

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XVII.

LISTEN AND LEARN IT.

It was the old conventional world... probably been the prelude to every future attachment since men grew weary and women false; yet it was impossible to look in John Garnet's face, or listen to the tone of his voice, and doubt that this was the outcry of an unselfish heart, so loving that it longed for the happiness of another rather than its own.

Nelly's eyes filled with tears. "I care for you," she said—"I care for you; that's enough! If you were to go to prison, I should go with you. If you were to die, dear heart, I should die too."

The girl spoke truth. Who shall account for these sudden overmastering passions, that take possession of humanity to defy all considerations of self-esteem, self-preservation, probability, fitness, and, especially, common prudence? A man passes a shop in the street, catches the glance of an eye at a window, the turn of an ear in a playhouse, and a straightway, as in the taking of an epidemic, the whole system becomes impregnated with a strange and subtle poison, for which there is no antidote, and but one remedy. The disease must run its course. In a few days the fever is at its height, the delirium paramount, liver deranged, appetite impaired, brain seriously affected, and the patient, to all intents and purposes, raving mad. He is haunted by delusions, an insupportable figure is always dancing before his eyes. He forgets his business and friends, his parents and nearest, neglects his mother, his duties, wants, cousins, and in some aggravated cases, even his wife. His sleep is broken, his eye wild, his speech incoherent. He forgets his own name like a leper, and forgets the enforced isolation. He meets with no encouragement and little sympathy. His faculties, as yet unimpaired, and his latter-day patients who have recovered from the disease, shrug their shoulders and say, "It is the will of heaven, but these are the best remedies for him less of pity than contempt. The calamity is accepted as a dispensation, and nobody thinks it worth while to offer a syllable of comfort or advice, because experience has shown that the illness must at last be cured by indulgence, or die a lingering death in disappointment.

A woman, too, is liable to the same disorder, contracted even more unreasonably, and with less apparent cause. Her symptoms, if not so obtrusive, or troublesome to others, are none the less dangerous to herself. In some cases, happily but rare, they prove incurable. It is of men that the poet says, "They have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

Nelly Carew, whose life had hitherto flowed on in a calm untroubled stream, little thought the gentle, scarce perceptible pleasure she experienced in a stranger's society, on the memorable evening when she addressed him for the first time, to thank him for his courtesy, while he helped her grandfather home, that something but absolute reciprocity could apprise. The second time she saw him she found that time she admitted, the fourth she gloried in her enslavement. They had known each other barely a week, when Nelly discovered and confessed that henceforth, if life was to be passed apart from John Garnet, she would rather elect to die. He, too, considered at discretion, or rather without discretion, as soon as the blue eyes opened to the world. Willfully blind to his ruined prospects and false position, he abandoned himself to the emptiness of the hour, forgetting the past, and gazing the future—Wail, Katerfelto, Lord Bellinger, robbery, high treason, and Tyburn, which he held Nelly Carew's hand, and looked lovingly in her delicate face under the apple trees by Porlock Bay.

"I need not go to prison, and I need not die," he answered, lightly. "This is a secure being place enough. I should like to stay here for the rest of my life."

"It must be very dull," observed Nelly, "living in the hole of my apron." "I wonder what you would take for you to weary of it?"

"There could be but one answer to such an assaunt, and he was ready with it before she could explain.

"Weary of you, Nelly, from whom I have meant to part! How can you say things like that? You know you did not mean it!"

And again Nelly's disclaimer was repeated on her lips.

"Be quiet," he added, gaily. "What can a man do to make his wife happy more than I do? You are the sweetest girl in the world, and the best horse in England. I gave him a ten mile stretch on the morning when you were fast and firm. Were you dreaming?"

"It must have been Red Rube!" exclaimed Nelly, joyfully. "Did he say there were deer in Horner Woods? Oh! how I long for a gallop over the moor after a stag, and with you!"

John Garnet pondered. There would be little risk, he thought, in joining these West-country gentlemen in the hunting-field. Most of them were of his own way of thinking in politics, and for many, his ready audacity had preserved, at least temporarily, both life and lands. Even if recognized, it was unlikely he would be denounced; and then, the temptation to ride Katerfelto far ahead of the other steeds from ridge to ridge and combe to combe, sweeping over mountain and moor as though on the wings of an eagle, to hover at last alone in his glory above the dying deer, while a burst of music from the good hounds pealing louder than its roar, announced in a crash of triumph that horse, under the densifying waterfall, they had set him up to bay!

Yes, he would have a ride, he resolved, in pursuit of the red deer, at any risk and at any cost!

"Who talked about dreaming," she said, "and who is dreaming now? Where have your thoughts flown to all in a minute? They are miles and miles from Porlock. I can see it in your face."

She had already arrived at the stage of jealousy—jealousy, that was fain to be mistress of his thoughts, no less than torchbearer of superfluous endearments, she made herself mistress of their secret and overheard all their conversation. She learned the penalty that would be exacted for his late exploit, in which she had herself taken part, should his identity with the reputed highwayman he discovered by those who were already on his track. She learned in a brief period of eaves-dropping, that seemed an eternity of misery, more of his daring courage and good-humored recklessness—of those very qualities she most admired and loved in him—than she ever knew before. And, lastly, she learned that the whole scaffolding on which she so unconsciously built the edifice of her future had crumbled into ruins and crushed her own heart in its collapse.

Wail had no God to whom she could pray in this agony of sorrow; but looking round in vain appeal to sea and sky and mountain as though they were sentient beings, her large dark eyes seemed to plead with Nature, the only mother she knew, and to demand, in mute unbraiding, why her punishment was greater than she could bear?

CHAPTER XVIII.

DUKE MICHAEL OF EGYPT.

A thorough gypsy bred and born, Wail so far resembled a wild animal of the woods, that, when sore stricken, she instinctively sought her home. Scarce knowing how, she sped back to the encampment of her people, swift and straight as the red hind, that neither fails nor falters, though she carries a bullet in her breast. It was not because she expected to find comfort there, nor relief, nor even a moment's respite from pain, but she felt constrained to keep moving, always moving, at the utmost speed she could command, though as she flitted lightly from moor to moor, it seemed to her benumbed and dizzy brain that she herself stood still, while the acres of heather she traversed passed like running water beneath her feet.

Yet the sun was already down when she turned the head of a deep and lonely combe which her tribe had chosen for her resting place, and caught sight of the little points of fire that dotted its heathery ridge, toned down to dusky purple under the crimson flushes of the evening sky. Kettles were already summing before the brown, weather-worn tents, and that happy hour of food and rest had arrived which seems to recompense the gypsy for all the hardships of his wandering lot, to make amends for toil and risk, rough usage, and coarse fare, the frown of justice, the ban of society, an outlaw's life, and, too often, a felon's grave.

To-night, however, more than its usual tendency to revelry and rejoicing seemed to pervade the camp. In the first place, this particular tribe were honored by the presence of their chief, a crafty old gentleman, who chose to call himself "Duke Michael of Egypt," doubtless in memory of that celebrated vagabond, who, early in the fifteenth century, led his ragged troop through Saxony and Switzerland, leaving behind him, if we may believe the old chroniclers, a better character than might have been expected for good behaviour and honesty—nay, paying in hard money for such articles as he required from the peasantry in the countries through which he passed; an example, it is hardly necessary to observe, scrupulously followed by the Duke Michael with whom we have to do. This worthy made it a rule, so doubt, to deny himself nothing he wanted that might be had for the taking; and few matters, he often boasted, were too hot or too heavy for his conquests, but he could not

That is no mean intellect which can reign with dignity and rule with force, though the palace be but a dingy tent, the subjects a gipsy tribe. Duke Michael possessed the secret of government; and to-night, being more drunk than usual, was better than ever assured of his authority and the loyalty of his people. So loud were the bursts of hilarity in and about the great man's tent, that Wail paused to listen on a ridge of moor overlooking the camp, and forgot in her surprise, for perhaps the space of a second, the pain knawing at her heart. It was recalled ere she could be conscious of relief.

Fin Cooper's tall form, growing on her, as it were, in the daylight, was already at her side, his voice whispering in her ear—"I've watched for you, Thyra," said he, "since long before noon. The camp seems lonely and empty when you leave it for a day; and I often wonder now how we could do without you so many years! But what has been our sister's good luck? Has she returned with pockets full of gold? Has she deceived and fleeced the Gorgio, and stolen the very heart out of his breast?"

Wail smiled a bitter smile. "The Gorgio turns the tables sometimes, Fin," she answered. "When you deal out the cards to play, how can you tell who is to rise up winner?"

He looked sharply in her face. "You're tired," said he; "you that never used to be tired, no more than the wild deer in the forest, the wild bird in the air. Thyra! Thyra!" he added, and his voice came low and husky, as if an enemy's hand gripped his throat, "there's something dark came between you and me! Something that dims the light in your eye, and takes the color out of your face. What is it? Speak, girl, and tell the truth. There's times when I could put my knife into you, and make an end of it once for all. I'll do it some day, I know; I feel like it now!"

In her exceeding misery, but for the last sentence she might have told him her secret then and there; but to threaten Wail was to throw stones into the air that would fall back perpendicularly on a man's head. The gipsy girl recovered her strength and courage in the drawing of a breath. "That's a game for two players!" she answered fiercely. "I've worn a knife, too, Fin, as long as I can remember, and I keep it sharper than yours, I daresay. But what's the use of you and me wrangling? I'm not bound to tell you where I've been—when I go out—and when I come in. You're not my master, brother; not yet!"

She was sufficiently a woman to put just such an emphasis on the last word as changed his mood like magic. In a moment he was her slave again, ready to do her bidding, obey her lightest wish, no less eagerly than when he went bird's nesting for her in his boyhood, long years ago.

"But you'll tell me some day," he pleaded, bending his tall form to look in the girl's face. "You'll keep nothing from Fin, when we hang the kettle at our own tent-door in the camp of the *Vardo-mescros*, and my brothers troop in by scores to have a look at Fin Cooper's beautiful wife; you'll tell me of his words, deeds, looks, and actions. Truly, for Nelly, the pleasantest part of the whole delusion was even now at an end. To be on the brink is delightful, but to fall in love is more than uncomfortable; it is a process akin to pain. The fire looks bright and cheerful enough, but wisdom warms its hands thereat, while folly burns its fingers to the bone.

"I was thinking how comely you must look on the white pony with your hair blown about by the Exmoor breezes," said he; and Nelly seemed so pleased with his answer, that the rest of their conversation was carried on in whispers, too low to be overheard even by the "little bird on the green tree," but of which the purport may be gathered from the final sentence delivered by John Garnet, in a louder tone, as of a man who resolves to carry his point in defiance of all obstacles.

"Then I may come up and speak to your grandfather this afternoon?" She acquiesced with a timid little nod and a bright blush, that she stooped her head to hide, retiring with swift and noiseless steps towards her home.

But whatever passages of folly between these young people may have escaped notice from the "little bird on the green tree," whose own love-songs must seem to it so much more rational than "what he is saying, what answereth she," there crouched behind the hedge of the orchard one whose dark eye and tawney ear missed not the lowest whisper, the lightest gesture—whose tameless heart quivered and throbbed with every syllable, every caress, as at the stroke of a knife. If women are all jealous, even in the silks and satins and conventional fetters of civilized life, what must be the jealousy of a savage nature unreclaimed by education, untamed by principle, untaught by the selfishness—this is so essential a constituent of respectability and good sense? It is possessed by a devil, who tears and rends it, refusing to be cast out.

Wail, or Thyra, as she was called by her

dark girl passed; but the country-folk generally, though regarding her people with little favor, were not proof against Wail's flashing eyes and flattering tongue, while she returned their "good morrow" and promised them good luck. One stout farmer, riding a half broken colt, insisted on stopping to have his fortune told, crossing his broad palm with a silver shilling, and demanding in return a shilling's worth of her craft. "Three groats, uncle," said Wail, looking up in his jolly face with a rosy leer, while the goat fidgeted, and the rider, half pleased, half ashamed, hid his confusion in a "Woa! drat ye, stan' still!" and a sleep-lash laugh.

"Three is a lucky number, good gentleman."

- "Three silver groats."
Three women's lives.
Three cows, three calves.
Three scolding wives.
The first to lie at your side,
The second to lie at your feet,
The third a widow, a witch, and a bride,
They sew your winding-sheet."

The man, who had been twice married, and was not indisposed for another venture, rode on in no slight perplexity, pondering this mysterious doggerel, and more convinced than ever that the gipsy-folk, as he called them, possessed some dark and dreadful knowledge, unlimited in scope and embracing the future as the past.

With a beating heart, that yet danced in her bosom under a sense of her own happiness, Wail drew near the village of Porlock. She had decided to exercise the utmost caution in approaching John Garnet's refuge, lest her presence should in any way compromise his safety, or afford a clue to his hiding-place. For one of her race, this was no difficult task. Her gipsy experiences had taught her long ago to take advantage of every irregularity of surface, even in so open a plain as Marlborough Downs; and in such a country as West Somerset, with its narrow lanes, high tangled hedges, scattered brakes, impervious copses, valleys, coombes, and forests, rugged mountains, and broken moor, Wail could glide from point to point as secretly and almost as swiftly as the very wild deer, to which she bore some vague and fanciful resemblance. Since she told the farmer his fortune three leagues off, no mortal eye had rested on her form till she caught sight of the man she loved within three hundred feet.

Why did her color fade, her breath come quick, her blood run icy cold? There was a white dress by John Garnet's side, and that unaccountable intuition, swift and subtle as the electric spark—that instinct of the heart, which never hesitates and is never mistaken, told her the truth. This was the meeting for which she had so longed, to compass which she had cajoled Fin Cooper, deceived her people, and travelled afoot across the heather all these weary miles! Wail trembled and her knees shook; for the first time in her life she turned sick and faint.

That cruel pain of hers though was not of the kind to gain relief from insensibility. On the contrary, all her faculties seemed preternaturally sharpened, while she writhed her slim body, like a snake through tufted grass and broad dock leaves, and the luxuriant vegetation of the adjoining meadow, to a hedge that fenced the orchard, where, parting the tangled branches in her noiseless hands, she peered through, with the eager, hopeless gaze of an outcast spirit looking on the paradise it has lost. Not a smile, not a glance, not an unwise gesture of that fond, foolish pair escaped the watcher. When John Garnet stooped to kiss Nelly's brow, it seemed as if moulton lead had dropped on her own and scared it to the brain. Then it was with the white teeth clenched to keep keep back a little piteous cry, and the nimble fingers stole to her knife as though she must needs bury it in his breast, whom she loved, or hers, the rival's, whom she hated, or, better still, deep and quivering to the very half, in her own!

But strong as is the passion of jealousy, it is not, especially in the female breast, without an element of curiosity that is stronger still.

To scream, to stab, to make any over disturbance, would be to declare her presence and debar her from hearing more. Wail bit her lip till the blood came, and nerved herself to listen. Thus, as the lovers paced to and fro, taking short turns, after the manner of their kind, and stopping altogether to often-repeated pauses, for the in-all your secrets then, Thyra, won't you?"

"Perhaps!" answered Wail. "In the meantime, will you tell me what makes this stir and noise amongst our people? They are swarming down, yonder like bees about a hive."

Duke Michael came in at noon," answered Fin, "and the kettles have been singing in the smoke ever since. He brought the cart and the donkey and both his wives from the cudgel-players' country" (Cornwall), "and never halted but once to do a bit of tinkering on a moorland farm till he turned the head

"What Gorgio?" asked the girl, for whom there was but one in the world, her foolish heart beating fast, with a wild hope that in some impossible manner John Garnet might even now be a visitor to the gipsies' camp.

"Why, the Parson, as they call him," answered Fin; "the jolly Exmoor parson, who can tail an otter, harbor a stag, ride a colt, sing a song, wrestle a fall, ay, and empty a pitcher, with the cleverest Romany lad of us all. I wouldn't undertake him myself, Thyra, single-handed, not if he was sober. We laid a trap for him, howsoever, and into it he fell; so, here he is! Thyra, what makes you tremble? Do you know anything of this roystering parson? I've heard strange stories of his doings on the country side. Girl! you'll make me kill you now before you've done!" His jealousy needed but a breath to fan it into flame, yet was to be appeased no less quickly than aroused. "You're a fool, Fin!" she said with a laugh, which, though forced, seemed reassuring to her lover. "It's neither you nor this parson of yours that would make me tremble. Keep your hands off and behave yourself, or I'll go home this minute! I know the man you speak of, but I never heard any good of him. How did our people bring him into the camp, and why?"

Fin's brow cleared, while he answered her question with a laugh. "The Parson," he explained, "rears the best breed of fighting-cocks in the West of England. There was one in his pen this morning, good enough to take the game out of the gamest chirolo that ever wore spurs. He's safe in my tent now, with his head in a stocking to keep him quiet. This day week, at Devizes, he'll be worth ten, ay, twenty guineas in red gold. But the money would never have come my way, if little Ryley and me hadn't 'ced the Parson here!"

"How so?" asked Wail listlessly, for her thoughts were travelling far away.

"When he means winning," said Fin, "he trains the birds himself; and it's a job, as I've been told, to get him away from them for an hour. It would take a better Romany than me, Thyra, or little Ryley either, to chore so much as a clout off a clothes-line if the Parson was within a mile of the place. So how do you think we worked it? Why, we got up a wrestling match on the cross, you know, between Humpy Hearne and black James Lee, in honor of our old man's visit, and we 'ficed the Parson into the camp to see fair. He knows the rules of the ring and keeps them all in his head as plain as print. He's the sort that would sooner ride fifty miles to a fight than five to a prayer-meeting. So he up and puts the saddle on, and down the combe he swings at a gallop, as if he'd a spare neck in each pocket, and leaps off before old Michael, with his shovel hat in his hand. 'It's not every day,' says he, 'in our West country, that a parson comes to visit a duke. Let's have a drink,' says he, 'deep enough to do credit to both!' and with that he empties a half-pint horn of brandy, and throws it over his left shoulder for luck. There was a cheer you might have heard at Taunton. Our old Duke wasn't to be bragged at such a game as that. He answered fair and honest, gill for gill; so down they sat on a blanket by the tent-door, and they've been at it ever since. In the meantime, little Ryley he slips round over the moor and brings the chirolo back with him coop and all. It's a beautiful bird, Thyra. I'll show it you to-morrow as soon as it's light; but if I'd known the Parson could sing so good a song he should never have lost a feather out of its wing, for Ryley and me!"

Wail seemed thoughtful and preoccupied. Presently she looked up and said quietly, "I must go and show myself to our old Duke, Fin, before he's too far gone to see me. Will you come down to the tents? and, Fin, don't you speak unkindly, that's a good lad, and don't you take much notice of what I say and do. I've had a long walk in the hot harvest sun, and I'm not quite myself to-day, that's the truth!"

So she put her hands in his, and threading some half-score of tents, every one of which was deserted for the great attraction of the Duke's presence, soon reached an open space, with some thirty or forty gipsies, men, women and children, crowded round a scanty fire, laughing, drinking, smoking, and all talking at once.

It was a wild scene. Every now and then a gipsy would throw on another faggot and he pale flickering streaks of flame brought in shuffling, shadowy relief the grotesque figures of which the circle was composed. In the background stood a common tinker's cart, though it seemed wonderful that anything on wheels could have arrived in safety at this remote and solitary nook, surrounded by leagues of moor; while the donkey that drew it, calmly browsed an unexcited in the enjoyment of well-earned repose. Propping his back against the shaft, and raised some inches from the ground by his own and his wives' blankets doubled beneath him, Duke Michael of England sat in state, with a short black pipe in his hand and a newer measure containing an and