

KATERFELTO,

A STORY OF EXMOOR.

CHAPTER XV.

SHORTER THAN USUAL.

It is no doubt provoking not to be able to irritate a man if you wish; but Nelly had barely yet arrived at that stage in the manly which desires a quarrel for the pleasure of making up.

"You—you didn't get wet," she said, timidly. "When we were all obliged to hurry home yesterday. The showers here are very heavy, and apt to—"

"Wet a man to the skin," he said, laughing, "so they are everywhere else. I am sorry to lose your pleasant society, Mistress Carew, but, thinking the strange gentleman might be an old friend of your grandfather, I did not wish to intrude, and walked some as fast as I could."

She shot a grateful glance at him. "Yes," she observed, in rather a marked tone, "he is a friend of grandfather's rather than of mine, though I have known him ever since I was a little girl."

"Is that so very long, Mistress Carew?" he asked, with another of his pleasant smiles.

They were walking through the orchard behind her home, along a path that led to the shore. She stopped and plucked some wild flowers from the hedge, perhaps to hide a blush.

"I have a favor to ask you," she said in a low voice, and stooping her head over the pony. "Do not say Mistress Carew—I don't like it. I had rather you would call me Nelly."

There was the least possible inflection of voice on the pronoun, just enough to make John Garnet's heart beat as it had never beat before.

Nelly, she repeated, "will you give me one of those flowers?"

"You may take the whole bunch," she answered, "I only gathered them for you." But she walked on so fast after this gratifying answer, that it was impossible to tell her one word of the old tale that was rising to her lips.

All that day she took care not to be alone with him another minute. From the orchard she took him to the beach, where the villagers were collecting sea weed; thence to a field where harvest was already nearly done, home to the cow house, with its attendant milkmaid; and so back to grandfather's parlor, where she poured out his evening draught of cider with her own hands.

Why Nelly should have cried like a naughty child when she laid her head on her pillow; why she should have woken before daybreak, and risen at sunrise to put new ribbons in her dress of a color she had lately heard somebody say he liked, is more than I can take upon me to explain. I can understand, however, why John Garnet lay a-bed longer than usual that same morning, and turned on the other side, hoping to go to sleep again, that he might dream another dream like the last about Nelly Carew.

Abner Gale's dreams, if he had any, would seem to have been of no such pleasant nature for he was stirring with the dawn, breakfasting fiercely before sunrise, on Devonshire mutton and strong ale, cursing, notwithstanding his profession, each of his servants in turn for imputed shortcomings, from his cherry-checked parlor-wait to the man who fed the pigs. In and out the house, and through the precincts of the farm-yard, or "barn," as he called it, the master's eye was only less drenched than his tongue, his tongue than his hand. Yet was he well served to with the scrupulous obedience of fear.

He would fain have mounted his horse and ridden across the moor in the direction of Porlock again to-day, but even Abner Gale was compelled to pay some respect to the decencies of life, and even such a parish as his exacted a few hours' attention after an absence of weeks.

There were conditions to be written out for a wrestling match between two rival champions, arrangements to be made for supplying the ringers with unlimited cider at their approaching feast, a badger recently drawn to visit; and some terrier-puppies just opening their eyes on this wicked world, to inspect.

Also, there was a child to be baptized, a matter that would keep, and a wench to be married, a matter that would not.

"Let to-day," thought the Parson. "I

Rudd, needed no second bidding. Raising the jug to his weather-tanned face, he took a hearty pull, a pull that nearly emptied its contents.

The Parson scanned him approvingly. Rube wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and sat motionless in his saddle without a word.

He was a man of seventy at least, short, slumped, withered, and tough as shoe leather, with a keen gray eye, set in countenance wrinkles, that seemed traced in the red-brown skin with the point of a needle. He rode a broken-kneed Exmoor pony, low in condition, but as hard as nails. Sportswoman was written in every line of his face, every turn of his limbs, yet his stoed, saddle, bridle, and the clothes on his back would have been dear at five pounds.

Like a ghost, it was Rube's custom not to speak till spoken to. His answers too were ghostly and mysterious, and he loved to vanish like a ghost when he had delivered his pithy say.

Presently, in such a whisper as denotes respectful confidence, the Parson broke silence.

"Three inches?" he asked, with the utmost concern.

"And a quarter?" was the reply. Twenty-two score and may be a pound over. The slot was less than an hour old at sunrise."

"Rights?" asked the Parson.

"A warrantable deer," answered Rube, and each moved in silence for more than a minute.

"It's a pity," observed the Parson, after a pause, "there's no knowing where he may go to by next week. These heavy deer travel a long way when they're not hurried. It's hard to say where he may be when we want him. There ought to be no Sundays in the hunting season."

So self-evident a proposition seemed not to require assent. Red Rube held his peace, and looked at the empty cider-jug. Taking the hint, Gale entered the house, and returned with it refilled. The old man's eye glittered, and he indulged in another pull. It seemed to loosen his tongue. "That be main good zider, and he, shortening his reins and applying his one spur to the pony's ribs, as though to depart, but turning in his saddle, with an after-thought for a few last words.

"I wuz down Lapford way yesterday," said he, with a chuckle, "and hoam by Rose Ash. I larned reamed, Pa'ysen, three-score years ago and more, afore I took to the deer. There's money to be made by reading, I tell'ee, and money means drink."

"What do you mean?" asked Gale.

"I mean there's hand-bills up at both places, offering a hundred guineas reward, that's what I mean," replied the old man, kindling to excitement. "Him as rode the gray stallion has been about again. Galloping Jack they always called 'un, and if a man could steal a view of 'un, or get the wind of 'un, or so much as slot 'un where he harbors, 'tis a hundred golden guineas paid down in hand. I've moved many a right stag in my time, Master Gale, but never such a noble head as that."

Then, as fearing his loquacity must have compromised him in the eyes of so good a sportsman, Red Rube departed at a gallop, and was seen no more.

Abner Gale looked after him, with a smile. Lord Bellingier then had taken his advice, and adopted the most likely means of bringing to justice the perpetrator of an outrage that was both highway robbery and high treason. It interested the Parson but little save in so far as the gray horse was concerned. If its rider should come to the galleys he would do all he knew to put that noble beast into his stable. In imagination, he was already galloping it over Exmoor, to go and see Nelly Carew.

Then the Parson signed and swore, and sighed again, and put on his dingy cassock to marry the tardy couple who had waited so long.

He tied them up, however, fast and sure, before the stroke of noon, pocketing his fees with considerable satisfaction, for Mr. Gale took no delight in the gratuitous administrations of the Church, little thinking that, even while he pronounced the blessing, which it did not strike him seemed a mockery from such lips as his, John Garnet was turning out into the sunshine, fresh and fair, like a bridegroom himself, to wait upon Mistress Carew.

The gentleman lay long in bed without dreaming the pleasant dream again, so he thought him at last that it would be more to the purpose to rise and pursue the reality, than lose his time in sighing after the shadow. He was very far gone now. The pony she had given him stood in water at his bedside, every hour of the day seemed wasted that was not spent with his blue-eyed girl, and he never saw Waifa thought for more

First, through the hush of night, there steals a cool, soft breath, like the sigh of some spirit of morning, lingering for the dawn. Soon, swelling to a breeze, it stirs the cloud on the moor, the leaf in the copse. A bird awakes and twitters in its nest. Anon, in joyful chorus, answering notes, pipe shrill and clear, "through all the woodland, while a pale streak of light, low and level on the eastern ridges, peeps above the sky line. Great black masses stand out from the gloom in deeper shadows and broader touches, soon to resolve themselves, as the eye masters their shape, into rock and coombe, hill, valley, and hanging wood. But now the pale streak has changed to crimson, underlined with a yellow sear, the mountain puts on its crown of fire, and the highest tree-tops in glade and valley, are tinged with flame, while, far and near, pointed peaks, rugged tops, purple heather, dusky moorland, all are tipped with gold. Then, in his blazing chariot, the lord of light comes up to raze his course, and night is passed, and man goes forth to his labor until the evening, and the harvester's day's work is done.

"Red Rube," as he worshipped the sun at all, worshipped him less in love than fear, dreading, above all things, that his beams should cause the dews to evaporate from the sward, and harder into an unimpressionable surface the yielding clay beneath each sheltering bank, or round each bubbling spring. Rube believed that, for beauty and majesty, no object in the world could vie with the beam, and branches, the "Brow Kay and Tray" of a warrantable deer, yet he had not been a nurse-child of Nature, in all her seasons and all her moods, without learning her lessons, and imbibing for his foster-mother an instinctive love, only the deeper that it was unconscious, unsuspected, and in spite of himself.

Is this not the secret of our attachment to field sports, and do not these which bring us face to face with Nature retain this fascination when every other pastime or excitement has palled on the satiated senses, the weary world-worn heart?

That noblest beast of chase, the wild stag, in the West of England, has a lordly habit of feasting during night, and seeking repose in the small hours towards dawn of day. Gliding, like a ghost, through cornfield and orchard, he travels many a league after sundown, feeding on the best that moorland soil and scanty harvests can afford, nibbling the half-ripened ears on one hill-farm at midnight, flinging the turnips overhead in wasteful profusion on another ten miles off, within an hour; seeking, before dawn, the shelter of some wooded coombe, in which he means to harbor, at an equal distance from both. Restless, wary, vigilant, he is always on the move, and habitually suspicious of an enemy. It is to master, by man's intellect, man's powers of observation, the superior speed, finer instinct, and craftier nature of the brute, that "Red Rube" has been after the deer from boyhood, acquiring in the experience of many seasons so intimate a knowledge of their haunts and habits, that, in spite of age, infirmity, and a confirmed tendency to drink, he has earned an unchallenged right to call himself the most skilful "Harborer" in the West.

The ground must indeed be hard, and the "slot," or print of the animal's feet, many hours old to baffle Red Rube, who, stooping to the line like a blood-hound, reads off, as from a book, the size, sex, weight and age of the passing deer, the pace at which he was travelling, its distance ahead, and the probability of its affording a run. Therefore it was his custom to be abroad long before day-break, guiding his Exmoor pony, only less wise and wary than himself, through broken paths and winding tracks, by log, boulder, and precipice, with an instinct, unerring as that of the wild animal he went to seek. In the first twilight of morning he would hobble the pony at the head of some remote coombe that bordered on the moor; and prowling stealthily down its windings, would begin his quest in the different haunts that he knew were frequented by deer. He seldom made a cast in vain. Ere the light was strong enough to distinguish it, he usually came upon the footprint of his game. Then he stopped, examined it carefully, pondered, and made up his mind. If the slot were three inches wide at the heel, after due allowance for nature of ground and rate of speed, it would be that of a six-year-old hart at least, carrying nine or ten branches on his two antlers, having, in forrester's language, "his rights," and to be described therefore as "a warrantable deer." Such considerations would cause "Rube" to grin—he never laughed—and to take a pull at his flask.

Following up the track to some deep impenetrable woodland, in which it was again lost, he would make a circuit of many miles

and spring back to the turf as light as a brocket. But then shoes was never welded this side Tautown town. That's what beats me! Parson Gale? Well, the Parson it might be, only this is an up-country horse for sure. Up-country rider, too, or he would have turned into the wood 'stead of keeping the track. No. He's not heading for Exmoor, isn't this one. Maybe he'll double back before sun up, and I'll fresh find him here in the coombe, if I only keep quiet and lie close."

So Rube put his ear to the ground, listened, groined, took a suck at his flask, and coiled himself down, like some beast of prey, on the watch.

He did not wait long. His hair was hardly warm ere he started to his feet, at a crashing of branches within a hundred yards; a bounce, a splash, an oath in a man's voice, and the snorting of a horse, plunging and struggling through a bog.

In the solitudes of the West, as in the Arabian desert, every man you meet must be a friend or enemy; but in Somerset and Devon, till you have proved him the latter, you believe him to be the former. Rube ran to help, and saw the best nag he had ever set eyes on, up to its girths in a swamp, sinking deeper with every plunge.

The rider already clear of his saddle, and imbedded over his boots in the green yielding slime, did his best to aid and encourage his horse by word and gesture, but the bog became only deeper and softer with every struggle, while to turn back seemed as difficult, and almost as hazardous as to charge through.

But that aid was near, a fossil man and korse, in perfect preservation, might have been found centuries hence in a stratum below the surface, puzzling the geologists of the future as to how they got there.

"Right hand I tell 'ee I push 'un to the right, man!" exclaimed Rube, springing eagerly from his lurking-place. "This patch o' flag be the only sound spot for a landyard's round—Steady, lad! Let 'un catch wind their a bit, and he'll come through."

Presence of mind, that essential quality of a horseman, was never wanting to John Garnet. Guiding Katerfelto to the little knot of rushes indicated, which, true to their nature, afforded foot-hold where they grow, he paused for a breathing-space, ere patting his horse's neck with a word of endearment, he roused him to another effort, that, after a plunge or two, placed him in safety, with a bank of sound heather beneath his feet.

The gray trembled all over, his eye rolled, his nostril dilated; but, with a prolonged snort and a shake, he recovered his composure, rubbing his handsome head against his master, as though to congratulate him on their joint escape. "We'll never go there again, my boy," said the rider, whom this treacherous surface had so deceived, adding, as though he did well to be angry, "why it looks like the best bit of gallopin' ground in the whole coombe."

Red Rube grinned. To one born and bred on Exmoor, this was a jest that palled with no amount of repetition. These tempting islands of green sward, smooth and level as a lake, while affording, indeed, but little firmer support, seemed designed by nature to lure a horseman from another country? The harborer's keen gray eye had taken him in at a glance, just as it would have mastered the points, size, and weight of a warrantable deer to the brief second during which the creature bounded across a ride. From the lace on his hat to the spur on his soiled boot, Red Rube had reckoned up John Garnet, as it were, to the very counting of the buttons on his coat. From Katerfelto's taper muzzle, to the last hair in his tail, he had, in the same instant, so impressed the whole animal on his mind, that he could have sworn to its identity under any circumstances, at any future time. It struck him, even while man and horse were straggling in the bog, that they answered the description of that highwayman for whose capture so large a reward was offered in the hand-bills; and it was from no considerations of humanity or fair play that the old man refrained from knocking the stranger on the head, when he had him at disadvantage, unhorsed and knee-deep in a slough.

His reasons were extremely practical. In the first place, he had no weapon with which he could hope to contend successfully against a younger and stronger man; in the second, he could not bring himself to believe that so experienced a West-country rider as Galloping Jack would have fallen into a trap like this. "A bog," as he said, "so black and ugly, that even Varmer Viall's cows, poor things, do have the sense to keep out!"

"Well, it might have been worse!" replied John Garnet, good-humoredly, while

your horse prettily enough, and sit in your saddle like a rock. Maybe you never heard of "slotting" a stag, twenty score weight, with a back like a bullock, and all his rights fairly counted, into a lone quiet coombe, where you harbored him so close you could touch him with the top joint of a trout-rod? Maybe you never saw an old black-and-tan twenty-six inch tuffter, with long flapping ears and hanging jaw, as steady as a clock, and as wise as a bishop, snuffle and quest and traverse, till he owned the scent with a roar, deeper, louder, fuller of music than the organ I heard in Exeter fifty years ago, when I was a boy. Maybe I'm only wasting my breath. You up-country gentlemen know nothing of our sport on the moor."

The spark had caught. That strange enthusiasm common to all votaries of the chase brightened John Garnet's eye, while he continued the other's narrative of an imaginary stag hunt.

"Then, with a crash of broken twigs and leafy branches, up he starts from a brake of deep green hazels,—stares about him for half a minute, time enough to count his points, and look him over—turns his head from side to side, displaying his mighty neck and noble width of beam, lays his antlers back, and leaves the wood at a springing trot, too proud to hurry himself, and deliberating calmly where he shall go next. Presently we lose sight of him, to emerge a mile off on the open moor. When he treads heather he breaks into a gallop, and speeds away like an arrow from a bow. You have moved him fairly now. Take up your turriters and let us lay on the pack."

"Right you are!" exclaimed Rube, holding his breath in sheer excitement. "You've been there before, I'll wager a gallon."

"Talk of music and the organ in Exeter Cathedral!" proceeded John Garnet, "thirty couple of such voices of these would silence a battery of cannon. They spread like a lady's fan; they swarm like a hive of bees. Soon they settle into their places and stream across the moor, like horses in stride and speed, like lions in strength and energy, and fierce desire for blood. Now's your time, old man. You sit down in your saddle and say to yourself, there is nothing on earth worth living for compared to such moments as these."

"My work is over when you come that," said Rube, adding respectfully, "You're a true sportsman, sir. If I do know how to harbor a stag, you do know how to hunt him. I'll warrant. Yet I never saw you out with us on the moor here, as I can call to mind."

"Do you think there is no hunting but in the West?" replied John Garnet. "We have red deer in my country, and hounds that can set them up to bay. Horses, too, and men who dare ride them as straight as a bird of the air can fly. These many a horn wound, and many a pair of spurs going from morning till night, all the season through, in the canny North."

"Like enough!" answered Rube. "But I'll always maintain that the moor is the moor. When your honor has once forded Badgeworthy water, you'll never want to follow hounds in any other country again."

"And that shall be before I am many days older," replied John Garnet, reflecting what an agreeable addition to the amusements of his retirement would be this favorite pursuit; and remembering also, no doubt, that Mistress Carew, on the wonderful white pony that fed in the orchard, was a keen votary of the chase. "Do you find a good stag, and, unless we get into a bog again, my gray horse and I will try to see him killed."

"I'll do my best," said Rube; and with a clumsy obeisance, turned back to the moor, looking after John Garnet's figure as it disappeared amongst the giant stems of Horner Wood, with a puzzled expression on his quaint old face. This frank, well-spoken stranger was a riddle he could not read; "a slot," as he would have expressed it, that left him "at fault." The man might be a robber and an outlaw; but at any rate he rode to administration; was cordial, open-handed, and a sportsman to the back-bone.

CHAPTER XVII.

"LISTEN AND LEARN IT."

And you never told me your life was in danger, never said that a careless word might ruin both of us at a blow. Dear heart, surely you might have trusted me."

It was Nelly Carew's voice, and her brow was pressed to John Garnet's shoulder, while she spoke. The red-checked apples hanging overhead in her grandfather's orch-