

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER VI.

MY LORD AND MY LADY.

What could men see to rave about in such chits as these? Why, the little creature was not even well dressed, and had hardly so much as learned to ogle and handle a fan! Was it possible that innocence, simplicity, natural red and white, could presume to contend with such a position, such millinery, and such experiences as hers? Lady Bollinger sighed to think how she was thrown away. What depths there were in her loving heart that had never been fathomed; what passions in her mature womanhood that had never been aroused. Alas! those depths could have been balmed out with a thimble; those passions, affections, caprices, call them what you will, were three parts simulated, and the fourth only skin-deep. Nevertheless, she esteemed herself a lovable woman, wasted and misunderstood. She had a headache, she had the spleen, the vapors. Ranelagh was very tiresome last night. The lights still danced before her eyes, the hum of conversation still vibrated in her ears. Resting her heavy head on the dressing table, she seemed to live the whole scene over again.

What a medley and confusion it was! Women with enormous head-dresses, wide hoops and high-heeled shoes, patched, powdered, painted, courtesying, smiling, and grimacing. "Your ladyship is vastly kind. Shall wait on you with pleasure. Not real diamonds, ma'am? I protest. I have it from the best authority. Fie! my lord, I thought you were more gallant. The Earl, as I live. Come back from the grand tour with a wife! Whose wife? La! Sir Ramaduke, I vow you make me blush. The king hath had another interview with the favorite. Angry words, and post-horses ordered on the north road. Too good news to be true. Mrs. Betty, you look charmingly. What conquests you must have made at the Bath. Here's the bishop! Madam, your humble servant;" and so on till the stream of nothings swelled into an unintelligible babble. And out of this concourse of so-called friends, this turmoil of so-called conversation, was there one form amongst the throng that could call the blood to her cheek, the light to her eye? One voice that fell sweetly on her ear, that woke an echo responsive in her heart? Yes, on reflection there was or e—nay, there went two or three—half-a-dozen—a score—but it seemed that, of late, her charms had ceased to work, her glances to fascinate. Ten compliments—she counted them on her fingers—made the sum total of her triumphs last night. Harry St Leger devoted himself to the bread-and-butter hoyden. The handsome colonel had drunk too freely of claret to be available. The marquis was wholly taken up with Mistress Masters (who, and what she was, nobody knew!) Two or three snuff-taking admirers simpered, but did not commit themselves. The duke passed her with a bow, and it was a weary world!

As she came to this conclusion, a tap at the door announced the arrival of her waiting-maid with the daily dish of chocolate. Contrary to custom, that demure person did not depart after she set it down.

"What is it, child?" asked Lady Bellinger, not very good-humoredly, because of her reflections. "Speak up, and don't stand staring there as if you'd seen a ghost!"

"It's my lord," answered the waiting-maid, tossing her head, in imitation of her mistress. "My lord bade me ask your ladyship if you were up, and if you could see him now directly, before he gets into his coach."

"My lord!" repeated his wife, in a tone of surprise, that sufficiently attested the infrequency of such visits. "What can my lord want with me at this early hour? How am I looking, child? Quick! Give me those drops off the chimney-piece—a clean cap, the one trimmed with pink, you fool!—Put a touch of color in my cheeks; I declare my face is like lead!" Draw that window-curtain! Now you may tell him he can come in."

Lord Bellinger entered accordingly, dressed in great splendor, with cane, hat, and snuff-box in hand. Thus encumbered, he made shift, nevertheless, to take the tips of his wife's fingers and carry them to his lips, inquiring at the same time how her ladyship did, and whether she had slept well.

Her ladyship had not closed an eye, of course. She was feverish, poorly, and far from strong! Thus establishing a position of defence from the first.

"Zounds! madam," exclaimed he, "so much the better—you will the more readily be at what I have to say."

My lord to do him justice, was a good

He looked in her face disappointed, and perhaps a little hurt.

"My lady," said he, "you're a puzzle!"

"My lord," said she, "you're a brute!"

CHAPTER VII.

READY AND WILLING.

They left town together notwithstanding; and although my lady altered her mind with every mile, now extolling her own sense of wifely duty, now bewailing her want of firmness and consistency, yet by the time she arrived at Hounslow, were they were to sleep, she had become reconciled to the society of her husband and her enforced journey to the West.

Such impressionable natures, from which emotion so easily passes away, enjoy at least this advantage—that one swallow makes for them an immediate summer, one glimpse of sunshine absorbs the memory of a month of storms.

Lord Bellinger, too, seemed in the highest spirits. Though his back must be turned on London and all its pleasures, his inconstant nature could nevertheless find enjoyment in the mere act of change. Moreover, an hour before departure, he had effected a loan of ready money from the accommodating Katerfelto, who waited on him at his residence in Leicester Square, so completely disguised that Waif herself could hardly have recognized the respectable-looking citizen, in a brown suit and tie-wig, with ample cambrio neckerchief concealing his long beard, who was ushered into his lordship's own apartment the moment he entered the house.

Lord Bellinger prided himself on the rapidity with which he transacted affairs of moment. No doubt his method was peculiar to himself.

"Katerfelto," said he, surveying the brown suit and tie-wig with grave curiosity, "I must have five hundred guineas in gold—now, in half an hour."

"Impossible, my lord," answered his visitor. "The time is too short; but you can have it in three-quarters."

"I like doing business with you," rejoined his lordship. "I never knew you make difficulties, nor found you unable to overcome them. I want the money directly, because I leave for the West this afternoon; but I consent to give you another quarter of an hour."

"Your lordship is vastly obliging," replied Katerfelto, with his peculiar smile. "I must trouble you to sign this little acknowledgment of the debt."

He drew a sheet of paper from his pocket, filled in certain blank spaces at the writing-table, and spread it before his lordship, with an air of excusing himself for the liberty he was obliged to take.

It was Lord Bellinger's boast that he never refused to draw his sword, drink his bottle, stake his money, or sign his name; yet he made a wry face, and threw his pen into the inkstand with a curse, after it had performed its office.

"I'm in a corner," said he, "or you would never have had me on such exorbitant terms. The king's business must not stand to cool. Hang it, man! if it had been my own, not a usurer in the town should have bit me like this!"

"Your lordship is in haste," answered Katerfelto; "and his Majesty's commands cannot be too speedily obeyed. I trust," he added, carelessly, "there is no fear of disaffection in the West."

"State secrets!" answered Bellinger, with a laugh. "How can I tell? I have not yet seen the minister. I go to him in an hour for final instructions."

Though Katerfelto was pondering deeply, his tone seemed lighter than usual, while he asked how the other had been amused the night before at Ranelagh; observing, "It is not your lordship's custom to leave an adventure half accomplished."

"No more of that!" exclaimed Lord Bellinger. "These are but the pastimes of a man who has little serious business on hand. Ambition, you know, is a specific for love. If I play my part well, Katerfelto, I have reason to believe that the next time I borrow your money it will be for an earl!"

"Good luck attend your lordship," answered the other, turning to depart. "As you are strong, be merciful."

My lord laughed, and snapped his fingers. "In half an hour," said he, "I shall have the lives and estates of some half dozen gentlemen in my pocket. Intrigue, my good friend, is all very well; but for real sport, give me the great game. If your spiritual informants can travel so far, they will shortly bring you stirring news from the West."

"The vicissitudes of this material world affect me but little," answered Katerfelto, "save in so far as they aid my researches among the boundless regions of science and fatality. I am but a man of thought, while your lordship is a man of action. If, in my humble capacity, I can serve you, command me; and so I take my leave."

"He's an honest fellow enough, I protest," thought his lordship, as the door closed,

He looked in her face disappointed, and perhaps a little hurt.

"My lady," said he, "you're a puzzle!"

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"He's an honest fellow enough, I protest," thought his lordship, as the door closed,

"I feel that I ought to be in the saddle," replied the other, "a hundred miles from your close, smoky town. If it wasn't for these cursed bandages, I should never know that I had a side at all."

"Off with them, then!" said Katerfelto, suiting the action to the word by unwinding their folds. "See now the fruits of a little knowledge and a little patience. These wounds have healed, as we call it, at the first intention. Do not be so ready with bare steel again; or, if you must needs brawl, keep your sword-arm bent, and your point moving in a narrower circle."

John Garnet's eyes brightened with pleasure, but his face fell a moment afterwards.

"You have restored me to life," said he, "and I cannot even pay you a surgeon's fee. I tell you plainly, I have not ten guineas in the world."

"We are comrades in the same service," answered the Doctor, quietly. "There is no question of guineas between you and me. Will you ride a hundred miles on an errand, in which we are equally interested, and cry quits?"

"To the end of the world!" answered John Garnet; "only I have not a horse to my name."

There was a simple earnestness in his tone that sufficiently vouched for his fidelity. Katerfelto, scanning narrowly the resolute countenance and strong and active frame, smiled to think that here was a tool shaped expressly for his purpose.

"I might find horse-flesh," said he, "if you can find spurs. Will you be ready to mount to-night on my errand, if it should be necessary? My errand," he repeated, in a low, impressive whisper, "and the king's!"

"God bless him!" answered Garnet, while each looked meaningly in the other's face. "I have those in my interest," continued the charlatan, "ay, at the very council table, who keep me well informed from hour to hour. You will dine as usual. You will crack a bottle of our best, to the king's health. Before sunset, I will tell you when to pull on your boots."

While he spoke a knock was heard at the door and Waif, glancing slyly at John Garnet, brought the Patron a letter left by a man who looked like the light-porter of some city warehouse. It contained these lines:

"The invoices are already forwarded. Prices ruling high; hemp likely to rise. Realize at once, not a moment to be lost."

Twice Katerfelto perused it with an anxious brow, then he turned to John Garnet, and observed carelessly:

"A stroll before dinner will do you no harm. Come with me to the next street, I want your opinion of a horse I keep there."

So congenial a request met with an eager affirmative. In the flush of returning health, John Garnet longed keenly for the fresh outward air. And to see a horse again, even in another man's stable, was a return to life and all that made life enjoyable once more.

The doctor wrapped himself, though it was summer, in a long black cloak and drew a square cap down to his very eyebrows, before he crossed the threshold, precautions which seemed scarcely necessary for purposes of concealment, inasmuch as he led his visitor along two or three unfrequented by-lanes, to an old tumble-down building, that looked more like a dilapidated pigeon-house than the dwelling of so noble an animal as the horse.

"Enter," said he, unlocking the door. "The husk looks of the roughest, but there is a kernel within."

John Garnet was surprised to find the stable roomy, commodious, well ventilated, and amply supplied with all necessaries for the comfort of its inmate. "If the casket is mean," said he, "at least it seems well lined, and water-tight. Let us open that shutter, Doctor, for a glimpse at the jewel it contains."

It was a jewel! An exclamation of wonder and admiration escaped the visitor's lips, as daylight, thus admitted, revealed to him the beauty and symmetry of the animal he came to inspect. From boyhood he had spent much of his time in the saddle, found a store of pleasure and legitimate excitement in the companionship of his horse, and here seemed the very flower and perfection of the whole equine race.

It was not that the sloping shoulders, the deep girth, the flat legs, the round firm feet, the full, well-turned back, and lengthy quarters denoted strength and speed unequalled, but there was also that proportion and harmony of all the parts, which Nature is careful to preserve when she means to turn out some masterpiece of her craft. John Garnet said as much; and Katerfelto, man of science though he was, could not conceal a certain prim satisfaction, which every man alive betrays when congratulated on the superiority of his steed.

"I am a poor judge," observed the Charlatan, whom no earthly consideration would have induced to bestride the paragon before them; "but I imagine the creature is as good as it looks."

"That I'll swear he is!" replied John

not know who and what you are even now," said he, "but you seem the best friend I ever had. Frankly, doctor, I already owe you more than I can hope to pay. In my opinion, you have bought me, body and bones, at a high price; and I am ready to do your bidding, be it what it will."

"You speak like a man of sense," answered Katerfelto. "Come back to the house; Waif shall find us some dinner, with a bottle of good old Burgundy, and I will give you instructions at once."

They returned, therefore, to Deadman's Alley, threading the by-streets with the same secrecy as before. Katerfelto informed his companion, as they walked, how he became the owner of so matchless an animal—the last possession, it must be admitted, with which John Garnet would have credited his physician. "I obtained him," said the latter, "even as I obtained Waif, and from the same people. Only, I paid hard gold for the child; whereas, they let me have the horse for nothing."

"And yet they may have stolen both," observed his listener.

The other shook his head. "Waif is a gipsy," said he, "pure bred, or I should never have encumbered myself with her. No; they are a strange people. Their honesty is not like our honesty, neither, indeed, is their fraud; but they have their notions of fair dealing too. They brought me the horse to pay a debt of honor."

John Garnet opened his eyes. "A debt of honor!" repeated the Charlatan.

"The rogues had robbed me of some valuable jewels while I was sojourning in their tents during the illness of an old reprobate, whom they called their duke, and whom I attended without demanding a fee. Repenting of such ingratitude too late, for the jewels were beyond recovery, they sent me the highest priced article they could lay hands on, and it proved to be the very horse you are to ride out of London to-night. How they came by him, it was useless to inquire; but they assured me—and I have no reason to doubt their word—that the owner would never cause inconvenience by appearing to assert his claim."

"Do you think, then, they murdered him?" exclaimed John Garnet, in an accent of dismay.

"Very probably!" replied the other. "But I had little curiosity on the subject; it was no affair of mine."

The silence that ensued, lasted to the door of the surgery, and, indeed, with small interruption during the progress of dinner. When that meal was taken away, and Waif, with many a backward glance, had departed and shut the door, Katerfelto filled the glasses, smacked his lips over the Burgundy, and thus delivered himself:

"They would hang you, my good sir, if they could catch you; and this I consider a sufficient reason for your leaving London to-night."

John Garnet gasped, and set his wine down untasted. For some time he had entertained uncomfortable misgivings to this effect. It was not reassuring to hear them corroborated by so sagacious a person as his host. "Chance-medley is not a hanging matter," said he, in a shaking voice.

"But murder is," answered Katerfelto; "and murder I fear they would bring it in. Why, in the name of all that is hasty, my young friend, did you not take a couple of gentlemen into that dark room, and exchange a pass or two in the presence of witnesses? See how the matter stands as it would be submitted to a jury. An altercation, brooded over for more than an hour; a quarrel, not in hot blood, but on reflection; and the company gone. The lights out; the younger man escapes, and the elder is found stabbed to death on the floor? It looks ugly, you must confess."

"I have thought so more than once," replied John Garnet, much disturbed. "Do you mean they will try me for—for—my life?" He got the question out with difficulty, and swallowing a mouthful of wine fancied it tasted like blood.

"I mean nothing of the kind," said the other. "I mean you never to be placed in such a position. I mean you to be a score of miles away to-night. I mean to rescue your name, to save your life, and to make your fortune."

"How so?" asked John Garnet, taking comfort while he emptied his glass.

For answer, Katerfelto made an almost imperceptible sign with one of his fingers, to which the other responded by a word, whispered so low that its import was to be gathered less by the sound than the movement of his lips.

"I was sure of it!" exclaimed the Charlatan. "I could have sworn from the first you were one of us. I may speak freely now. John Garnet, I call upon you this day to ride for the king!"

"To the gates of hell!" was the reckless answer. "And as much farther as your good horse will carry me. I am ready to start this minute."

"Softly," said the other. "I neither require so prompt a departure, nor so long a journey. You need not mount for another