

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HARD BARBAIN.

Plodding wearily on in the smothering dog-gedly continuous fog that takes a tired hunter home, Cassock presently pricked his ears, and increased the pace of his own ac-cord, while his other heart beat fast, for a flash of activity, a low shot in front, fluttered the blue riding habit that enclosed her pretty shape, reddened the feather in the jaunty little hat that could be worn so jauntily by none but Nelly Carew. Cowslip had found a make-up for his lost ground in time for her to see the end of the run, and Nelly was riding soberly home, full of pleasant thoughts and fancies that grouped them-glees and a figure on a gray horse, skim-ming the brown moorland far ahead of all other riders, and who, last seen, alone with the hounds.

"Good even, Mistress Nelly," said the Parson, ranging alongside with an awkward bow. "Nothing amiss, I hope, with Cowslip, is it?" "Is not often the pair of you give in before the deer, but you must confess that for this once Abner Gale and the old black nag had the better of pretty Mistress Carew." His voice, hoarse and thick with conflicting feelings, startled her from her day dream. Nelly's color rose, and the consciousness that he observed it caused her to blush deeper in mingled vexation and shame.

"I made a fatal mistake at starting," said she, with a nervous little laugh, and a full stop.

"A great many women do that," granted the Parson.

"And all my calculations were wrong," confessed Nelly, without noticing the inter-ruption. "If the deer had passed under Dunker's Beacon, like the big black stag last year, and taken toll in the Barle, down by Tranter's Bridge for instance, or at Withy-pool, where would you all have been then? Your turn to-day, Master Gale, mine to-morrow. That's the rule of stag hunting, and it seems the same for most things in life."

She spoke with a flurried manner and an affection of gaiety he did not fail to detect. "The Parson's restless eye and moody brow frightened her, and glancing round on the solitude of the moor, she wished herself back with grandfather, safe at home.

"I would it were the same thing in life," he answered sullenly. "A bold, straightfor-ward man who meant fair, and feared no-thing, might have a chance of holding his own, then, and wouldn't see his place taken by the first new comer with thicker lace on his coat than mine on his forehead. Your part for the deer is well enough, Mistress Nelly, for the fact that don't know better, but when it comes to stags would compare it with a rival old Exmoor stag?"

"I don't understand you!" said the girl, looking in vain for a companion, and wonder-ing what had become of all the defeated riders who must be plodding steadily home.

"Then I'll speak out," replied the Parson, "and remember what Abner Gale says that he sticks to, for good and for evil, mind, for good and for evil. I'm a plain man, Mis-tress Carew."

"Not a plain for your age, you know!" Nelly could not resist saying, though dread-fully frightened. But he continued without offering the interruption—

"A plain man, and maybe I haven't learned any of the monkey tricks your town-bred gentlemen bring into the West, think-ing to carry all before them, with a hoist of the eyebrows, a frown, and a dancing-master's bow. But at least I'm honest, if I'm nothing more, not afraid to show my face by light of day, nor to speak my mind in any company, from my Lord Bellinger down to Dick Boss the sheriff's officer, who has got a job in hand that will take him all his time, judging by what I saw to-day."

"Dick Boss! Sheriff's officer!" repeated Nelly, pale and agitated, for already she knew too well John Garnet's danger. "What have I to do with these matters? Why do you say such things to me?"

"Then the Parson's voice softened while his face reddened, in Nelly's ear it sounded harsh-er than before.

"Why, Mistress Nelly?" he repeated. "I an-swered that you can ask me so simple a ques-tion. Why do I watch every look of your blue eyes, every word from your sweet lips? Why do I feel a different man in your presence, and hover about you like that moor-land hawk up there hovering over the bare brow of the mountain, wheeling, poising, watching and waiting patiently till he may stoop and

everything, and I've got his life in my hand!"

Of all her fair and noble qualities, a woman's hypocrisy is sometimes the fairest and the noblest. Unlike the rougher sex, it is when she is most unselfish that she seems most artful to deceive. Had her power been equal to her will, Nelly Carew's natural in-clination, and indeed her earnest desire had been to strike this man down, and tramp him under Cowslip's hoofs, not, perhaps, to death, but to bodily injury and degradation, yet she commanded herself with an effort beyond all praise, and smiled sweetly in his face, while she observed—

"Something has put you out to-day, Mas-ter Gale. I suppose that is why you want to quarrel with your best friends. You never spoke to me so sharp before. Is it Cassock's fault, or mine, or whose, that your good nag could not keep up with that gray horse on the open moor? The creature seemed to have the wings of a bird. If that's all, sure-ly no disgrace to be beaten when a man does his best."

Though her tone seemed easy and uncon-strained she felt cruelly anxious, and re-solved at any cost to learn how far Abner Gale's enmity was to be feared on her lover's behalf.

"The gray horse is a good one, I'll not deny," said the Parson. "Too good for his master and his master's trade, though the best has saved the man from hanging many a time and oft. I'm surprised at your grand-father, Mistress Nelly. I'm more surprised at yourself, that you can consort with such a jail-bird. He is a disgrace to us all, coming here to Porlock as though he could find no better place to hide in from the hue and cry."

"Do you mean Master Garnet?" exclaim-ed Nelly, with flashing eyes, while she stifled a sob of wrath and fear that rose from her heart.

"I mean Galloping Jack, the highway-man, answered Gale, a villain who should have swung, by rights, at Tyburn last au-tumn, whom I devoutly hoped to see hanged before the fifth of November next!"

"You showed me his dying speech and confession yourself, answered the girl, with tight set lips that kept down some overmas-tering emotion by sheer force of will. "Come, Mas-ter Gale, you know as well as I do that John Garnet is no common thief with a black vizard and a speedy horse, no mere moon-light robber to stop a coach for plunder on the king's highway. He has done something worse than that. Out with it, you used to have no secrets from your friends. Tell me what it is!"

Parson Gale was in the habit of declaring that a man who told a lie should possess a good memory. He wished he had stuck more consistently to this maxim, and had not, by his own forgetfulness, thus laid his own state-ment open to denial. The wisest course, he thought, would be to take the bull by the horns.

"I only hoped to shame you out of your fancy, Mistress Nelly, said he with a trans-parent affection of friendliness and sincerity. "I know this man has assumed the title of a famous highwayman for disguise. He is no more Galloping Jack than I am. He is Master John Garnet, plain John Gar-net, as I have heard them call him, in ridi-cule I fancy, of his waiting-maid's face and mop of curling hair. Wanted for robbing his Majesty's Government. Wanted for high treason. Wanted for murder done in Co-vent Garden, brought home to him by evi-dence no court of justice can gainsay, and as sure to swing, on one, and all of these counts, as I hope to get home to supper this blessed night!"

She had grown paler and paler with every accusation in the catalogue of her lover's crimes. She looked as if she must have fall-en fainting from the saddle, yet never for an instant did she lose her presence of mind, nor forego her resolution to save John Gar-net how she could!

"I can't bring myself to believe it is as bad as you say," she answered carelessly. "But I thought there was something unusual about the gentleman, I'll not deny. 'Tis grand-father who will miss him if he comes to harm. Grandfather took to him, you know, as he never took to a stranger before. You must have seen that yourself."

"And you, Mistress Nelly, said the Par-son, bringing his weary horse nearer the white pony's side, "did not you take to this stranger, too, and for the sake of a new face flout the old friends who had loved you all your life?"

"I! Master Gale," was the feminine re-ply, "you talk of loves and likings as though we could put them on and off like our hose and farthingales. Sure you never thought me one to forget an old friend for the sake of a new face, comely though it be?"

"And you do not really care for this bedi-zened Jack-a-napes?" he exclaimed, while his voice shook with an emotion that be-trayed how deeply the admission touched his

brawler and a sot, and—and—worse than that, drinking and roystering at feasts and revells, while all the time my heart was sore for the sweetest lass in Devon, to think I wasn't good enough, nor comely enough, so much as to kiss the tips of her fingers, nor to sip with her on the same cup. But I'd be a different man if you was only to hold up your hand. It would be no trouble to leave liquor and wrestling-bouts, fairs, and fiddlings, roaring lads and saucy wenches, at your bidding. Nay, more than that, I could go back from the great oath I swore, if you did but hold up your finger, and forgive my bitterest enemy for your sake!"

"Why should you have enemies, you that are so frank and hearty?" asked Nelly, fairly alarmed at the strength of the feelings she had aroused, while determined to profit by them at any cost.

The Parson reined in his horse, and un-consciously she followed his example.

"The man John Garnet," said he, in a hoarse voice, "took my brother's life—stabbed him in the dark, Mistress Nelly, without friends or witnesses, and that man I have sworn never to leave till with my own eyes I see him laid in a murderer's grave. To day an accursed chance deliv-ered him out of my hand, when my knife was almost at his throat. The next time he shall not escape so well. Dick Boss and I, with a few stout lads to help, mean to have him safe in Taunton Gaol before the week is out. And this is the gallant, pretty Mistress Nelly, I was fool enough to think had made such way in your good graces as to supplant your old friend Abner Gale."

How she hated him, sitting there, square and resolute, on his horse! The unwelcome suitor, the implacable enemy, the avenger thirsting for the blood of one whom she loved more madly, more devotedly, because of his danger and his need! Her blue eyes burned with unaccustomed fire, her cheek glowed with a deep, angry crimson, and Parson Gale marked her emotion, believed it was called forth by affection for himself.

He looked at her in speechless admiration for the space of a full minute, then he burst out with a sob.

"Have pity on me, Mistress Nelly, have pity on me! I love you so! I love you so!" She had reviewed the whole position, taken in every detail of the position during this eventful pause, and made her crowning manoeuvre with the skill of that subtlest of all tacticians—a woman at her wit's end!

"It's very easy to talk!" she observed, de-murely, "but I was always one that liked to see a man prove his words. If you— you really cared for me, you would do what I ask, wouldn't you, Master Gale? and never want to know the reason why!"

"Ask it!" exclaimed the Parson, "and if I say no, beautiful Mistress Nelly, then say no to me, when I plead for something dearer and more precious than the light of day and the very air I breathe!"

She knew too well the compact implied by so enthusiastic an assent, but hesitated not for a single instant.

"You must spare Master Garnet," she said, in a steady, monotonous voice, "and give him time to clear out of the country, for my—my grandfather's sake."

"On one condition!"

"On any condition," she murmured, and the brown moors, the evening sky, seemed to spin round so fast that she turned faint and giddy in the whirl.

There was no question of deception, no loop hole for mental reservation and event-ual escape. In the balance hung her lover's safety against her own destruction. Could there be a doubt into which scale would be-ding the deciding weight of a woman's self-sacrificing devotion, a woman's uncalculat-ing love?

"You will be my wife, Mistress Nelly Carew, if I pledge myself to let this man go free?" said the Parson, in slow, distinct syllables, while a grin of triumph, none the less hateful for the expression it expressed, rendered his face more hideous than ever in her eyes.

"I will be your wife, Master Abner Gale, if you pledge yourself to let this man go free!" she repeated, in clear, incisive tones that seemed the echo of his own.

"And you promise never to speak to him nor see him again?"

"And I promise never to see him, nor speak to him again!"

"It's a bargain."

"It's a bargain."

Then they shook hands, and although Abner Gale would fain have ratified this strange betrothal with a kiss, there was some-thing in Nelly's face that absolutely cowed him, and he forebore.

They soon separated where their respec-tive paths diverged. The Parson made his way over the moor, wondering that he did not feel more elated with his triumph, while Nelly rode home alone, looking into vacancy with a white face and fixed, tearless eyes, that seemed to express neither joy nor

years, or even a few months, older than themselves.

More than one venerable inhabitant of Porlock, noting his shrunken form and feeble gait, was heard to express a fear that, with the close of autumn, it would "go hard with Master Carew," and the veteran himself, though he kept his opinion from Nelly, little hoped to see the buds and blossoms of an-other spring. He felt that Death was com-ing like a giant on the mountains, casting his shadow before him as he advanced with swift and noiseless strides, nor, but for the leaving of his grandchild, did it seem so hard to follow the host of friends and comrades who had preceded him to the unknown country beyond the deep, narrow stream. A brave man is seldom deceived in such mat-ters. Old Carew, taking to his bed, gaunt and weary, an hour before Nelly came home, knew he would never leave it again alive.

Guiding Cowslip deftly down the hill into Porlock, the girl believed her cup of misery was full. She told herself it could not hold another drop. Severed from the love of her life at a single blow, that by her own hand—bound to the man she loathed and feared and hated, by her own promise—pledged never to see nor speak to John Garnet again— forbidden even to warn him that he must fly! No! Honor or dishonor, she would not hold to this part of the contract! He must learn the truth from her own lips, and then, though he should heap curses on her perfidy, she would bid him farewell for ever, and live out, as best she might, the life of misery and desolation she had chosen for his sake!

It formed no part of her calculations that he should be waiting for her at her own door, that, lighting down a from her pony in the dusk of evening, she should leap into his arms, and find herself folded in a close em-brace against his heart.

"Oh! you mustn't! you mustn't!" was all Nelly had strength to say, for one happy moment, ere she leaped herself and stood apart, trembling in every limb. Then, even in the failing light, she observed that his face was very grave, and she missed the gay, care-less ring in his tone, that possessed so strange a charm for her loving ear. She had never heard him speak so sadly before.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, "my own Nelly, I looked for you all the way home, and waited here till you came back, because I had something to say that it was right you should hear to-night. I have not the heart to say it now. I was going away to-morrow morning, only for a time, Nelly, but I can-not leave you in distress. I must stay and help you to keep up your courage, dear heart, and to take care of grandfather. He is ill—very ill. I fear, my pretty lass, and asked for you before he went to lie down; but try not to be frightened, dear heart, if—if he doesn't seem to know you at first, when you go to his bedside!"

With a little cry of terror and pity she bounded from him while he spoke, and sped like a lightning to her grandfather's cham-ber, leaving John Garnet standing by the porch, with Cowslip's bridle on his arm, in the last stage of perplexity and distress.

Leading the pony to the stable, he felt ut-terly at a loss what to do.

Courageous as he was, and too reckless of his own safety, he could not but feel that his position here in the bidding-place he had chosen became more dangerous every hour. Dick Rube's warning did but corroborate his own suspicions, and when he reflected on Parson Gale's unscrupulous hatred, which would leave no stone unturned to deliver him into the hangman's hands, his common sense told him there was but one chance of escape left, while the plan advised by the harborer, of taking boat at Ilfracombe, seemed the only practicable means of flight.

So soon, therefore, the next day, as Kater-felto was recovered from the effects of his ex-ertions, he had intended to make for that little seaport, and embark forthwith, sending the gray horse back to Porlock by a trusty hand, to remain in Mistress Carew's care till his owner's return. He promised himself one more interview with Nelly, when, for the fiftieth time, they might exchange vows of unalterable affection, and so would go his way, despondent indeed and unhappy, yet not wholly despairing of better days to come.

And now old Carew's dangerous illness, which he was advised the moment he got off his horse, scattered all those projects to the winds. While he waited for Nelly's return, that he might prepare her to expect the worst, he resolved that no consideration of safety for himself should part him from the woman he loved, so long as his presence could cheer and console her grief.

After a restless night, and an early visit to Katerfelto's stable, where it was satisfactory to find the gray horse, fresh and lively, rested from his hard day, John Garnet presented himself at Carew's door, and was surprised to be received by Nelly herself, who had not been to bed, nor looked upon the day before

is it? Nelly! Sweetheart! What have I done?"

"To save him from death! To save him from death!" The words seemed ringing in her brain, or she never could have nerved herself for the task she had under-taken.

"We have not gone too far to draw back, Master Garnet," she said. "There is a time for all things. Let there be no more fooling between you and me."

She spoke lightly, even flippantly, though she felt her heart breaking. Surely there is no courage like that of a woman who makes up her mind to lead a forlorn hope.

"Fooling!" he repeated; "fooling! Do you mean to affirm that you have been fool-ing me all the time? Explain yourself, Mistress Carew. Have you found a new sweetheart, or is this but a sorry jest to try the temper of the old?"

She bowed her head in assent. If she made him angry, she thought it would be easier to effect a rupture. And yet, to part from him unkindly! ah! if she could but fall down then and there, tell him the truth, and die.

He felt utterly perplexed, astounded, in-credulous, yet wounded to the very heart. It seemed so impossible she should have ceased to care for him, even while the announce-ment was on her very lips. Stuffy, and with an offended air, extremely unlike the frank and kindly bearing that was one of John Garnet's characteristics, he made a low bow, and observed quietly:

"No lady need fear persecution from me. Forgive my repeating to you, Mistress Carew, that I loved you dearly, and believed you cared for me in return."

"I know it," she said, and but for a chok-ing sensation in her throat would have added something more.

"I have deceived myself strangely, it seems," he continued, trying to meet her eyes, which she kept averted from his face. "Nevertheless, I think I am entitled to demand the cause of this sudden dismissal. I should not like to lose my respect for you, Mistress Carew, even though I must try to forget my own unreasonable love."

Still that catching in the throat. She loosened the black velvet band round her neck, before she could answer.

"Master Garnet," she said, "it is not good for you to be here. You ought never to have come. I blame myself you have not sooner gone away. Believe me, the air of Porlock means death. If you— you ever cared for me, as you say, depart at once, to-day, this very hour, and put the blue sea between us, for my sake!"

"For your sake?" This was surely a new experience of the sex, thought John Gar-net; was ever woman so incomprehen-sible? Was ever woman so lovely, and so beloved?

"For my sake," she repeated, and the blue eyes met his own without flinching. "Master Garnet, I am going to be married, and your presence here conduces neither to my happiness nor your own."

"Married? Tell me at least the name of the man you have chosen."

There was no bitterness in his tone. Only a deep sorrow and a kindly interest that told of unselfish affection, wounded, but not des-troyed.

"Parson Gale," she answered, speaking very fast and glancing wildly about her. "Does it surprise you? Is it strange? Does it seem like a jest?" She burst into a pau-sing laugh, shrill, harsh, and by no means sug-gestive of mirth. He looked anxiously in her face, wondering more and more.

"Mistress Carew," he said, in a grave, earnest voice, "I pray you may be happy," and offered his hand.

She caught it in both her own, with a low, sobbing cry, pressed it to her heart, her lips, her eyes now streaming with tears, flung it from her in hysteric violence, and rushed out of his presence, leaving John Garnet ut-terly bewildered and dismayed.

Even now he could not bring himself to admit that all was over between them, though wholly unable to account for his sweetheart's inexplicable conduct, and com-pletely at a loss what to think, and what to believe.

Later in the day, wandering restlessly to and fro, unwilling to leave the vicinity, he observed Parson Gale ride through the vil-lage of Porlock, dismount at old Carew's door, tie his horse there by the bridle, and enter the house without further ceremony. Then, for the first time in his life, he felt that keen pang of jealousy, which is at once the test, and the punishment of love.

The Parson, notwithstanding certain mis-givings, smothered in his own breast, that his wooing, although successful, was attend-ed by many hindrances and drawbacks, had attired himself, as became his new character, with unusual care and splendor. The rusty old riding suit was replaced by a new one, and