

# The Storyteller

FOILED.

TRULY those were bitter days. Stone-hearted men were let loose upon the children of the Church, and through the gloom of that time of stress no man could dare to prophesy the day of betterment.

In a quiet little corner of Somersetshire, on Monday, the 28th of March, 1625, the Manor of Westfield was in a state of confusion.

Father Ralph Westfield, a son of the Westfields—a family of long and untarnished Catholic reputation—was at that time an inmate of the house. Mass had been said there on the previous day, and the villagers had come long distances to it despite the knowledge that their lives might pay the forfeit for such temerity. And now the news had come that the State myrmidons were already on the path and might at any moment be expected to make a raid on the Manor. Then Father Ralph would be taken before the authorities to answer for his heinous crime of worshipping God according to the rites of his forefathers.

In these times of pace we can look back with something like complacency across those darker ages and read of the priest's hiding place without realising to the full what it meant not only to the priest but to the faithful few who shielded him to have the stern forms of heartless, callous, and brutal men tramping through the home like the bloodhounds they really were in search of the hidden priest, whose life would be virtually over when the hiding place was discovered. The women of that time were heroines that no other age can ever hope to equal. A look, a word, an incautious glance would be enough to undo the secret preparations of many a long week. There was the duty to show a smiling face and unchanging countenance when men stood on the very threshold of discovery, tapping at a panel which alone stood between the hunted and the hunters. Coarse jest and impious ribaldry, vile hints and vile threats, had to be borne without a murmur lest an outburst of indignation should lead to their undoing. Young girls bore insults that were a shame to their girlhood, mothers bore insults that shamed their motherhood, and heaven holds many a bright saint unwritten in our calendars whose claim to that high honor rested on the heroic courage with which they went through those awful moments of trial and doubt.

Westfield Manor was a beautiful, old-fashioned house, with a great, square hall and roomy oak-panelled apartments. It stood in a considerable acreage of ground, which had been the property of the Westfields from time immemorial. Since the news had arrived that a troop of men were on their way to capture Father Ralph, the two gardeners had in turn watched at the approach of the house to report the first sight of the visitors.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and Father Ralph, his sister Grace (a pretty girl still in her teens), and Mrs. Westfield were at tea talking of the illness of King James, news of which had reached them, when, without warning, the younger of the gardeners, Dick Pardon, rushed into the room. There was no need for him to tell his errand. His excited manner and troubled face told plainly enough that the expected moment had arrived.

'How many of them are there?' asked Father Ralph.

'A many; I can't say to be sure, Father—10 or 12 of them at least,' the gardener replied.

'And are they far off as yet?'

'Not more than half a mile,' he answered.

'Well, well, I must haste to hide,' said the priest. 'God knows I would sooner meet them face to face, like a man, but that it would mean my little flock being left without a shepherd.'

'And you still think, Ralph dear,' asked his sister, 'it were better not to tell us your hiding place?'

'Yes, it will be better so,' he answered. 'Your fears cannot then betray it. God knows the trial is hard enough for you to bear as it is.' He kissed them, pressed their hands fondly, and looking once more into their pale, anxious faces, hastened from the room, while the gardener, Dick Pardon, hurried outside and resumed his work of weeding one of the beds in the near vicinity.

There were four distinct hiding places in Westfield House, each of them cleverly contrived and capable of outwitting any but an expert pursuivant, and it was a happy thought of Father Ralph's to leave his mother and sister in ignorance of the one which he had selected, so that should they be made to accompany the search party their anxiety on the searchers actually approaching the real hiding place should not betray it.

Mrs. Westfield and Grace had not long to wait in their terrible suspense, for in a very few minutes a noisy, laughing troop of horsemen had reined up before the gate, and tying up their horses, boisterously entered the house.

'Remain where you are, mother dear,' said the brave young girl, and throwing open the door of the little room, she boldly stepped out and faced the group.

'Somewhat an uncereemonious visit, gentlemen,' she said, in a firm, even tone. 'What may be the meaning of it?'

The leader of the gang, apparently, was a short, ill-favored looking man of middle age, beardless, though anything but clean-shaven, and generally dirty and dissipated in appearance.

With the air of bold assurance he eyed his interlocutor and, turning, addressed one of his companions before answering.

'A merry-eyed and comely wench—eh, Jacob? A wench after your own heart—eh, Jacob? A nice trim—'

'Enough of that, sir!' rang out the rich, clear voice. 'I am Miss Westfield, of Westfield Manor, and, as you may yet learn, not to be insulted with impunity. Your business here? Be good enough to explain it.'

Slightly cowed for the moment by her determined bearing, he tapped the end of a paper which was showing in his doublet.

'I have my orders here to search the house for a Popish priest—one Ralph Westfield. Is he within?'

'If your orders are to search, it will matter little my saying he is not within. You will doubtless obey your orders whatever I say.'

'Well, that's true enough,' answered the man. 'And besides which, and likewise in addition thereto, we happen to know he is within; so, by your leave, it would save us the trouble of searching if you tell us at once where we might find him,' he answered with a grin.

'You are doubtless paid for your trouble, my good sir, so that I need not spare you on that account. You may search—only I warn you of one thing: if you exceed your orders by any needless damage or violence my mother's name is yet good enough in this county to warrant me in promising you a speedy retribution.'

The man shrugged his shoulders.

'To business, Jacob,' he said to

his lieutenant. 'Place three of your men at the outer doors and one to watch over the good lady here.' He pointed to Mrs. Westfield, who sat in trembling anxiety within view of the group. 'The young lady we must trouble to show us over the place, as we've not had the honor of being here before.'

Grace Westfield knew it would be idle to refuse and thus rouse the brutality of her rough visitors (stories of whose deeds had often reached her ears), so, calling a maid to remain with her mother, she took her place as guide to the search party.

Commencing where they were in the hall, they were soon busy tapping the oaken wainscots, moving aside pictures, shifting chairs and tables, and measuring floor spaces and walls to discover if any space within the house was unaccounted for. The leader of the gang let his eyes every now and again rest on those of Grace, but without once finding any change of expression or gleam of fear, although on one occasion he had actually caught her glance while his hand was on the very panel which, rightly pressed, would have opened the way to the first of the hiding places. Nor when the danger was passed did her face brighten or alter, though it was hard to repress her elation as they left the hall and entered the great dining-room, one hiding-place—perhaps the very one in which her brother was secreted—already overlooked.

There were gibes and jeers and coarse jests enough from the men but though their loose vulgarity often brought a blush to her cheeks she bore it all bravely and went around with a great show of unconcern.

At last, when their search had lasted half an hour, a sudden cry from one of the men told her that one of the hiding places had been discovered. It was behind a deep, old-fashioned fireplace. A loose tile, carelessly replaced or accidentally moved, had given the clue, and in a few minutes others had been shifted and a hole discovered which led to a small aperture beneath. There was not light enough to discover its extent or whether it was occupied; so he who had been styled Jacob called on the priest to disclose himself.

'Soon run to earth, my friend,' he called out, keeping, however, a fairly respectful distance from the spot. 'Best show thyself up and save being spitted with this long blade.'

The poor girl's moments of suspense were so terrible that something of it must have shown on her face, and seemed to assure the leader that their search was over.

'No answer, Jacob,' he said, with a rude oath. 'Then thrust round your sword and see what comes in the way of it.'

The sword was poked into the aperture and twisted here and there, only to meet with walls on every side, and finally one of the men lowered himself into the hole and assured himself that the space within was only a few feet square and was absolutely empty. Nor did the most careful scrutiny discover any other egress from it than the way through which he had entered.

'So ho! my mistress,' said the man Jacob, with a grin, 'the fox, then, has more holes than one! Why, what's that? Another one already?' he added; for two men who had been conducting a search in another apartment now called out to their leader that they had discovered a hiding place, and instantly he and the others—Grace being compelled to go with them—hurried to the adjoining room. There two panels of the wainscot were removed and showed the entrance to a narrow passage between the walls. Apparently neither of the men who had discovered it was anxious to prosecute the search, for they said in chorus that 'the honor ought to be-