel, and then, with a queenly grace, she followed in silence her loquacious mother.

On reaching the camp, the success of the Princess became loudly applauded, and not least by Jethro, who forgot for the moment the gravity he usually assumed in the pleasure that this basis of his plan for the capture of Charles Freeman had been so easily secured.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAPTURE.

"That is better, my Princess," exclaimed Rachel, as she looked at a piece of paper on which were traced a number of words in an irregular form, and without any sense. "Another trial will perfect your endeavour."

Obedient to the command of her mother, the gypsy, with the note obtained from Clara lying before her, again exercised her exquisite skill on a fresh sheet of paper.

"That is perfection!" again exclaimed Rachel, as her daughter passed to her the result of another effort she has made. This time it was a note written in a fair and delicate hand, and was quickly shown to the leaders of the tribe, who pronounced it perfect.

The Princess had forged a note to Charles Freeman in the handwriting of Clara, and in a manner that would have baffled the cunning of the cleverest expert to have detected it. To secure the copy the gypsy had visited the Priory, and the tale of sorrow was fabricated to awaken the sympathies of her dupe. The design of the forged note was to induce Charles Freeman to leave home to meet a messenger from Clara by ten o'clock that evening. The request ran:

"Dearest Charles,—It is with the deepest sorrow I inform you that Sir Harry has again given utterance to his wrath in the severest execrations. I tremble for the consequences, less for my own sufferings than for yours. I pray you to be cautious, as it is impossible to point out the course his anger will take. May I entreat of you, as you regard my happiness, to be on the East Cliff to-night, certainly not later than half-past ten, when a trusty messenger from myself will meet you with further information."
"Yours forever,"

"CLARA."

P.S.—Fail not to be present at the hour named."

This clever effort of the gypsy raised her high in the esteem of her people, who believed they could trace in her all that tradition had inspired them to believe belonged to the former glories of the princes of their race. Having received the applause of the swarthy tribe, heart-sick, yet in manner calm and indifferent, she folded the note most tastefully, that it might be ready when the hour arrived to send it to its destination.

The sun which had been shining in splendour throughout the day, was sinking below the horizon, when there came forth from a tent in the gypsy encampment a man dressed in the livery of the Priory. The manner in which he touched his hat on approaching Jethro, would have assured him the reputation of being an adept in the calling of a livery servant. It was to this man the fatal note was to be entrusted for safe deliverance, and it appeared impossible that one better adapted for such a mission could be found.

Leaving the camp of the Lee's, the messenger crossed the public road, and quickly descending the sides of the cliff, pursued his way along the lower level by the sea shore. Maliciously he smiled as he passed onward to his cruel work, an evil angel, bent on destroying the happiness of those who were a blessing to the world. To see such an agent pursuing a work so fiendish might have aroused the feeling of the beholder to call for one of those accidents which unlooked for so frequently overtake the good and smite him to the earth; but such accident, had the guilty wretch, and held themselves painfully, although wisely, aloof from interfering with that man of mischief. Neither did it happen, as is sometimes the case when the wicked are plotting against the good, that the heavens themselves, as though to intimidate and turn them from their evil course, utter in the rolling thunder, and in the vivid lightning flash, the voice of warning. On this occasion the firmament was serene, and the ocean calm, save that the gentle ripplet, the effect of the feeble breathing of the east wind, agitated its surface. The shadows of evening now covered the earth, and those sou-