

A Terrible Temptation.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"That was the only place you could do it. I knew you were brave enough," she gasped, "so I waded you on; and I will save you yet. Not one among them dare attempt such a leap; they must go round a mile or more. But there is no time to lose, for the light is increasing every minute. Follow me quickly."

She took the bridle from him, and fastened the still trembling horse to a tree hard by.

"I will see after him," she said, in answer to Esmond's look of anxiety; then she led the way with swift unerring footsteps under brushwood and amid rocks, until they reached a tiny cave just capable of holding one person.

Stella almost pushed Vesey in. "Stay there till evening, or till I return," she said. Then she paused for one instant, looking at him solemnly, with deep yearning gaze: "If I never come back, remember that I saved you after all."

But as he stretched out his arms towards her she had disappeared. At the same moment the storm, that had been returning unnoticed, burst again upon that world in a deafening drowning volley of wind and rain.

CHAPTER VI.

Esmond Vesey watched and waited with vain impatience for the gipsy girl's return; he was faint from lack of food, weary with exertion, excitement, but his indomitable spirit never flagged, and as soon as the shadows began to close the short wintry day, he stole recklessly from his hiding-place.

Alas, when he looked for his horse, he had gone; then bitterly the thought crossed him. Had Stella indeed carried out her threat, or had his pursuers found his steed, though not able to discover himself?

The latter was more likely, he tried to believe, but his heart was heavy as he thought of the impossibilities of achieving his journey on foot.

He would fail in his task, receive disgrace instead of honour, and lose Joan.

That last thought urged him on to a pace too fleet to be maintained for long, but which bore him far from the ravine and the cave across the wide-spreading moor along a kind of cattle track—the only clue he had to follow.

"I will get out of this moor to-night, or die!" he said, resolutely pressing his teeth together. "Once amid human life I can obtain some animal to help me on. My papers are safe, and my money, so far: I hear no sounds of those rascals behind or ahead now. After all I might be in a worse plight, thanks to the best horse man ever had, and to that strange mysterious girl. Poor Stella!" Almost as he had uttered the words his foot touched something in his path, and bending down he saw a figure stretched motionless upon the damp ground. "Stella!" he said, in tones of deep remorse, stooping over the white face and closed eyes. "Stella! are you hurt, little one?"

There was moisture oozing from her side, which he felt with sickening horror was not rain. He tried to stanch the wound as best he could, and roused either by the pain of movement or by his voice, the glorious eyes unclosed and met his wistfully.

"Take me in your arms. Kiss me before I die!" the girl gasped, upraising herself with an effort. "That will not hurt her; she will have all your kisses, all your love in the future. Well, I have died for you—she will not do that!"

"Stella—Stella darling, how did this happen?"

She heard the anguish in his tone, and she smiled gratefully up.

"I betrayed you to them—yes, I was mad with jealousy and pain; and I told them the way I had bade you go. They would never have tracked you but for me; but the moment the deed was done, the moment I saw them start on your track, I would have given my hands to undo my revenge. I loved you—I loved you, and I had destroyed you. I started off to intercept you or them; I resolved to die for you if you could be saved in no other way. I thought of the ravine, and I fancied you might dare that leap. I arrived just in the nick of time, and I showed you the only spot where horse could clear it; then I put you in shelter, but I knew they were coming on—they would find you out unless they were lured away, so I mounted your horse and rode for you. In the darkness they did not see. Once I thought I should escape—if your horse had been fresh I might have done so, but it was tired, and stumbled. They fired and hit me here," she touched her side with a gasp of pain. "The horse went on when I fell, and they followed it, I think; the storm was blinding, and they could not see or know. I have lain here ever since—I do not remember more. But you are safe."

Her voice for a moment gained power and life.

"I have died for you!"

"My darling—oh, my darling, it must not be—it is too much! Stella, what can I do for you?"

His tears fell like rain on her face; she put up her lips to his, and he pressed them passionately.

He forgot the harm she had done him almost for the moment he forgot Lady Joan.

"Stay with me to the end; it will not delay you long!" she said faintly. "Hold me so, kiss me now and again—that is all I want. Oh, before I forget, let me tell you the way you must go. You will soon be out of the moor now, and at the nearest town you can get another horse. You will do your task yet—my injury has not been fatal."

She gave him clear full directions, and then she leaned silently back in his arms, gazing in his face with a love that would haunt him to his dying day.

"It is best I should go," she said, in answer to his grief. "My own people would take my life—I could not come to you. Best I should go like this!"

Earnestly, yearningly, he tried to instil some future hope, some more than earthly comfort into the departing mind, and perchance the ignorant, untaught nature grasped, in that late hour, some divine truth; anyhow, her face grew more peaceful, her smile brighter as the end came on.

"Kiss me once more, darling," she whispered, clinging convulsively to the strong arm around her. "Darling, darling, oh, must I leave you now? I love you so! I loved you the first moment I saw you. Oh, dearest, kiss me once again—again. Good-bye. Where am I going? Ah, me!"

She was gone, silently, swiftly as she had so often departed from his sight, only this time the stiffening fingers were locked in his, the clouded eyes were turned upon him still.

He could give her no more pleasure or pain now, and reverently he laid the slight form down, crossing the hands on her breast, and lingering to breathe one prayer ere he departed to finish his task.

Her own people would find her and bury her, he knew; he could do nothing more for her, and his duty beckoned him on; so on he toiled until the next town was reached, and the worst part of his journey, he felt, was over.

"Lady Joan, have you no welcome for me?"

Almost timidly Esmond Vesey spoke. He had returned, honoured, successful, feted among the particular circle to which he belonged, though, alas! the royal favours he had been promised were in the vague, never-coming distance yet; but the only person who gave him no sign of praise or welcome was the woman who had urged him to the danger—the girl he loved.

"Lady Joan, have you alone no welcome for me?"

"I am glad you succeeded. I congratulate you on your courage and discretion."

Her tone was like ice, her grey eyes met his fully, with naught but coldness in their sweet depths, no tint of that alluring tenderness that had thrilled him was to be seen to-day.

He came boldly nearer to her; he had sought her out, was paying her a visit in her own house.

"Before I went you promised me a reward," he said, looking at her intently. She laughed, turning her head away.

"For the good of the cause we promise many things rashly, Master Vesey, I fear."

"You repent of this promise? You are afraid of what I shall ask?"

"I know you too well," returned she quickly, "to fear you will ask for anything I could only bestow unwillingly." His face went very white, his strong hand trembled.

"Women are strange creatures," he murmured in troubled pain under his breath—"impossible to comprehend."

"I grant you they may seem so to you, though, indeed, I should have thought, Master Vesey, that one so vastly experienced in love-matters as yourself might have learned ere this to understand them; and her ladyship smiled scornfully.

"You are pleased to be sarcastic, Lady Joan. My one experience of love—"

In spite of himself his voice grew hoarse and choked, and Lady Joan interrupted carelessly:

"You refer to the lovely gipsy-girl, I suppose. Of course I know—"

"Do you know about her?" in sad wonderment.

"Too much!" in haughtiest disdain. "Master Vesey, it is useless our playing at cross-purposes of fencing with false delicacy. When I gave you the rash promise I most bitterly deplore, I had the foolish conceit to believe myself held alone in your heart."

"As you ever have been—as you ever must be," earnestly.

She smiled again miserably.

"My own eyes undeceived me. I saw the girl in your house, and Lord Bellingier told me part of the truth."

"Bellingier could tell you no word of truth, for he knows nothing of the story. Lady Joan, have I ever told you a lie? Do you hold me capable of descending to a meanness like that?"

His blue eyes gazed fearlessly, tenderly, into hers.

"Never!" she uttered involuntarily, her glance held in spite of herself.

man it is the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Then simply, clearly, and sadly he related from first to last his acquaintance with Stella.

"You understand I would tell this to no other woman, and you understand why I tell it to you," he said, as he told of the gipsy-girl's fierce, uncontrolled, passionate love, and Lady Joan listened with breathless interest and averted head. Her eyes shone brightly as she heard Esmond's choice of herself rather than even the safety of his mission; but they darkened angrily as she read the gipsy's treachery in the swift-on-following danger that overtook him; then they filled with tears as she heard of the poor girl's passionate remorse and cruel death.

As Esmond ceased speaking, standing with concentrated gaze reviewing the terrible pictures his tale had conjured back to him, Joan arose, and went softly to his side.

"I believe every word you have uttered," she whispered earnestly. "That is very good of you."

He spoke stiffly for the moment. In face of all he had undergone, and the unswerving loyalty he had paid her, her readiness to misjudge him, and put faith in jealous interference like Lord Bellingier's, seemed a little hard; but the next moment he turned and looked at her, and his half-formed resentment fled.

The deep grey eyes were raised in softest beseeching; the exquisite face was quivering, paling with deepest feeling.

"I can only repeat the promise I gave you," she said brokenly. "Ask of me what you will now."

"Then I ask only yourself," he whispered; and she came to him.

With his arms clasping her to his heart, his eyes, his lips, meeting hers, all the danger and sorrow through which he had won her seemed as nothing compared with this keen exquisite joy.

"You really love me?" he breathed, anxious to have assurance doubly sure; "you so noble, so beautiful, so good, so sweet!"

"I really love you—you, so noble, so tender, so strong, so brave, so true!" she said; and of her own free will she twined her beautiful arms around his neck and lifted her lips to his. "Esmond, my darling, I have loved you for years!"

Startled by a knock, the lovers were intruded upon by Lord Bellingier. Her ladyship advanced with her calmest, most graceful smile.

"You have followed Master Vesey here to congratulate him, no doubt, and it is a happy time to choose, for there is another matter just arranged upon which we both expect every-one's congratulations. We are betrothed," she stretched out her hand to Esmond proudly. "Oh, and, Lord Bellingier, you told me a little story of a gipsy-girl once. It may be as well to mention that I have just been hearing the true and most totally different version of that tale."

"Of course if you like to be hoodwinked—" began the angry and discomfited lord; but it was useless for him to foam and rage in face of the perfect happiness he saw on the two faces before him. He did the wisest thing he could under the circumstances—took as speedy a departure as possible.

Esmond Vesey and the Lady Joan were married before the spring flowers came, and when the land was a little more at rest from turmoil and plot, Vesey took his bride to visit that weird stretch of moor on which he had so nearly met his death.

Together beneath the bright summer sun they stood beside the gipsy's lonely grave, and bending to read the simple inscription, "Stella, aged twenty," written on the little cross of wood at its head, Lady Joan there related to her husband the secret of her own interview with Stella.

"It was not in jealousy or pride, but for your dear life's sake, that I gave you up to her as I thought that day, Esmond." Then as tears rose in the sweet grey eyes: "I must ever think pitifully of her, for she lost all I have won, and she expiated with her life her mad yielding to a terrible temptation."

Potatoes on Heavy Soil.

Many years ago the idea obtained currency that good potatoes could only be grown on sandy soil. It is still prevalent in some quarters, for with some men when an idea obtains lodgment in their minds no other can take its place. The old-fashioned Mercer potato was much better when grown on well fertilized, sandy soil. We are half inclined to suspect that this was because such land was always dry. At all events, heavy soil, if well drained, now grows as good potatoes as sandy soil can. But in a wet season, the heavy soil is apt to be too wet. The Peerless potato is, we think, better grown on heavy soil than on sand, mainly because it is a strong grower, and on sandy soil the tops sometimes die down from drought while the tubers are still immature and watery.

The International postal convention opens at Vienna on the 20th inst. Some weeks ago, a special invitation was sent to the Dominion government urging that Canada be represented there, and acting upon this, Sir Chas. Tupper has been deputed to attend and take part for the Dominion.

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