KETIRA THE GIPSY

Mrs. Henry Wood

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I.

"I TELL you what it is, Abel. You think of everybody else before yourself. The Squire says there's no sense in it."

"No sense in what, Master Johnny?"

"Why, in supplying those ill−doing Standishes with your substance. Herbs, and honey, and medicine they are always getting something or other out of you."

"But they generally need it, sir."

"Well, they don't deserve it, you know. The Squire went into a temper to−day, saying the vagabonds ought to be left to starve if they did not choose to work, instead of being helped by the public."

Our hen−roosts had been robbed, and it was pretty certain that one or other of the Standish brothers was the thief. Perhaps all three had a hand in it. Chancing to pass Abel Carew's garden, where he was at work, I turned in to tell him of the raid; and stayed, talking. It was pleasant to sit on the bench outside the cottage−window, and watch him tend his roots and flowers. The air was redolent of perfume; the bees were humming as they sailed in the summer sunshine from herb to herb, flower to flower; the dark blue sky was unclouded.

"Just look at those queer−looking people, Abel! They must be gipsies."

Abel let his hands rest on his rake, and lifted his eyes to the common. Crossing it, came two women, one elderly, one very young a girl, in fact. Their red cloaks shone in the sun; very coarse and sunburnt straw hats were tied down with red kerchiefs. That they belonged to the gipsy fraternity was apparent at the first glance. Pale olive complexions, the elder one's almost yellow, were lighted up with black eyes of wonderful brilliancy. The young girl was strikingly beautiful; her features clearly cut and delicate, as though carved from marble, her smooth and abundant hair of a purple black. The other's hair was purple black also, and had not a grey thread in it.

"They must be coming to tell our fortunes, Abel," I said jestingly. For the two women seemed to be making direct for the gate.

No answer from Abel, and I turned to look at him. He was gazing at the coming figures with the most intense gaze, a curious expression of inquiring doubt on his face. The rake fell from his hand.

"My search is ended," spoke the woman, halting at the gate, her glittering black eyes scanning him intently. "You are Abel Carew."

"Is it Ketira?" he asked, the words dropping from him in slow hesitation, as he took a step forward.

"Am I so much changed that you need doubt it for a moment?" she returned: and her tone and accent fell soft and liquid; her diction was of the purest, with just the slightest foreign ring in it. "Forty years have rolled on since you and I met, Abel Carew; but I come of a race whose faces do not change. As we are in youth, so we are in age save for the inevitable traces left by time."

"And this?" questioned Abel, as he looked at the girl and drew back his gate.

"She is Ketira also; my youngest and dearest. The youngest of sixteen children, Abel Carew; and every one of them, save herself, lying under the sod."

"What dead?" he exclaimed. "Sixteen!"

"Fifteen are dead, and are resting in peace in different lands: ten of them died in infancy ere I had well taken my first look at their little faces. She is the sixteenth. See you the likeness?" added the gipsy, pointing to the girl's face; as she stood, modest and silent, a conscious colour tingeing her olive cheeks, and glancing up now and again through her long black eyelashes at Abel Carew.

"Likeness to you, Ketira?"

"Not to me: though there exists enough of it between us to betray that we are mother and daughter. To him her father."

And, while Abel was looking at the girl, I looked. And in that moment it struck me that her face bore a remarkable likeness to his own. The features were of the same high−bred cast, pure and refined; you might have said they were made in the same mould.

"I see; yes," said Abel.

"He has been gone, too, this many a year; as you, perhaps, may know, Abel; and is with the rest, waiting for us in the spirit−land. Kettie does not remember him, it is so long ago. There are only she and I left to go now. Kettie "

She suddenly changed her language to one I did not understand. Neither, as was easy to be seen, did Abel Carew. Whether it was Hebrew, or Egyptian, or any other rare tongue, I knew not; but I had never in my life heard its sounds before.

"I am telling Kettie that in you she may see what her father was for the likeness in your face and his, allowing for the difference of age, is great."

"Does Kettie not speak English?" inquired Abel.

"Oh yes, I speak it," answered the girl, slightly smiling, and her tones were soft and perfect as those of her mother.

"And where have you been since his death, Ketira? Stationary in Ai "

He dropped his voice to a whisper at the last word, and I did not catch it. I suppose he did not intend me to.

"Not stationary for long anywhere," she answered, passing into the cottage with a majestic step. I lifted my hat to the women who, for all their gipsy dress and origin, seemed to command consideration and made off.

The arrival of these curious people caused some commotion at Church Dykely. It was so rare we had any event to enliven us. They took up their abode in a lonely cottage no better than a hut (one room up and one down) that stood within that lively place, the wilderness on the outskirts of Chanasse Grange; and there they stayed. How they got a living nobody knew: some thought the gipsy must have an income, others that Abel helped them.

"She was very handsome in her youth," he said to me one day, as if he wished to give some explanation of the arrival I had chanced to witness. "Handsomer and finer by far than her daughter is; and one who was very near of kin to me married her would marry her. She was a born gipsy, of what is called a high−caste tribe."

That was all he said. For Abel's sake, who was so respected, Church Dykely felt inclined to give respect to the women. But, when it was discovered that Ketira would tell the fortune of any one who cared to go sumptitiously to her lonely hut, the respect cooled down. "Ketira the gipsy," she was universally called: nobody knew her by any other name. The fortune−telling came to the ears of Abel, arousing his indignation. He went to Ketira in distress, begging of her to cease such practices but she waved him majestically out of the hut, and bade him mind his own business. Occasionally the mother and daughter shut up their dwelling and disappeared for weeks together. It was assumed they went to attend fairs and races, camping out with the gipsy fraternity. Kettie at all times and seasons was modest and good; never was an unmaidenly look seen from her, or a bold word heard. In appearance and manner and diction she might have been a born lady, and a high−bred one. Graceful and innocent was Kettie; but heedless and giddy, as girls are apt to be.

"Look there, Johnny!"

We were at Worcester races, walking about on the course. I turned at Tod's words, and saw Ketira the gipsy, her red cloak gleaming in the sun, just as it had gleamed that day, a year before, on Dykely Common. For the past month she had been away, and her cottage shut up.

She stood at the open door of a carriage, reading the hand of the lady inside it. A notable object was Ketira on the course, with her quaint attire, her majestic figure, her fine olive−dark features, and the fire of her brilliant eyes. What good or ill luck she was promising, I know not; but I saw the lady turn pale and snatch her hand away. "You cannot know what you tell me," she cried in a haughty tone, sharp enough and loud enough to be heard.

"Wait and see," rejoined Ketira, turning away.

"So you have come here to see the fun, Ketira," I said to her, as she was brushing by me. During the past year I had seen more of her than many people had, and we had grown familiar; for she, as she once expressed it, "took" to me.

"The fun and the business; the pleasure and the wickedness," she answered, with a sweep of the hand round the course. "There's plenty of it abroad."

"Is Kettie not here?" I asked: and the question made her eyes glare. Though, why, I was at a loss to know, seeing that a race−ground is the legitimate resort of gipsies.

"Kettie! Do you suppose I bring Kettie to these scenes to be gazed at by this ribald mass?"

"Well, it is a rabble, and a good one," I answered, looking at the crowd.

"Nay, boy," said she, following my glance, "it's not the rabble Kettie need fear, as you count rabble; it's their betters" swaying her arms towards the carriages, and the dandies, their owners or guests; some of whom were balancing themselves on the steps to talk to the pretty girls within, and some were strolling about the enclosed paddock, forbidden ground but to the "upper few." "Ketira is too fair to be shown to them."

"They would not eat her, Ketira."

"No, they would not eat her," she replied in a dreamy tone, as if her thoughts were elsewhere.

"And I don't see any other harm they could do her, guarded by you."

"Boy," she said, dropping her voice to an impressive whisper and lightly touching my arm with her yellow hand, "I have read Kettie's fate in the stars, and I see that there is some great and grievous peril approaching her. It may be averted; there's just a chance that it may: meanwhile I am encompassing her about with care, guarding her as the apple of my eye."

"And if it should not be averted?" I asked in the moment's impulse, carried away by the woman's impressive earnestness.

"Then woe be to those who bring the evil upon her!"

"And of what nature is the evil?"

"I know not,"she replied, her eyes taking a gain their dreamy, far−off look. "Woe is me! for I know it not."

"How do you do, Ludlow? Not here alone, are you?"

A good−looking young fellow, Hyde Stockhausen, had reined in his horse to ask the question: giving at the same time a keen glance to the gipsy woman and then a half−smile at me, as if he suspected I was having my fortune told.

"The rest are on the course somewhere. The Squire is driving old Jacobson about."

As Hyde nodded and rode on, I chanced to see Ketira's face. It was stretched out after him with the most eager gaze on it, a defiant look in her black eyes. l thought Stockhausen must have offended her.

"Do you know him?" I asked involuntarily.

"I never saw him before; but I don't like him," she answered, showing her white and gleaming teeth. "Who is he?"

"His name is Stockhausen."

"I don't like him," she repeated in a muttering tone. "He is an enemy. I don't like his look."