

The Storyteller.

LLANFAIR COURT.

(Conclusion.)

CHAPTER III.

'Tis well,' muttered Richard, as he climbed the steep road to meet the soldiers, 'my uncle is safe, and my work becomes the easier. See, here they come.'

A rough, brutal set of men they appeared, as they approached; their heavy footsteps rang out on the stony path, while their coarse laughter jarred on his ear.

'How now, puppy!' exclaimed the leader, stepping forward, and clapping the youth on the shoulder, 'thou hast not played us false, I trow! Ha! ha! this is a good piece of work; 'tis a fine bird, and one that has used his wings to some purpose. But to-night his limbs will be bound, and his head ere long, methinks, will be set loose!' and giving vent to a harsh, triumphant laugh, he led the lad on.

'Look thee, Master Norton,' exclaimed Richard, 'I have played a dangerous game, and led thee to fortune and favor. Thou knowest the priest is here, but without my aid he will not be found, and I swear I will not help thee, unless thou promise on thy conscience that the girl, my cousin, shall not be injured, or in any way molested by thy brutal men.'

'Tut, boy, my business is not with maids, but with Massing priests. On my oath my men shall not touch a hair of thy pretty cousin, and for that matter,' he added, waving his hand majestically, 'I extend the same protection to all the women. They cannot hinder us in our work. Regarding thine uncle, Rupert Trevor, I will not pledge myself. Methinks he may like enough prove troublesome.'

'On that score, Master Norton, thou needst have no fear. My uncle is ere now in London attending the deathbed of his sister.'

The priest hunter cast a glance of suspicion at the youth, then apparently satisfied: 'Perhaps 'tis as well,' he remarked, 'our way will be the clearer. But hark thee, renegade, not one penny shalt thou receive till that dog Morgan is fast bound and cuffed, thou understandest, methinks?'

Richard nodded assent, but his hands clutched, in the angry hatred he feared to show. Assuming another manner, he turned to him deprecatingly.

'Good Master Norton, I would not that——' he hesitated, and colored with shame, 'I would not that my cousin and her old nurse know too soon that this is my deed. Give me not away. With thy good leave I would appear at first to be against thee and thy band. But when the Blue Room is reached, and Mistress Trevor is safe in her own chamber I will point out the secret place and press the spring, too, if necessary,' he added hastily, the color flaming to his cheeks.

Norton laughed harshly.

'Thou girl!' he jeered, 'so soft and dainty in thy feelings, so shamefaced in thy deeds! I must needs make a man of thee, and this will be thy first step to-night. Well, be it so, I will not teach thy cousin to think ill of thee sooner than need be. Thou canst not escape us now, and these are mere trifles.'

By this time they had reached the house, and Norton placed his men so that no one could possibly pass out undetected. The main door was still open, and Gwynyth and Dame Rachel stood in the hall.

'Here, woman,' said Norton, addressing the old servant, 'it hath come to my ears that you have one of your rascally priests secreted here in this Papist den. Lead me at once to his hole.'

The Dame looked him up and down for some moments in silent contempt.

'If you comes a-priest hunting, all I can say is that you have dropped on the wrong track,' she said at last, with all the Welsh woman's disregard for truth, 'you will find no Papist baggage here, and as for a priest, forsooth, think you we love life and liberty so little as to harbor one in these days? Besides, my master is away from home, and 'tis very unlike indeed I should afford shelter to any one in his absence. So you may take yourself off, and all your ruffian crew, too.'

'Tis useless to argue thus, Rachael,' interposed Richard, 'these men have the Queen's warrant, and are charged to search the premises, the law must take its course.'

'Indeed, Master Dick, and pray who told the law its course lay in Sir Rupert Trevor's honest household?'

Richard winced beneath those piercing eyes, and shrank once more behind Norton.

All this time Gwynyth had stood at the far end of the hall, concealed behind some heavy tapestry hangings, a graceful little figure in her simple white dress.

The paleness of her face set off to perfection the large brown eyes, and the dark hair hanging in thick waves over her shoulders. She was old for her age, and possessing her father's strength of will, had now subdued all childish fear, determined to act her part. She came forward, and her voice, as she addressed Norton, rang out clear and distinct.

'In my father's absence, I am mistress of this house. I pray you therefore to enter and make your search, as the law commands. Methinks, however, you will find here no trace of priest or Papist. I trust you will then tarry awhile, to partake of Dame Rachael's hospitality ere further pursuing your journey.'

For a moment Thomas Norton was well-nigh taken aback by the girl's quiet ease of manner.

'A civil spoken wench,' he muttered, 'and a handsome one too, albeit that proud gleam in her eyes. I thank thee, maiden,' he said aloud, 'I shall doubtless accept thy hospitality, but first of all to

work. Now woman,' turning again to the Dame, 'lead us to the Blue Room, I have no time to waste on idle search.'

The Blue Room! For a moment poor Gwynyth's self-control almost broke down, and right thankful was she of the dusk, which helped to hide the color she felt was rising to her cheeks. How did he know? Was he also aware of the hiding place behind the chimney? Were they indeed betrayed? She shrank further back, into the gloom of the old hall. But Dame Rachel rose to the occasion; there was no surprise in her voice, only the natural annoyance of a querulous old woman.

'I trow, and what are we coming to, in these troublous times? In my young days we'd have wondered if the moon were turning blue to see a party of rufian men demand a free passage through the house of an honest country squire, to say nothing of his being a knight to boot? But what must be, must, times are sadly changed! The Blue Room? Follow me then, though 'tis scarcely worth the trouble, for you'll find no skulking Papist there. I prithee, master, see that those men of yours, bring not an over-load of mud upon their boots, to soil my clean floors.'

With that she led the way up the broad oak staircase, followed by Norton and his party, while some distance behind Gwynyth brought up the rear. On the first floor, Dame Rachel turned down a passage leading in an opposite direction to the Blue Room. Norton, who was by no means unsuspicious of the old lady's good intentions, muttered into Richard's ear:

'See thou that she takes us aright. 'Twill go ill with thee, thou snivelling cur, if this proves but a fool's errand after all.'

Richard murmured something in an undertone; he felt that Thomas Norton despised him. He trembled at the very thought of incurring the brutal man's anger: it must not be, so pulling himself together, he called to the Dame:

'Surely good Rachel, thou art not leading us aright. If I mistake not the Blue Room is in the other wing. Master Norton hath but little time to spare, he must make his search and be gone.'

The Dame turned sharply round, and stood facing the youth, her eyes flaming with anger and contempt.

'Thou seemst mightily taken up by this priest hunting, Master Richard,' she said, 'if thou'lt not follow me, lead the way thyself!'

'Nay, Rachel,' he replied, making a faint attempt at smiling, 'be not wrathful, I would but save time. Take these gentlemen to the Blue Room, I pray thee.'

'I tell thee lad, I'll not stir to help them! Do thy devil's work thyself! Take thy friend, ferret out the priest, if he be here, and get thy wage. Paid spy! Traitor!' she hissed, 'betray thy religion, thy uncle, thy home and take thy filthy lucre! Dost think I'll stir a hand to aid thee?'

She stood with her arms akimbo, scorn and defiance written on every feature. Richard cowered beneath the torrent of angry words, and would have slunk into the background, had not Norton laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

'So thou trembling coward,' he said roughly, 'thou seest the game is up! They know thee for what thou art, in with me hand and foot. Lead on, I say, show me the room and the hiding hole behind the chimney. Dost hear? I brook no delay!'

Not daring to disobey, Richard made his way through the men in order to take them in the right direction. As he did so he caught sight of Gwynyth, who had stood witnessing the scene from a distance. The color rose to his brow. At all events she should not be present at the last act, she should not see his final disgrace.

'Gwynyth,' he said huskily 'get thee to thy chamber. These are no scenes for a maiden.'

With something like a sob the girl flew towards him and flung herself at his feet.

'Oh! listen to me, Dick' she implored, clasping her hands, and speaking in an undertone so that none but he might hear, 'by the love thou bearest my uncle, who hath ever treated thee like a son, by the love thou hast for me thy sister-in-law, hear me. Save the good priest's life! It can yet be done, for they know not the room. Dick! Dick! if you have a heart within you, if you believe in a God above, be not false to your religion!'

'Move on, I say,' cried the voice of Norton, 'send the wench about her business, or, in the fiend's name, I'll do it for thee!'

Trevor hastily dragged his cousin from her knees, and forced her to move on with him.

'Canst not see, girl,' he muttered, 'I am powerless? They know the priest is here, and were I not to show them the room they would burn the house about our ears.'

'And let them burn it!' cried the girl, freeing herself from his grasp, her dark eyes flashing, 'are we such cowards that we fear to suffer in the cause of truth? Ah! Dick, my cousin, and her manner oftentimes once again, 'perjure not thy soul with sin, bring not the blood of this holy man upon thy head. 'Tis not too late, even now thou mayst draw back.'

She would have said more, but Norton, lashed to fury by the unnecessary delay, pushed her rudely aside, and forced Richard forward. The men shoved passed her, not sparing their brutal jokes, and a few moments later she was left alone with Dame Rachel. All ire had fled from the good old servant's face, she was all gentleness now, as she pressed her loved master's child tenderly in her arms.

'This is no place for such as thou, my sweet mistress Gwynyth. Let us hie to thy chamber, for here, indeed, we can do no more.'

'Nay, Rachel,' replied the girl, as she quietly but firmly freed herself from her old nurse's embrace, 'what others have strength to suffer shall I fear to witness? Our presence may at least afford some comfort to the good Father in his hour of need. Come, let us follow them.'

The sounds of angry voices and loud hammering filled the air as the old woman and maiden slipped unperceived into the room. The mantelpiece was already shattered, four men had climbed into the great fireplace, probing and knocking with their crowbars. Bu