

Literature, &c.

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINES.

From Sartain's Union Magazine.

THE POACHER'S DAUGHTER.

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CHAPTER I.

'Let loose my hand Ralph Wilson! I will have none of thy fair words; in good truth, they are hateful to my ear.'

'Beware, Bessy Thorne! I love thee now, yet if thou spurnest me, look well to thy future.'

'I do spurn thee—I scorn thy threats, and now leave me; go from hence.'

Ralph Wilson sprang hastily to his feet, and turned upon his companion a gaze of angry hatred. Bessy Thorne returned his fierce scowl with a scornful smile, and waved her hand towards the door.

'Tis well—I obey thee; yet hark ye, fair one, for this night's bitter words I will have full revenge.'

'A brave yeoman thou art, to threaten thus a lone girl! But, master Ralph, I pray thee, go: I am weary of such jarring words.'

Muttering a curse the exasperated young man opened the door, and closing it roughly behind him, rushed out into the darkness of the night.

Then, with hurried and trembling fingers, Bessy Thorne drew the ponderous bar across the door, and when she crouched down upon the wide stone hearth, the tears were fast streaming over her face. The coarse dress of the cottage girl could not conceal her rare beauty, and the ruddy firelight flashed upon bright though tear-gemmed eyes, dark curls, long and silken, and quivering lips, red as the deepest coral. A loud rap sounded thro' the long kitchen, and Bessy sprang to the kitchen door.

'Father, art thou there?' she asked softly. 'Spare thy words, good Bess, and let me in,' was the somewhat tart rejoinder, and the girl quickly obeyed. Then a tall, swarthy man, roughly dressed, and carrying a game bag and gun, entered; around his neck Bessy flung her arms, in an ecstasy of joy, as she murmured,

'Dear father!'

Richard Thorne gently patted his daughter's glowing cheek. 'Art glad to see me, pretty blossom?' he asked, seating himself in one of the high-backed, rush-seated chairs. 'Then cook me a savory supper from that bag, and I will thank thee for thy welcome.'

'The gamekeeper hath been bounteous to thee,' said Bessy, as her father drew forth many hares and pheasants from his bag.

'No thanks to him that I got these,' replied Richard Thorne, smiling grimly.

His daughter dropped the pheasant she held, and looked inquiringly at him. 'From whence came they then, dear father?'

'From the grounds of Sir Roger Stuart; and this good gun did win them for me.'

A shudder passed over Bessy. 'Alas, my father, thou a poacher!' and she burst into a flood of tears.

'Don't cry, Bess,' said Thorne, passing his hand over his daughter's dark curls. 'I hold my life too dear to lightly risk it; I am in no danger.'

'Tis not for that alone, I weep,' returned the girl, raising her black eyes to her companion's face; 'but, father, thou doest wrong, God will frown upon thy sin.'

'Hush child! thou talkest idly. I have as fair a right to the pheasants and hares, as Sir Roger himself, and 'tis no harm now and then to get a choice supper for one's self.'

'And yet 'tis breaking the laws of God and man,' tearfully returned Bessy.

'Prate no more to me, Bess, but look to thine own concerns,' angrily returned the poacher, and for a while there was silence in the kitchen.

Richard Thorne was troubled, when, but a little distance from his cottage, he had fancied that he heard steps near him, and had seen a form stealing behind the high hedge; and feeling ill at ease, he hastened home with his stolen game; there his daughter's gentle reproaches made him still more uncomfortable, and he sat by the bright fire moody and unhappy.

In the olden times, of which I write, rigid were the laws of 'merrie old England' against the poachers, and they were enforced with peculiar rigour in Somersetshire where lived Richard Thorne. Thorne knew that he was suspected, yet he flattered himself that no suspicious could with any certainty be fastened upon him. Closely watched by the gamekeepers, yet ever eluding them, the poacher pursued his unlawful course, whilst dark forebodings often overshadowed him, and rendered him a miserable man.

Whatever Thorne might be to others, he was gentle and kind to his motherless daughter—his beautiful child, who had grown up in the rude cottage so lovely, so good and so fair.

'What ailed thee, Bess, when I came in?' asked the poacher, suddenly breaking the silence; 'thine eyes were tear swollen.'

Ralph Wilson was here, and did much weary me with most odious love speeches; and—

'And thou lovest him not, my Bessie?' interrupted her father, laughing. 'I marvel not; Master Ralph is wonderfully ill favored.'

'His heart is as ill as his face, dear father, and I beseech thee forbid him to cross our threshold again.'

'So, then, it shall be—and, my fair daughter, Ralph Wilson shall trouble thee no further.'

As Richard Thorne spoke, to his ears and his daughter's there came a sound, which seemed to them as the murmur of many voices, and the trampling of many feet, without the cottage. Bessy turned a terrified glance upon her father. He had sprang from his chair, and his cheek was nearly as white as her own.

'Keep a stout heart, Bess; be silent as for my life; but haste thee, hide this!' and the poacher touched with his foot the game which lay upon the hearth.

'Fly! oh, father save thyself!' and the affrighted girl hurriedly pushed the game through an aperture in the broken floor, and drew over it an old mat. When she looked towards her father, he had gone—she was alone.

'There is nothing here,' said the constable, as he turned from a fruitless search throughout the cottage, and my good fellows, we have had the whole of our weary walk for nothing.'

With some words of excuse to Bessie for the fright they had given her, the constable and keepers proceeded towards the door; they had but reached it, when a fine large hound which leaped outside, bounded in. Snuffing the floor, and with ears erect, the brute came towards the hidden game: his paw was upon the mat; and in an instant it would be torn up, and the evidences of Richard Thorne's guilt dragged forth.

For the poacher's daughter it was but the work of a moment to snatch a blazing brand from the fire and thrust it close to the dog's head. The animal gave a yelp and rushed out of the door.

'What ails the brute?' and the group at the door, whom the scene had escaped, looked inquiringly at Bessie.

'Thy hound was rude, sir keeper, and I did but give him a slight chastisement for his offence.'

'Tis well,' and with a hasty 'Good night' the door was closed.

When all was hushed without Richard Thorne began to creep slowly from his hiding place. It was a dark recess of the cottage, under a heavy pile of old sail cloth; and here he had cowered while the keepers sought him.

'Go back father,' gasped the trembling girl; 'I fear they will return, come not forth so soon.'

'They will not, Bess, and I cannot smother here: I am almost choked with dust; and the poacher coughed loudly.'

Ere he had time to draw back beneath the cloth, in a moment, as it were, the keepers sprang in again, and Bessy Thorne screamed with terror.

'Ha! Master Richard, art caught finely, thrusting thy head from thy hiding place, as a tortoise from her shell. But now we have unearthed thee—come forth; and the poacher was dragged out roughly by his captors. Richard Thorne did not deny his guilt. Looking round upon the angry men, he asked—

'Who is my accuser?'

'I am,' shouted Ralph Wilson, pressing in to the centre of the room. 'I saw thee lug home thy game not an hour ago, and made it my errand to inform Sir Roger Stuart's keeper of thy poaching. Pretty one,' and Wilson laughed sneeringly as he looked on Bessie, 'what thinkest thou now of my revenge?'

'Silence!' black-hearted knave! thundered Thorne, as he drew his daughter to his side; 'I will break thine empty pate if thou sayest more.'

Ralph Wilson was about to retort stormily, when a low growl from the hound which had before scented the game arrested the men's attention. With a fierce bay of triumph, the dog, finding he was no longer driven back, tore up the mat, and dragged out upon the floor the poacher's spoil.

'Had we doubted thy guilt before, this is full proof against thee. It was well we lingered by the window,' said the head keeper, looking sternly at Richard Thorne. 'Off with him my brave lads.'

'Take me along, I pray thee, good men, let me go with him,' implored Bessy, clinging tightly to her father's arm.

'Come, then; thou canst stay to night in the lodge,' gruffly said the keeper; and flinging her cloak around her, Bessy Thorne went forth with her father and his captors. The firelight in the poacher's cottage died away that night in a lonely and deserted home.

CHAPTER II.

In the spacious library at 'The Hall,' Sir Roger Stuart sat alone. It would seem his reflections were of no pleasant nature; for, as he gazed into the bright fire, his brow ever and anon was wrinkled with a dark frown, whilst half-uttered exclamations burst angrily from his lips. 'Hang the poachers!' he at last exclaimed, springing from his chair, and walking with such heavy strides through the apartment, that the polished oak floor almost creaked beneath his tread.

But Sir Roger was suddenly interrupted in his angry pacings. The library door opened, and a very young man, remarkably handsome and graceful in person, entered. 'I crave thy pardon, Sir Roger, if I intrude,' said he, pausing as his eye fell upon the troubled face of the old man; 'I thought to find my uncle here, and knew not that thou wast engaged.'

'No excuses, Clarence Wyllde; I love thy bright company. Nay, do not leave; I am weary of being alone. Come in, and talk with me awhile; and young Wyllde followed Sir Roger to the fire. 'How liketh thou Somerset, my boy? 'Tis thought a noble

shire; and yet, I fancy, compared to thy gay London, it seems wearisome and dull.'

'Not so, good Sir,' quickly returned Clarence Wyllde; 'the two weeks which have already flown since I came beneath thy roof have been most pleasant. Right glad, am I that I listened to my uncle's persuasions, and came with him hither.'

'Sir Hugh hath seemed dull almost to sadness, since his late visit to London. Hast thou marked this, Clarence?'

'I have, Sir Roger, and in vain have sought to learn the cause of his strange mood. For this purpose I hoped to find him here this morning.'

'I know not where he is; it may be gone out to walk. But tell me, now, Clarence, how didst thou like my game?'

'Tis fine, Sir Roger,' returned the young man, with all a sportsman's earnestness, 'and thy grounds are well stocked.'

'How long they will be so, I know not,' returned his companion, with a short laugh; 'the poachers thrive in this neighborhood. Yet, thanks to my trusty keepers, I have now as bold a villain in the keep as ever poached a hare or pheasant.'

'Whom may he be?' asked Clarence Wyllde with some interest.

'Richard Thorne; and, having had a fair hearing and been found guilty, to-morrow he goes to Taunton gaol, to await his trial at the next assizes. No pity for him Clarence,' quickly added the old gentleman, seeing the expression of the youth's countenance; 'but he has a fair daughter, lovely and good.'

'Sir Roger, a woman craves to see you, and will take no denial; and the old butler had scarcely spoken, ere Bessy Thorne rushed wildly past him, and flung herself at Sir Roger's feet. So shrouded was she in the cloak and hood that he before whom she knelt knew her not, even in the fair morning light.

'Mercy, mercy for my father!' she implored.

'Who is thy father, maiden?' asked Sir Roger kindly.

'Richard Thorne, whom false tongued men have maliciously accused of being a poacher. Good Sir Roger be merciful to him, he is foully belied.'

'Bessy Thorne, such words are idle. On the oath of good men, upright and just, has thy father been accused, and the law must take its course.'

'Oh, spare him, Sir! He is, indeed, no poacher; only, upon that miserable evening when he was dragged from our home, had he shot a few hares and pheasants; but it was the first offence, and he will never do the like again.'

'My poor child,' said Sir Roger, gently, 'would it had been the first offence, then I might have listened to thy prayer. Yet thy father has long been suspected as a daring poacher, and my keepers but waited for a certain proof against him.'

'But he hath been most cruelly and falsely slandered,' earnestly urged Bessy.

'Answer me truly this question, maiden: Hath not thy father often before the night of which thou spoke brought home game?'

'Yes, good Sir; but to me he ever affirmed most solemnly that such had been the keeper's gift.'

'He basely deceived thee, then. And now, poor child, plead no longer; 'tis of no avail.'

But Bessy Thorne, with passionate tears and sobs, clung the more closely to Sir Roger, and besought him urgently to have mercy upon her father. 'Spare him, send him not to jail!'

'This is but a waste of words, Bessy Thorne,' returned the old man, growing weary of her entreaties, 'I cannot grant thy request. And now thou mayst leave me.'

Quickly Bessy Thorne sprang to her feet, and turned to leave the room. As she did so, her eyes fell, for the first time, upon Clarence Wyllde, who earnestly and pityingly regarded her. Blushing deeply, the maiden moved towards the door; but ere she reached, young Wyllde, with gentle courtesy, opened and held it for her. The young stranger's gaze for a moment thrilled the peasant girl, but only for a moment; and, as she hurried down the long passage, Clarence Wyllde saw her slender figure bent in grief, and heard her sweet voice sadly murmuring, 'My father! alas my father!'

'But, my good uncle, 'tis no fancy of mine; Sir Roger hath also marked thy disquietude, and spoken of it to me. I pray thee, now, let thy loving nephew share thy sorrow.'

'Clarence, thou hast ever thine own way since thou wert a boy. I never could refuse thee aught; and since thou desirest it so earnestly, I will tell thee my trouble.'

'Thanks, kind uncle; I will do my best to soothe thy grief; and the young man respectfully touched his lips to Sir Hugh Wyllde's hand.

'Are we alone, Clarence?' and Sir Hugh half raised himself from the massive walnut chair, in which he sat, and glanced searchingly around the large chamber.

'Save ourselves, there is no one here.'

'My boy, dost thou remember my wife, thy beautiful aunt Alice?'

'Do I remember her, Sir Hugh? Methinks I see her at this moment; and I could never tire of gazing upon her fair portrait which hangs in our old gallery.'

'Clarence Wyllde, I loved my Alice as though she had been an angel; and when God took her to himself, my heart was crushed. England became dreary to me, and I went from it to other lands. My only child—a sweet babe—Alice, I left with a family servant. I had no relatives with whom I cared to place her, and this woman had nursed her from her birth. Kind and tender-hearted I knew Cicely Wells to be, faithful and upright I also believed her; but in this I was mista-

ken. On my return, the news reached me that my Alice was dead, and I visited her nurse but to have it confirmed. From the grave they pointed to me as my child's I had the bones removed and placed with those of my wife. Then again I went forth from England, more lonely, more heart-weary than before; and here Sir Hugh paused, and passed his hands over his eyes.

'But uncle,' said Clarence Wyllde, after a silence of several moments, 'may I not ask why these events of years ago do now so trouble thee?'

'Be patient boy and thou shalt know. After my second return, I took thee, my brother's orphan child, to my lonely home and heart; and well hast thou repaid my love, good Clarence. But I linger in my tale.

When last in London, I was summoned to the deathbed of Cicely Wells; and with her dying breath, what think you, nephew, that woman told me? What, but that, to her knowledge, my child had never died, and the tale of her sickness and death was a fearful falsehood. And when I questioned her why she had so deceived me, she confessed that Alice had suddenly and darkly disappeared, a few weeks before my return; and, dreading my anger for her carelessness, she had thus concealed the truth. Cicely Wells went on to say, continued Sir Hugh, his voice trembling as he spoke, 'that she had placed in the babe's hands a little Bible, which I had given to my Alice, and which by mistake had found its way among the child's clothes. This Bible was richly clasped with gold, and the glitter thereof pleased the babe; and thus she left her for a little while, playing within the cottage door. But Alice was gone when she came back; and from that day to this—sixteen years—she has never been heard of. Cicely Wells carefully hushed the matter, yet secretly made enquiries, but could only learn that a company of strolling gipsies had been in the neighborhood, and then she knew that tempted by the child's rich clothing, and the gold clasps of the Bible—for it, likewise, had vanished—that they stole her away. On her dying bed, whilst the death-rattle was almost sounding in her throat, Cicely Wells confessed all this to me, and prayed my forgiveness; and I forgave her though she had deceived me most cruelly.'

The stately form of Sir Hugh Wyllde was bowed with grief, and he hid his face from Clarence.

'Oh, my uncle,' said Clarence, his fine face lighting up with earnest affection, 'grieve not so hopelessly; there is something, I know not what, which tells me that thy Alice lives, and that we will yet find her.'

'Now, may heaven bless thee, boy, for thy cheering words! Since I listened to Cicely Wells' death-bed confession, I have thought of my child as lost to me, as dying in wretchedness and misery; and to my brain this has been madness.'

'Sir Hugh, thou hast been to me as a father; I owe thee much, and it were a small repayment of my debt to seek for thee thy child. I pledge, then, my honor to find her if she lives; and may God help me so to do.'

Clarence Wyllde bent him at his uncle's feet as he thus spoke, and Sir Hugh placed his hand upon his sunny hair and fervently blessed him.

Before a blazing fire, in the wide old sitting room, Sir Roger Stuart and his guests were seated, and whilst autumn winds wailed mournfully round the Hall, they talked cheerfully—almost gaily.

Without, a very different scene was transpiring. Three figures stole cautiously round the side of the keep, and in the dim light of the cloud-shrouded moon, it could be seen one was a woman, closely cloaked, the other two rough looking men, coarsely habited.

'Master Allan, tread more softly, I pray thee,' said the sweet low voice of Bessy Thorne; 'should the keeper hear thy heavy step all is lost.'

'If I can help it my good friend Richard Thorne shall not be lost; but hark thee maiden, not only for his, but for thy own sweet sake, have I attempted this. I do mind me how tenderly thou didst nurse my wife last year, and for this I have ever been grateful.'

'Good Will Allan, talk not of that, but haste thee now, and thou kind Master Davis, help him to fling that rope to yon gratings; my father but waits to seize it, and if ye love him, linger not.'

The rope was flung, and Richard Thorne, climbing up the keep window, whose iron bars had been previously loosened, had clutched the end with his eager fingers, when a bright light shone in the room, and the poacher, bewildered and startled, lost his hold, and fell with a heavy crash, back upon the floor.

'There lie, thou rascal poacher!' thundered the keeper; 'tis well that to-morrow thou goest to Taunton gaol, or else thy cunning would soon free thee.'

At the sound of the keeper's voice the two men cast down the rope and fled, while Bessy Thorne, shrieking wildly fell as one dead upon the earth.

'There, lay her down gently, wife; she will soon come to. And so, poor lass, it was thy mad freak to save thy father!' and the keeper looked pityingly upon the ashy face of Bessy Thorne. 'All thanks to Ralph Wilson for advising me of this attempt. Had it not been for him,' continued the man, 'I would have lost my dainty prisoner.'

Unpitiful Ralph Wilson! Revenge is indeed cruel—'tis like the fierce flames of an angry fire.'

CHAPTER III.

'Sir Roger will not refuse thee. Oh, sir