

A Terrible Temptation.

CHAPTER I.

It was a horrible situation, and he bit his lip and stamped his foot with anger, but unavailingly, for he was utterly powerless—one amidst, perhaps, sixty. Sixty stalwart unscrupulous, defiant gypsies, who had waylaid him in his ride across the dark lonely moor, had robbed him of his horse, his purse, his watch—everything of value about him, save the precious papers of whose existence they were ignorant, and whose hiding-place they had not discovered.

For those papers' existence he had staked his own, and, in spite of his predicament, he smiled happily as his hand touched the secret pocket in which they securely rested. But how could he fulfil his trust, how continue the perilous journey he had sworn to perform, robbed of every means of travelling?

Esmond Vesey spoke out as this thought crossed his brain.

"Exchange is no robbery," he said in the calm high-bred tones that would alone have proclaimed his rank. "I do not ask you to return my own watch, as its value I cannot pretend to deny, but I ask one of you to give me in return some means of telling the hour. I am pledged to perform a certain distance in a certain time, and you must comprehend how you, by your sudden and unexpected movements," his handsome head turned with quiet scornful smile towards the men who had first attacked him, "have increased the difficulties of my task. I do not ask you to return my own good horse, as his like I know well none of you have ever beheld before; but I suggest that you—shall we say lend me some animal capable of bearing me to the nearest place where I can obtain food, and shelter, and means of going farther. I care not whether the beast be horse, or mule, or ass, as long as it can carry a man of my weight out of this utterly impracticable region."

Perhaps his words might have had some effect had he not tinged them with satire, and allowed that scornful smile to play upon his features; but that smile, coupled with the easy inimitable manner of the perfect aristocrat, irritated the motley crew around him exceedingly.

"You need not trouble about your journey, for you'll have no chance of following it up yet awhile. You may think yourself lucky you have not had a taste of the knife, here the speaker drew his hand with sinister motion across his throat; "but though we may be too sparing in that way, we are not fools enough to let you go free to give information about us at the nearest town."

"I give you my word of honor—" the young stranger began eagerly; but the gipsy laughed with mocking insult, and said, as he threw a rope around his prisoner's shoulders:

"We trust to something stronger than words, my fine fellow, as you'll see."

But he had miscalculated his man. A practised athlete, muscular as active, lithe as a panther, and strong as a lion, Esmond Vesey was a match for a couple of the hulking ruffians before him; and his blood was up now. The touch of the rope had roused it indeed.

With a dexterous spring, too quick for the other's heavy eye, and a blow aimed straight from the shoulder, he freed himself and laid his antagonist flat on the ground in one moment.

"Come on, all of you—only come fair and singly!"

He squared up, flashing round upon the companions of the prone hero, who hung back a moment, motionless from astonishment, then came upon him with a spring together; and bruised and stunned, bound and bleeding, Esmond Vesey lay unconscious upon the ground alone, as the moon slowly mounted into the heavens.

"Has that rascal fled?" he asked of himself, as consciousness returned, and he looked round upon the lighted scene.

"Hush! Don't move—don't speak," a low voice whispered in his ears as soft small hands travelled deftly over his bandages. "I'll set you free in a minute; but drink this first—it will do you good; and let me bind up your arm. There—so"

As he drained the little flask held to his lips, Vesey looked up with recovered strength, and met a gaze, dark as night, soft as sunshine, speechful of tenderness and anxiety, bent upon him.

"Have they left you my gaoler?" he asked; then, as his glance took in the loveliness of face and form: "Upon my faith, no man could wish for a prettier one!"

The girl colored under her dusky skin as she met his look of open admiration.

With a graceful, somewhat haughty movement she rose to her full height, and tossed back the raven tresses from her brow.

She was indeed a lovely creature—a perfect type of the agile, perfectly contoured, warmly colored gipsy beauty, almost extinct now in our own land, but constantly to be seen in the good old days of which this story tells. Every graceful movement spoke of free unfettered strength; every feature, every tint, spoke of the warm, beautiful, Southern life.

In her picturesque dress, and beneath the moon's rays, the gipsy Stella looked like some lovely enchantress, and Vesey's gaze spoke of wonder as well as admiration; but the girl's words and manners were essentially womanly.

"I thought you were treated too hardly," she said with a proud simplicity; "and I always take the side of the beaten. I waited till all the others had gone, then stole back to see if you were really dead. I thought you were at first."

"Thanks to you, no," Esmond said, rising with some difficulty and keeping himself erect by an effort. "But those rascally friends of yours have effectually stopped my journey. Confound them, why could not they find some other victim than a man with a king's mission to perform?"

The last words escaped him unconsciously, but the quick flash of intelligence in the gipsy girl's eye showed that she heard and understood them.

"Your mission was important?" she said softly.

"Far more than life or death. I must get on somehow," he continued, gathering himself together as best he could. "I am stiff and sore from head to foot. It is some little consolation to reflect, however, that I paid one villain out in a language he could understand,"—he added that with vast satisfaction. "I trust it was no particular friend of yours whom I stretched upon the ground. I allude to the gentleman who had the impudence to first approach me with a rope."

"Only the man the tribe have decreed I am to marry," said Stella slowly.

"Ah!" he looked at her searchingly with his splendid blue eyes; "and you, *ma chere*?"

"I hate him!" she said in low-toned vehemence, her straight dark brows contracting into one thin line, her red lips tightening upon each other. "I hate him!"

"Ah, I see," Vesey regarded the face from which momentarily all beauty had fled, and then he added laconically. "Poor devil!"

"If it had not been for my joy at seeing this overthrow—if had had not been Rube Garnet whom you worsted, I might not have troubled to return to your assistance," Stella said in the same low concentrated tones, and with the same curious look on her face.

"I rejoice that Mr. Garnet then first advanced. But, my dear girl, tell me, now"—as he spoke, he took her hand in his, and bent his deep handsome eyes upon her. As he did so he could not fail to note the glorious beauty of the dark face, nor could he fail to see the blush that slowly but deeply crept over it, and increased its loveliness.

"Tell me, now, how I am to continue my way? Is there any footway by which I can reach Boystwell?"

"None that you can find by night."

"Not even if you increased the debt I already owe by guiding me a little?" insinuatingly.

She colored again.

"I have another plan," she said slowly.

"I will guide you to a hiding place where you can rest safely for to-night, if you will come with me."

"Anywhere," emphatically.

"I will give you a little food and drink and to-morrow evening, if you will remain quiet for so long, I will bring you back your own horse and enough money to continue your way."

But she was stopped suddenly, for in his gratitude and the joy of the surprise the young man bent and pressed his lips to hers.

Only a kiss, from a gentleman to a gipsy girl; a kiss, half careless, half gallant, wholly grateful; only a brief soft passing salute, but if Esmond Vesey could guess what a kiss might have, would he have given it so thoughtlessly, so easily?

As his lips released hers the girl's whole frame trembled violently; her eyes flashed with outraged pride and resentment, and the man said hurriedly:

"I beg your pardon. Pardon me I entreat! It was but gratitude. I meant no liberty, no insult, I swear!"

The dark doe-like orbs softened, deepened, changed, drooped. Over the graceful figure went the quiver again.

For a moment Stella stood perfectly silent, then she said gently, and with a strange sweet shyness pervading her voice: "I pardon you. Come this way."

The cave was near at hand, though only a child of the wild intricate moor could have found its entrance.

Stella guided her companion in, and with marvelous dexterity arranged a couch for him to rest upon; some dried grass and leaves formed its substance, and she took off her own bright shawl for his pillow.

"Rest here in perfect safety," she said, standing before him without looking at him. "I must go now, but I will come at daybreak and bring you food, and to-morrow, when the night falls, I will keep my promise."

"How am I ever to thank you enough?" he asked.

He did not catch her in his arms again; he bent with courtly perfect reverence, as he might have done before the highest lady in the land, and pressed his lips to her hand; and Stella's dark eyes, upraised just for one moment, met the blue ones above with one shy, lovely, half-frightened glance, then she was gone and Esmond Vesey threw himself down on the improvised couch and slept.

He slept fitfully after his sufferings and exhaustion, but one vision ever came to him in his dreams—a pale, proud, delicate

face, framed in hair of deep dark gold, set with eyes of liquid gray—a face equally beautiful as, but widely different from, the rich glowing darkness of the gipsy Stella.

In the morning, however, when he awoke, it was Stella's face he saw bringing him the food he was indeed in sore need of.

"Your wound is healing," she said, examining his arm carefully. "It is well indeed Rube Garnet did not break the bone."

"Well indeed for him," was the muttered reply.

She smiled.

"You could crush him like an adder if you chose. You have twenty times the muscle—the strength, though he boasts himself finely."

"Has he any idea you know where I am?"

She shuddered involuntarily, then said quickly:

"Not a suspicion. All goes well. I will bring you your horse at nightfall. Do not stir from here till you hear his hoofs outside."

She then left him to his solitude.

Slowly the day waned, and the impatient prisoner waited and watched in silence.

At last the shades of evening fell, and with a joyous start, he heard his horse's neigh outside the cave.

Going out, Esmond found Stella holding his bridle, and caressing his glossy neck.

They were a rare couple, Vesey thought throwing one keen glance over them as the moon fell upon the perfect brown horse and the handsome girl.

"There is no time for delay," Stella said in a hurried whisper. "The sooner you are miles from this the better. Mount at once."

Then, as he obeyed, and the good horse whinnied again with delight at his burden, the girl said, speaking shyly and low:

"Can your horse carry double? Because I could show you a way that might cut your journey short by some miles."

"Come," he said eagerly, and held out his hand.

Light as a bird or a circus-rider, she sprang up before him, and, as the steed started, her hands guided the reins.

Little was said as they went swiftly through the night. Vesey's arm was perfect around her waist. Stella's glossy hair brushed his face. Now and again when a word had to be exchanged, it needed to be only in a whisper.

A ride for life or honor, or a word that was pledged—ay, a ride for something else even a heavier stake for one of them. Only when the lights of the town of Boystwell gleamed clearly before them did Stella turn.

"I must leave you now. Before I go own that I have kept my promise."

"I owe you a debt I can never pay," Vesey said passionately.

She had slipped to the ground and stood beside him, one hand upon the panting steed, her speechful eyes upraised, clear and lovely, but with something he could not fathom in their blue depths.

"I shall see you again some day," she said half dreamily, half with an intensity of wishfulness.

"I hope so, indeed," he responded, earnestly.

He was deeply touched, and grateful for the service she had done him; and he would not have been human could he have experienced that ride and gazed upon her beauty totally unmoved.

"Do you hope so?" she responded slowly, looking penetratingly into his face.

"Will it give you pleasure to see me again ere long?"

"Surely, yes. Can you doubt it?"

"I shall know at a glance if it is pleasure you feel. I shall stand by your side when you least expect it," she said; then, even as he framed an answer, she was gone silent and swift as a shadow of the night.

CHAPTER II.

One of the most fashionable houses in one of the formerly most fashionable parts of the metropolis was giving a grand evening entertainment, and ladies in gorgeous array were arriving in sedan-chairs; galleons in smart attire were thronging the steps inside the mansion.

Sweet smiles and meaningless words, jealous little cuts and thrusts, honeyed speeches with a sting hidden, and flattery, heartache, anticipation were all there, making up a successful reception as they do in our own day—precisely the same, though the etiquette and manners were a little stiffer, the manner of speaking a little looser.

But, amid all the pretence and put-on pleasure, two faces really looked joyful as they caught sight of each other across the crowded room, and Esmond Vesey edged his way through the throng to the side of the girl he had seen in his dreams.

She was the belle of the room, Lady Joan Ambrose by name, fair to bewilderment, proud to distraction, winning, perplexing, haughty, difficult to understand, impossible to please, said the hundred gallants who sighed for her smiles and received nought but snubs.

Though he dared to dream of her Esmond Vesey had no certainty how she would receive him when he crossed the room and bowed before her.

She put out her hand with the sweetest smile. Her grey eyes gave him a frank

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