

## A Strange Bed.

One bleak December night, about the year 1823, I, John Newstead, country traveller for the wholesale drapery firm of Marriot Brothers, Manchester, was making my way, on the back of my steady, sure-footed gray mare Polly, across Sefton Moor, a stretch of wild and barren heath lying between the towns of Packerton and Sefton-on-the-Wold, Yorkshire.

In those days, before railroads had taken the poetry out of everything, and when the knights-errant of commerce journeyed from town to town on horseback or in gigs, there was a touch of romance even in a "bagman's" life; many an adventure had I met with in the course of my peregrinations through the Northern counties, along lonely country roads, down still lonelier country lanes, over wild hills or across desolate "wolds" like the one I was now traversing.

I had been collecting accounts for my employers, Messrs. Marriot, at Packerton, on the day before, and in the breast-pocket of my coat was a bulky leather pocket-book containing nearly two hundred pounds in gold and notes, which I was to deposit in the bank at Sefton on the morrow. My pack, together with the valise containing my personal belongings, was strapped behind the saddle, and in the holster was a pair of pistols, indispensable companions for a solitary traveller in those days.

I had started from Packerton early in the afternoon, and should have reached Sefton before dark, but for the accident of Polly casting a shoe, which had caused a tiresome delay at a little wayside smithy. Night was closing in before half my journey was accomplished, and I had the pleasant prospect of being belated on the heath. Sefton Moor, in its forlorn solitude, is a depressing place even on a summer morning, when the sun is shining, and the larks are singing above the heather; but on a winter night it would be hard to imagine a scene more bleak and dismal, and, as I glanced at the dreary road before me, I felt my spirits sink to within a few degrees of zero.

It was intensely cold, and moon and stars were invisible, for the sky was shrouded in a mantle of fleecy clouds; a chill mist gradually crept over the moor, and presently, to my dismay, it began to snow. Faster and faster, thicker and thicker, every moment came the great soft feathery flakes, till all the air was tremulous, and I seemed to be shut in on every side by a constantly-descending white curtain, which moved with me as I moved and never lifted for a moment. I had crossed the heath more than once before in my annual visits to the neighborhood, but my daylight experience of the place was of little service to me now, when I could hardly see a yard before me.

We had plodded on through the snow and mist for several miles, the way becoming at every step more difficult to trace, when I began to have an uneasy suspicion that we had gone astray, and wandered into one of the many cross-roads which intersected the heath. I remembered that the road I had traversed before was a gentle rise all the way; I now found myself descending into a hollow, and in the distance I could hear the rush of a deep and rapid stream.

The path was full of ruts and holes, and the mare stumbled at every step; I drew rein, and was about to alight and lead her when an unexpected plunge of hers saved me the trouble by pitching me neatly over her head. "I fell soft"—that was one comfort—rather too soft, in fact, inasmuch as I alighted "all in the beautiful middle" as the French say, of a sticky bog; and the worst of it was this unexpected somersault so completely muddled my topographical ideas, turning them all topsy-turvy in my head, that when I scrambled to my feet again I found that I had completely lost my bearings, and had not the remotest notion in which direction lay the road from which I had strayed.

As I stood hesitating, with the reins in my hand, trying vainly to pierce the "white darkness" around me, and listening to the stream, which, swollen by the melted snow from the mountains, was rushing between its banks with the noise of a mountain-torrent, I heard the distant bark of a dog. I halloed, but, receiving no answer, I resolved to proceed in the direction of the sound, hoping it would lead me to a house of some sort. We had floundered along the rough cross-road for nearly half an hour, when, to my great relief, I saw a light glimmering feebly through the snow a short distance ahead, and, on approaching, found that it proceeded from the lower window of a house by the wayside, streaming in a long narrow ray through an aperture in the closed shutters. Finding my way with some difficulty to the front door, I rapped with the handle of my whip. There was a sound of hasty footsteps within, a scraping of chairs on a brick floor, and then, after a pause, a man's voice demanded, "Who's there?"

"A traveller who has lost his way. Open the door."

After some rattling of bolts and bars the door opened, letting out a stream of ruddy firelight on to the snow, and the figures of two men appeared on the threshold—dark silhouettes relieved against a bright background.

"How far am I from Sefton-on-the-Wold?" I inquired.

The men peered at me curiously, and the shorter of the two, who had a lantern in his hand, raised it to my face and took a long look at me, keeping his own features in the shadow.

"Sefton-on-the-Wold, sir?" he repeated at length, lowering the light, as if reassured by the inspection. "You've come many miles out of your way if you was going there. Why, it's right a' t'otherside the moor. This is the Beckley road you're on now. Beckley cross-road it's called, being a short cut to the town."

"Then Beckley is not far from here?"

"Nigh upon nine miles, and a very bad road. Won't you please put up here for the night, sir?" he added, after a pause.

"Is this an inn?" I asked in surprise.

"The Moorfowl," kept by Simon Blacklock," muttered the man who had not yet spoken.

"Well, it ain't exactly an inn," explained the other, who was evidently the landlord; "it's a sort of half-way house. But we've got a good bed, and a nice dry shed where we could make shift to put up the horse. Shall my son take it, sir?"

I hesitated. Remembering what I carried about me, I was naturally reluctant to trust myself in a strange inn; but I was so cold and tired, and the road was so long, and the warmth and firelight were so inviting, that I decided to take advantage of the shelter.

"I will see the horse put up myself," I said; "show me to the stable."

"My son will take you, sir," the landlord answered, quickly. "No, not you, Reuben. Here Sim—Sim!"

At this summons a shock-headed lad of thirteen emerged from the house, and, taking the lantern from his father's hand led me through a gate to the left of the entrance, across a yard at the side to a thatched shed, small, but dry and snug, already tenanted by a cow and a donkey, which were unceremoniously turned out to make room for Polly. When I had seen her fed and made comfortable for the night, I shouldered my pack, transferred the pistols from the holster to my pocket, and followed my guide back to the house.

The front-door opened straight upon the kitchen, a spacious, low-ceiled room, with an uneven brick floor and a wide hearth, on which a huge wood fire was blazing cheerily; over it was suspended an iron pot, which emitted a most appetizing odour. There was no other light than that of the fire, which filled the room with dancing shadows, and, leaving the far corners in obscurity, made it seem larger than it really was. As I stood on the hearth, unbuttoning my overcoat as fast as my numbed fingers would permit, I took the opportunity of observing my host and his eldest son, who were busy fastening the heavy bolts and bars of the front door. Both were tall, powerfully built men—broad-chested, long-armed, and billet-headed. The father, who was the shorter of the two, might have been forty-five or thereabouts, but looked younger than his age, owing to his colorless insipid complexion—hair, brows, eyelashes and skin all seemed of the same straw-colored tint, and his eyes were of the palest shade of china-blue. He was obsequiously civil, and his thin lips were almost constantly distended in an ingratiating smile. The son, a surly-mannered, gruff voiced young giant of one or two and twenty, had his father's sandy hair and light blue eyes, without his smile.

By the time I had noticed this much the barring and bolting were concluded, and the landlord approached to help me off with my coat. Having divested me of it he bade his youngest son take off my boots, while he lifted the lid of the pot to see how the contents were getting on.

"This is an out-of-the-way spot for an inn," I remarked, as I sat down and resigned my foot to the lad, "dropped down in the middle of a moor, nine miles from the nearest town."

My host, who was absorbed in gazing into the depth of the pot, made no reply; but the lad kneeling at my feet raised his head with a broad stare, and after a second said—

"Tain't nine miles from Beckley; 'tain't above five if you—"

Just then his father accidentally dropped the iron pot-lid on the hearth, and the rest of the sentence was lost in the clatter.

"Not above five!" I echoed, turning to my host. "Why, you told me a moment ago—"

"Not above five miles if you cut straight across the moor," he interrupted, "that's what Sim means, sir—but if you go by the road it's four more at least. It's a roundabout road, you see, following the windings of the stream. It isn't much used in winter, but in summer there's a good deal of passing—farmers going to market, and such-like. The supper's done to a turn, now," he added, lifting the pot off the fire and letting out a cloud of savoury steam; "and I make no doubt you're ready for it, sir."

His hasty manner of changing the subject confirmed me in a suspicion that my smiling, civil host had somewhat exaggerated the distance in order to keep me at "The Moorfowl" for the night; but, if the supper tasted half as good as it smelt, I would magnanimously forgive him.

"What is it?" I asked sniffing.

"It's a stew of rabbit, steak, and onions and potatoes," he answered, unctuously, smacking his lips—"a supper for a king

Now, Joyce, where are you? Light the candles and lay the cloth. Drat the wench she's always hiding when she wanted! Joyce, I say!"

At this summons there emerged from the shadow at the end of the room a tall, slender girl of eighteen in a coarse linsley petticoat and short white bed-gown—a girl with wild dark eyes and a dead-white face, its pallor rendered still more startling by the frame of heavy, lustreless dark-brown hair which was pushed back from her temples and hung in a neglected tangle about her neck. But it was not the unnatural pallor of the face that first struck me; it was the strange expression stamped on the features—a fixed, frozen look, as if the chill of some deadly terror had passed over her, paralysing her mind and driving all the light of life from her face.

She moved mechanically, like a sleep-walker, and looked with eyes that seemed to see nothing. There was nothing coarse or common in her appearance, homely as were her surroundings; her features, though irregular, were delicate. Her neglected hair was wavy and abundant; her eyes, of a soft brown, would have been beautiful but for their strange and fixed look.

"What is the matter with the girl? Is she ill?" I asked, in an undertone.

The landlord pushed his lips out.

"She has been, but she's well enough now, for all I know—well enough in body but a trifle weak here—you understand"—he tapped his forehead significantly—"takes odd notions, and so on."

"Is she a relative of yours?"

"Not she, sir; she's a 'fondling.' We had her from Packerton Workhouse to wait on my mother, who is bedridden. We shall have to send her back again, I fancy, for she gets queerer every day."

"Poor lass!" I said, involuntarily, looking, with the compassion I felt, at the forlorn young creature.

The girl, who had hitherto stood with downcast eyes, raised them suddenly to my face. What a strange look it was—a look that startled and thrilled me! Not the vacant stare of an idiot. No; those wonderful dark eyes were full of a significance which I vaguely felt, but, not having the clew to it, could not understand.

"Don't stand staring there, you moon-struck idiot!" interposed her master, in a coarse, brutal tone, which contrasted strongly with his honeyed accents to myself. "Light the candles and lay the cloth."

Silently and mechanically she obeyed, moving about like an automaton. I could not keep my eyes from her, but she never looked at me again.

"Supper is quite ready, sir," said my host at last rubbing his hands and smiling more than ever. "What will you please to take with it? We have good ale, or, if you would prefer a glass of something hot—"

"Ale with my supper and a glass of hot brandy-and-water before I go to bed," I returned, taking my seat at the table.

The ale was a trifle flat, but not bad; the stew was superb. I made a thoroughly satisfactory supper, and, when it was finished and I sat in an easy chair on the hearth, with my legs stretched out to the cheerful blaze, I felt in the best of tempers with myself and all the world, not excepting my attentive host, who seated on the opposite side of the fire, entertained me with tales of the moor, while his son was clinking bottles and glasses at the table behind me. Presently the hot water and a bottle of spirits were placed on a little round table by my side. I filled my glass, and stirred and sipped the steaming mixture, and then took about a quarter of it at a draught. As I set the glass down, the girl Joyce emerged from the shadow at the far end of the room, where I had seen her sitting while I was at supper, her face and jacket two dim patches of white in the gloom, and came towards the hearth.

"Now, then, what is it?" her master demanded.

She pointed to my boots, which lay between the small table at which I sat and the wall.

"Very well, take 'em away," he ordered. She stooped to pick them up, and, in raising herself managed to upset the table. Over went jug, bottle, and glass, with a crash onto the stone hearth, and up jumped I with an involuntary "What the deuce—" for not a little of the hot water had gone over my legs.

My host, who had been stooping to stir the fire, and had not seen the cause of the mishap, started up, with an oath.

"Who did that?" he demanded, with a black look at the girl.

"I did it myself," I answered, promptly, telling the fib without a moment's hesitation; "my knee got in the table, I suppose, and—"

"It was Joyce as did it, father," growled the son's voice behind me.

"Yes; it was Joyce as did it," shrilly echoed the shock-headed boy, who had been squatting like a toad in a warm corner of the hearth. "I see her upset it, I did."

His father threw down the poker, crossed the hearth in one stride, and, before I knew what he was about, raised his heavy hand and struck the girl on the temple.

"Take that for your clumsiness!" said he, and he raised his hand to repeat the blow, when I struck it up, and, catching

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