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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 XIII.

A DEMAND FOR THE SERVICES OF A GYPSY.

For many years the coast of Kent had been the resort of a gypsy family by the name of Lee, and Jethro, the leader of the tribe, was well known both to the coast-guard, and to game-keepers. Poaching and smuggling Jethro was ever ready to engage in, and the more daring the under-taking the better it suited his adventurous spirit. A portion of waste ground belonging to the Priory estate was the frequent camping ground of the Lee tribe, and to this place resorted such as required the services of their leader. With him, smuggling transactions in particular were matters of business, and he entered into them with a calm and quiet courage.

The services of Jethro being at this time in request, the agent of the contrabandist merchants sought an interview with that chief. In visiting the gypsy in his encampment, the great danger lay in being seen by the coast-guard, and to avoid this it frequently became necessary to take a long circuit. Yet even this practice did not offer full security, as spies were constantly patrolling to detect anything identified with smuggling.

The camp of the gypsies was unique in the sameness of its aspect. At all times the same squalor and apparent wretchedness prevailed. The gypsy appears to possess an instinctive dread of order, possibly arising from his nomadic habits, his want of a settled home. There can be but little question that to a great extent home receives that sacredness commanding so much care and attention, not simply because it is the place of our habitation, but also from the numerous objects in the shape of furniture, pictures, curiosities, and other matters of trifling value with which we are brought into contact. Simply a house, is not a home; it is the furniture, however humble, which makes the house a home.

The camp of the Lee's was no exception to the characteristics of its class, and consisted of canvas-covered carts, with their shafts supported at a level by means of resting on two sticks, and so arranged as to form a crescent outlook to the canvas town within. The tent of the gypsies alone showed a little method, being circular in shape, and so placed as to form irregular streets, while around them, and forming the detail of the residence of this fugitive race, confusion abounded.

It was toward evening when the agent reached the encampment, and in the lurid glare of the flickering firelight were to be seen the children of the tribe tumbling around in juvenile glee, encouraging that hardihood of nature which in after-life was to distinguish them from the more refined of the human race; while a number of the youth of both sexes were busily employed in making clothes-pegs from the willow, or brooms from the birch. The more hardy of the young men were engaged in the gypsy delight of wrestling, or in courting a cracked head from a blow in a game at single stick; while the hags of the tribe were attending to culinary matters, or in counting over the spoils of the day plundered from the simple-minded by the act of fortune-telling; and one or two of the more expert among them were diligently teaching some of the dark-skinned beauties the art and mystery of palmistry. This occult study was being pursued under difficulties, and was frequently interrupted by the boisterous play of the young men, made more noisy for the purpose of distracting the students from their studies, who as they cast upon them side-long glances, accompanied with bewitching smiles which showed their pearly teeth, drew down on themselves the rebukes of their teachers.

Jethro was at home when the agent reached the encampment, but sitting in silent dignity apart from his people as became the leader of the tribe. That chief was at that hour busily cogitating his future course, and aiding his effort by means of smoking a short clay pipe, which had been used by the gypsy as a kiln for burning many pounds of tobacco that had not passed through the Custom House. That pipe was the closest friend of the gypsy; it had been a long time in his possession, and if sacredness be a virtue of such a race, it was elicited from Jethro in favour of that short clay tube which had been his solace in the hour of disappointment, and a collector of his fugitive thoughts when required to be exercised in deliberate council.

The frequent exploits of Jethro, both from the caution and cunning it required to reduce them to a successful issue, made it essential for him to retain in his service a number of well-trained and faithful dogs. The life and liberty of the gypsy so frequently depended on the sagacity of these creatures, that he had studied

to make their education perfect, and so well had he succeeded, that the smallest word, or even a look, was understood by them as being the signal for silence or for speech. These dogs, which before the coming of the agent had been lying around their master with their ears on the ground, indulging in such a sleep as is proverbial of dogs, now that his footsteps were heard by them, lifted their heads, and wagged their tails, and looking up into the face of the gypsy requested permission to speak. The well-known, "Who is it?" was a signal for them to open their mouths, and a loud barking warned the intruder to the exercise of caution. But a low whistle given by the agent told that the visitor was a friend, and in obedience to the "That'll do" of the man, the dogs sunk again into quiet. Jethro did not move to receive his guest, but still sat in imaginary state, and with a countenance as stolid and indifferent as though none but himself were present.

"Good evening to you, Jethro," the agent began, as he drew near to the place where the gypsy was seated.

"Good evening to yer honour."

"Are you busy?"

"Not now. Why do you enquire?"

"Because we have a job on hand."

"Name it."

"Jack Pegden is coming over to-morrow night in the Nancy."

"What is her cargo?"

"Heavy goods; brandy."

"Bah! Hard work and little pay."

"Then you don't like carrying kegs?"

"It is a low trade; but I suppose the rough must be taken with the smooth. Where do you run them?"

"At Baker's Gap."

"And the Philistines?"

"Unacquainted with the move. Indeed it is given out that Jack Pegden is gone to Flushing, and it is well received."

"What time to-morrow night do you expect the Nancy?"

"Not later than ten o'clock. The tide at that hour will permit the lugger to run close under the cliff, and as a consequence the work will be lighter."

"I'll be there."

"But this is not all I require of you; I must have your services to-night."

"For what purpose?"

"Preparations must be made for secreting the goods until opportunity is afforded to take them away. The Nancy can bring over a large cargo, and if the weather be fine Jack will load her to the gunwale."

"How do you wish them secured?"

"You will have to practise your old dodge upon the hay-stack."

"I don't like that job."

"It is too hard work, aye?"

"Only fools like hard work; the man who owns an ounce of wit should learn to live by it."

"Is that your motto?"

"And yours too, I should imagine. Let me see, the moon rises at twelve o'clock; well, have the fellows ready, and if hard work is to be my fate to-night, I suppose I must submit to it."

"Will the gentleman stay and sup with us?" enquired a woman, a fine specimen of the gypsy, and the wife of Jethro, who had silently drawn near to the place where the two men were standing.

"Not to-night, Rachel," returned the agent.

"We have for supper as fine a brace as ever run on four legs."

"I must beg at this time to be excused."

"You house-dwellers are afraid of coming into too close association with the gypsy. For your own purposes you are glad of our services; but when you can dispense with them, you then despise our persons, and shun our acquaintance."

"Silence, Rachel," said her husband.

"Do I speak wrong in what I say? The gentleman knows it to be true. Let me persuade you, sir, for once to sup with the gypsies, and I'll stake the honour of our tribe that you shall not regret it. The forefathers of Jethro were famous for hospitality, and the stranger was never permitted uninvited to pass their tents."

This cunning appeal of Rachel to the virtues of her husband's family, stirred the pride of Jethro, and drew forth his own effort in supporting the invitation extended by his wife. The ambition of Rachel was to break through the restrictions of her class, and to place herself more on a level with the house-dwellers. This desire was generally unwelcome to the tribe, who piqued themselves on their exclusiveness, and looked in contempt on those among whom they wandered. More than one scene of confusion had arisen in the encampment through the inordinate wish of this woman, a scene which taxed all the authority of the leader to

reduce the opposition, and to obtain for her the toleration to occasionally indulge in this matter. Being now assailed by the invitations of them both, the reluctance from prejudice he felt to partake of the hospitality of the gypsy gave way, and the agent consented to remain. Rachel was in ecstasy, and did her best to produce a proper effect on his mind.

That old canvas covering of Jethro's court, concealed many an antique article for table use, which had been in possession of the tribe since the period when they were a family of importance. These were now spread on the green sward forming the table for that supper party, and as they glittered in the light of the camp fire attracted the attention of the guest, and would have disturbed the quiet of many a virtuoso. The effect of the wealth employed upon the stranger was carefully regarded by Rachel, who hastened to relate the tradition associated with each article, as well as to tell out its real history.

The pleasure of the gypsy woman was unbounded, and differed widely from the feeling of the agent, from whose mind neither the sight of the gypsy's wealth, nor the attention paid him in serving up the feast by those swarthy beauties, the daughter and relatives of Jethro, could remove the nauseating thought that what was placed before him was not of the most disgusting nature. There was no reason to think that the roasted creature resting before them on a silver dish of antique pattern and costly value was not a hare as declared; indeed, from the appearance, and from the fact that it might have been obtained from a neighbouring preserve, there was every probability that such was the case; but he had heard that dogs and other canine were eaten by Gypsies, and on this occasion his memory acted as the enemy of his stomach.

A very little hare, and a good deal of brandy, formed the supper of the agent, who took the earliest opportunity for quitting the camp, under the plea, that making arrangements for the work of the night called him elsewhere. About twelve o'clock Jethro himself also left the camp; for the moon had begun to show her gibbous form above the horizon, and the hour for commencing his labours was at hand.

So well-trained were the dogs of Jethro, as to distinguish a coast-guard, or game-keeper, and even a constable, at sight, and on seeing either of them, would at once return and give the signal of approach to their master. The course of the gypsy on leaving the camp, was directed toward first ascending the hill, as though his work lay far away, and on reaching the top to move cautiously along for the distance of a mile, and then by a sudden turn descend into the valley, and doubling his own track reach the place appointed. This caution was imperative, as at night the encampment was often closely watched.

To conceal contraband goods in that district, when immediately landed, and before they could be conveyed to a place of more permanent security, taxed the cunning and inventive genius of such as were employed in the trade. One method was, and a successful one, to remove the interior of a haystack, so as to leave the four walls of sufficient thickness to prevent its collapsing, and then to fill it up with smuggled goods. To do this required an amount of skill; and although in this attempt Jethro had many rivals, yet the work they performed was pronounced a failure when compared with that done by himself. In the district the gypsy was awarded the credit of being a first-rate artist, and this put his services in frequent demand. As his class, Jethro did not love work, but having discovered his capability to manipulate a haystack in a manner required by the smuggler, he submitted to his fate, and tried to relieve the hardship he was predestined to endure by charging a large sum of money for the work he performed.

On reaching the scene of his operations, Jethro commenced an attack on the hay, and in a few hours converted it into a receptacle for holding the treasures to be landed the following night. According to promise, the agent had brought to the spot men and horses, and as the hay was removed it was carried from the field, leaving not so much as a straw in a position to attract the attention of the most curious. Before parting, it was arranged that such as were to run the goods brought by the Nancy, should meet the next night, and under the leadership of Jethro proceed to the place of landing.

CHAPTER XIV.

DIGNITY SACRIFICED TO REVENGE.

The Nancy, which was to bring over the goods, was a fine vessel, and commanded by the most daring fellow infesting the coast at that lawless time. Jack Pegden was not only a smuggler, robbing the revenue, but he was also a greater enemy to his country in acting as a French spy. In trading between France and England this man never ran any risk of being captured, and detained as a prisoner of war; for the small packet of papers he carried with him were his passport, and afforded him a hearty welcome by the Frenchman.

On this occasion, as the weather promised to be fine, the smuggler justified the statement of the agent to Jethro, and loaded his vessel so heavily as to bring her down in the water to a dangerous point. But it was little he or his crew cared for this, for to those reckless fellows danger was sport, and the thought of dying a

matter for jest. Although the sky was clear when the Nancy left the shores of France, by the time she had got half-way across, a dense fog settled down upon the sea, shutting out from view every distant object. This state of the weather was not unfavourable to the adventure of Jack Pegden, who possessed the common conceit of the sailors of his day, and boasted of being able to steer his vessel into the eye of a needle. Such a marine effort would certainly have been most astounding, yet even the employment of such an hyperbole is an evidence of the skill possessed by those men over their craft. Having, therefore, started on her voyage, the Nancy came bounding along under foresail, mizzen, and great jib, the wind being abeam, and as she bent to the gentle gale the waters hissed around her bows as though she were being pursued by a host of serpents furious for her capture.

"Keep a good look-out ahead," was the order given by the skipper; and the man stationed for such purpose strained his eyes to penetrate the mist, in the hope of being able to discover a signal from the shore.

"How is her head?" was the enquiry now made, and the answer was:

"North-east by east."

"Keep her away a point and haul in the jib; we are getting near to the land and have too much headway on her."

"A light on the starboard bow!" shouted the man on the look-out, and before an answer could be given the white cliffs were seen looming in immediate proximity.

"Lower the foresail, my lads!" hissed rather than bawled the skipper; and as the large surface of canvas came running down, the vessel struck on the beach. The Nancy had been directed to the desired spot, and as she grated on the strand the "All right" of the shoremen told that the coast was clear. All now was bustle, but without confusion, and the hatches being thrown off, the cargo was distributed, and every man in waiting was laden with two kegs of brandy.

"Baker's Gap," the spot once so notorious as a place for landing contraband goods, is now almost forgotten in the district. A more loyal and law-paying race have arisen, who think of the doings of the past and blush. That Gap was the work of a stream running down the sides of a promontory known as Copt Point. Starting at the foot of the distant hills and meandering in a circuitous route over the table-land, it reached the edge of the cliff and leaped on the beach below in a foaming cascade. By slow attrition, the sparkling water in haste to reach the sea, had worn for itself a bed, which formed a gully or gap, that the smugglers ascended with their contraband wealth. This ascent seemed easy to the passer-by, but to attempt to clamber its sides as the bearer of a couple of kegs of brandy, was no ordinary effort. More than one that night, working under the command of Jethro, in climbing the precipitous sides of that rugged path, came down to the beach in a rapid descent in a manner certainly not convenient. The greater number of those employed belonging to the gypsy tribe, it gave their leader the absolute control over them.

The haystack Jethro had prepared for receiving the goods, being not more than a quarter of a mile distant from the place of landing, and the men having deposited one lot in safety had returned, and were again ascending the acclivity, headed by their leader, when a dark figure appeared to them standing out in front of a projecting rock. On perceiving this object, Jethro, in a loud, hissing voice, shouted to his men—"Halt! halt!" Obedience to his command being promptly given, he removed the burden from his shoulder, and, snatching a pistol from his belt, cocked it, as he ascended toward the place where the figure appeared.

"Who are you?" sternly demanded the gypsy.

"Don't be a fool, Jethro; put up that bulldog," was the immediate reply.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Harry; but I had no thought it was you."

"I dare say not; you thought it to be one of the coast-guard."

"I did, and had it been he must have submitted either to be gagged or shot."

"Gagged, of course. The man must be a consummate fool who would be shot for nothing, when he could obtain the sum of ten guineas for simply wearing a piece of wood in his mouth for an hour or two."

"Some of them have a conscience," said the gypsy ironically.

"Conscience, indeed! If they have they are a pack of fools; but catch the conscience of a coast-guard coming out of doors when the sum of ten guineas lays its finger on the latch."

"That may be, but this is neither the time nor place to discuss such a subject. Did yer honour see any one about as you came along?"

"Not so much as a dog."

"So much the better. Come on, my lads!" shouted Jethro to his men. Obedient to their leader, the fellows again commenced climbing the cliff with the kegs, while the gypsy remained to talk with the baronet.

"I went to the camp to inquire for you," said Sir Harry, and Rachel gave me an intimation of your whereabouts."

"I should advise you not to frequent the camp too often. Yellow Dick is positively mad with you, and if you persist in going I cannot be held responsible for the consequences that may follow. I have already employed my authority to restrain his fury, but he secretly avers that if he catches you near the encampment he will murder you."