
THE PANICLE.

THE farmhouse parlour faced the north, and the cold light, made dimmer by the bubbles of green glass in the heavy lattice, gave the place a grotto-like aspect. The floor, raddled round the sides, and covered in the middle with a knitted carpet of yellow and black cloth, was made of uneven flags; as much of the walls as was visible between the rows of memorial cards and samplers, and the engraved portraits of eminent divines, from John Wesley to James Caughey, nauseated the unaccustomed beholder with a monstrous design of livid roses festooned with ribands of pea-green.

At the door Mrs. Ollerenshaw paused and gazed inward with the devotion of one who prepares to enter a temple. She stooped and held her head sideways to discover if any dust had settled on the highly-polished gate-legged table. Its cleanliness proving satisfactory, she folded her checked duster into the smallest compass, and replaced it in the beaded bag that hung at her side, and entered, and went to the harmonium that stood between the windows. She was a fine middle-aged woman, with prominent teeth, a pallid complexion, and a hooked nose. This evening she wore her most imposing gown of steel-grey poplin. As she sat on the high music-stool, her back view was like that of a well-developed girl, and her dull, crimped hair was as luxurious as in the days when, as the Methodist local preacher's young daughter, she had caught the fancy of the wealthiest farmer of the countryside.

She played the tune of "Miles Lane," and began to sing in a voice which, despite its harsh Peakland accent and great unliability, was sweet and clear and strong, a doggerel hymn which her father had written in denunciation of all creeds save his own.

A maid clattered along the passage, and stood waiting with folded hands until Mrs. Ollerenshaw had finished the second verse, which condemned superstitious fools and Unitarian and Roman Catholic fiends with equal bitterness.

"There's Mr. Bateman Middleton come, ma'am."

Her mistress rose, and closed the lid of the harmonium. "You can bring him in here, Libby," she said. "Be sure an' see he wipes his feet well."

Then she sat composedly in the big leather-covered arm-chair with the big lugs, in which her husband had slept away his last days. She had just straightened her skirt when Bateman appeared. He was a tall, well-proportioned lad, with a broad red face. He had donned for the occasion his fawn-coloured holiday suit and his brightest necktie. Mrs. Ollerenshaw shook hands with him, and made him take the chair at the other end of the hearth-rug. After they had discussed the weather and the oats, she came suddenly to the point.

"Emma tow'd me as you were comin' up to ask leave to court," she said, "an' so I thowt 't 'ld be best for her to be out o' th' road. Shoo's ridden ower to her uncle Pursglove, an' s none comin' back till morn."

The young man's face saddened; he had hoped for a pleasant family scene, of the kind he had read of in the novels of Mrs. Sherwood's day, which are still the popular fiction of the hill-country. He was not uncertain of the mother's favour. There was no complaint to be urged against his position; the farm of The Hallows was his own property, and his brood mares had won prizes three consecutive years at the Noe Valley Show. Emma was his first love, and he foresaw no disappointment.

"It's a faith-trial as I'm goin' to test you by," Mrs. Ollerenshaw remarked. "My feyther tried it on my husband, an' his answer were satisfying, an' if yours is—then you've my consent off-hand."

"I'm willin'," the lover replied, feebly. "Em said 't would be no use our walkin' together unless you gave leave." His tone became even more conciliatory. "Shoo's a good daughter, an' shoo'll be guided by your will."

"Well, then, it's this," the widow said. "There were a farmer as used to come to our house when I were a wench, an' he said as 't happed to his wife ere they wedded. I wunna gie my opinion o' it, some b'lieves it an' some doesna . . ."

"It fell about this way. The young woman were goin' to Tidsa Market wi' butter, an' her way lay 'cross Middleton Moor. It were a hot day i' hay-time, an' shoo were dry 's a cricket, an' there werena ony quick water to slake wi'. Well, shoo went on an' on, till at last shoo couldna bear 't ony longer, an' set down her basket an' looked about. Th' Deep Rake's up there where folk used to dig for lead, an' all th' pit-whoals are full o' green water covered wi'

scum. It were filthy, but shoo couldna forbear an' shoo just stooped her down an' supped like a cow till shoo were full. Then shoo got up, took her basket an' started on again, but afore shoo'd walked ten yards summat stirred about i' her stomach. . . . Th' owd man said it twisted inside like a live horse-hair. Th' long an' th' short o' 't were as shoo didna go to Tidsa Market that day, nay, nor for long enow' afterwards. Shoo grew white an' flabby, an' i' less than a month were that bad shoo couldna leave whoam."

Bateman's mouth opened. "Eh, dear!" he exclaimed. Mrs. Ollerenshaw sighed when she saw his consternation.

"Doctors could do naught for her," she continued, "an' her folk began to think shoo were dyin'. At last someone suggested as th' wise-man as lived at Hanging Flat might be o' some service. So they sent for him, an' he came, an' said it were a panicle shoo'd swallowed. A panicle, but you'll find it i' no book! An' he came up th' next day at edge o' dark, an' made 'em build up th' house fire wi' fir boughs, an' then he took th' girl an' fastened her i' a chair wi' ropes, an' tied her hair to th' back-bars, an' turned all out, an' locked th' door. He kept her afront th' blaze till shoo were well-nigh roasted. Th' owd man reckoned he were listening outside, an' her moans were summat fearful!

"All o' a sudden th' panicle popped its yead out o' her mouth an' looked 'round. Then it drew back again, but th' wise man 'd seen it, an' he picked up th' potter that lay gain, an' shoved it in th' heart o' th' fire. But th' brute wouldna come out again, so he moved th' young woman till her knees welly touched the grate . . . Shoo were all covered wi' blisters afterwards, th' owd chap said, an' shoo had a bad bout o' rysipus. Th' wise man saw the panicle's yead come out again, so he popped behind th' chair an' hid. An' it crawled out, bit by bit—a beast th' picture o' a fat effeet, wi' six claws like hands, an' a swelled body about an arm's-length long, an' eyes blood-red. It let itself down to her bresses, an' afore its tail were out o' her mouth its fou' yead were lyin' in her lap. At last it drew its tail down, an' coiled itself up i' a knot. An' then, wi' one hand, th' wise man nipped up th' potter an' clapped t' other on th' girl's lips, an' began to burn th' panicle to death."

The lover's legs were trembling; his hands slipped from the sides of the chair and hung nerveless.

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!" he ejaculated.

Mrs. Ollerenshaw shook her head. She had heartily wished him to pass unscathed from the faith-trial; but she was not a woman to be soured by disappointment.

"When he touched it wi' th' potter it writhed about like a bit o' crozzlin' worsted; then it stood upright on its hindmost claws an' tried to get back again, but his hand—which it bit, an' caused him to use costick—were i' th' way, so it tumbled down an' lay on th' harstone. . . He laid th' potter 'cross it lengthwise. . . It began screetin' like a child. . . But it were soon a lump o' clnder."

A long silence followed. Bateman broke it with a tremulous inquiry—

"Did th' young woman get better, ma'am?"

"Th' man as tow'd us married her, onyhow!"

"I never heard such a fearful thing! I'd liefer ha' died!"

Mrs. Ollerenshaw rose. "So you b'lieve it, Bateman?"

"That I do, ma'am! It's as if I could see it now."

"Well, I'll say good-night to you. Onyone as b'lieves such a thing isna' fit to wed wi' Emma."

He crept dumbfounded from the room. She watched him pass through the garden; then, moved by some careful impulse, she followed to the door.

"Bateman," she cried, "come back a moment!"

He returned hastily, with a glad flush driving away his wanness.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"On'y this, Bateman: you munna come courtin' Emma ony more."

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