VARIOUS

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FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

The fire burns cheerily on the hearth, the great logs crackle and flare up the wide chimney, up which it is my wont to say you could drive a coach-and-four. I draw my chair nearer to it with a shiver. 'What a night!' I say.

'Is it still snowing?' asks my wife, who sits opposite to me, her books and work on the table beside her.

'Fast. You can scarcely see a yard before you.'

'Heaven help any poor creature on the moor to-night!' says she.

'Who would venture out? It began snowing before dark, and all the people about know the danger of being benighted on the moor in a snow-storm.'

'Yes. But I have known people frozen to death hereabouts before now.'

My wife is Scotch, and this pleasant house in the Highlands is hers. We are trying a winter in it for the first time, and I find it excessively cold and somewhat dull. Mentally I decide that in future we will only grace it with our presence during the shooting season. Presently I go to the window and look out; it has ceased snowing, and through a rift in the clouds I see a star.

'It is beginning to clear,' I tell my wife, and also inform her that it is past eleven. As she lights her candle at a side-table I hear a whining and scratching at the front-door.

'There is Laddie loose again,' says she. 'Would you let him in, dear?'

I did not like facing the cold wind, but could not refuse to let in the poor animal. Strangely enough, when I opened the door and called him, he wouldn't come. He runs up to the door and looks into my face with dumb entreaty; then he runs back a few steps, looking round to see if I am following; and finally, he takes my coat in his mouth and tries to draw me out.

'Laddie won't come in,' I call out to my wife. 'On the contrary, he seems to want me to go out and have a game of snow-ball with him.'

She throws a shawl round her and comes to the door. The collie was hers before we were married, and she is almost as fond of him, I tell her, as she is of Jack, our eldest boy.

'Laddie, Laddie!' she calls; 'come in, sir.' He comes obediently at her call, but refuses to enter the house, and pursues the same dumb pantomime he has already tried on me.

'I shall shut him out, Jessie,' I say. 'A night in the snow won't hurt him;' and I prepare to close the door.

'You will do nothing of the kind!' she replies with an anxious look; 'but you will rouse the servants at once, and follow him. Some one is lost in the snow, and Laddie knows it.'

I laugh. 'Really, Jessie, you are absurd. Laddie is a sagacious animal, no doubt, but I cannot believe he is as clever as that. How can he possibly know whether any one is lost in the snow, or not?'

'Because he has found them, and come back to us for help. Look at him now.'

I cannot but own that the dog seems restless and uneasy, and is evidently endeavouring to coax us to follow him; he looks at us with pathetic entreaty in his eloquent eyes. 'Why won't you believe me?' he seems to ask.

'Come,' she continues; 'you know you could not rest while there was a possibility of a fellow-creature wanting your assistance. And I am certain Laddie is not deceiving us.'

What is a poor hen-pecked man to do? I grumble and resist and yield; as I have often grumbled and resisted and yielded before, and as I doubtless often shall again.

'Laddie once found a man in the snow before, but he was dead,' Jessie says, as she hurries off to fill a flask with brandy, and get ready some blankets for us to take with us. In the meantime I rouse the servants. They are all English, with the exception of Donald the gardener, and I can see that they are scoffingly sceptical of Laddie's sagacity, and inwardly disgusted at having to turn out of their warm beds and face the bitter winter's night.

'Dinna trouble yersels,' I hear old Donald say. 'The mistress is right eneugh. Auld Laddie is cleverer than mony a Christian, and will find something in the snaw this night.'

'Don't sit up, Jessie,' I say as we start; 'we may be out half the night on this wild-goose chase.'

'Follow Laddie closely,' is the only answer she makes.

The dog springs forward with a joyous bark, constantly looking back to see if we are following. As we pass through the avenue gates and emerge on to the moor, the moon struggles for a moment through the driving clouds, and lights up with a sickly gleam the snow-clad country before us. 'It's like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay, sir,' says John the coachman confidentially, 'to think as we should find anybody on such a night as this! Why, in some places the snow is more than a couple o' feet thick, and it goes again' reason to think that a dumb animal would have the sense to come home and fetch help.'

'Bide a wee, bide a wee,' says old Donald. 'I dinna ken what your English dugs can do; but a collie, though it hasna been pleasing to Providence to give the creatur the gift o' speech, can do mony mair things than them that wad deride it.'

'I ain't a deridin' of 'em,' says John. 'I only say as how if they be so very clever, *I've* never seen it.'

'Ye wull, though, ye wull,' says old Donald, as he hurries forward after Laddie, who has now settled down into a swinging trot, and is taking his way straight across the loneliest part of the bleak moor. The cold wind almost cuts us in two, and whirls the snow into our faces, nearly blinding us. My finger-tips are becoming numbed, icicles hang from my moustache and beard, and my feet and legs are soaking wet, even through my shooting-boots and stout leather leggings.

The moon has gone in again, and the light from the lantern we carry is barely sufficient to shew us the inequalities in the height of the snow, by which we are guessing at our path. I begin to wish I had staid at home. '*L'homme propose, mais la femme dispose*,' I sigh to myself; and I begin to consider whether I may venture to give up the search (which I have undertaken purely to satisfy my wife, for I am like John, and won't believe in Laddie), when suddenly I hear a shout in front of me, and see Donald, who has all the time been keeping close to Laddie, drop on his knees and begin digging wildly in the snow with his hands. We all rush forward. Laddie has stopped at what appears to be the foot of a stunted tree, and after scratching and whining for a moment, sits down and watches, leaving the rest to us. What is it that appears when we have shovelled away the snow? A dark object. Is it a bundle of rags? Is it – or alas! was it a human being? We raise it carefully and tenderly, and wrap it in one of the warm blankets with which my wife's forethought has provided us. 'Bring the lantern,' I say huskily; and John holds it over the prostrate form of, not as we might have expected, some stalwart shepherd of the hills, but over that of a poor shrivelled, wrinkled, ragged old woman. I try to pour a little brandy down the poor old throat, but the teeth are so firmly clenched that I cannot.

'Best get her home as quickly as may be, sir; the mistress will know better what to do for her nor we do, if so be the poor creature is not past help,' says John, turning instinctively, as we all do in sickness or trouble, to woman's aid.

So we improvise a sort of hammock of the blankets, and gently and tenderly the men prepare to carry their poor helpless burden over the snow.

'I am afraid your mistress will be in bed,' I say, as we begin to retrace our steps.

'Never fear, sir,' says Donald with a triumphant glance at John; 'the mistress will be up and waitin' for us. She kens Laddie didna bring us out in the snaw for naething.'

'I'll never say nought about believing a dawg again,' says John, gracefully striking his colours. 'You were right and I was wrong, and that's all about it; but to think there should be such sense in a animal passes *me*!'

As we reach the avenue gate I despatch one of the men for the doctor, who fortunately lives within a stone's-throw of us, and hurry on myself to prepare my wife for what is coming. She runs out into the hall to meet me. 'Well?' she asks eagerly.

'We have found a poor old woman,' I say; 'but I do not know whether she is alive or dead.'

My wife throws her arms round me and gives me a great hug.

'You will find dry things and a jug of hot toddy in your dressing-room, dear,' she says; and this is all the revenge she takes on me for my scepticism. The poor old woman is carried up-stairs and placed in a warm bath under my wife's direction; and before the doctor arrives she has shewn some faint symptoms of life; so my wife sends me word. Dr Bruce shakes his head when he sees her. 'Poor old soul,' he says; 'how came she out on the moor on such a fearful night? I doubt she has received a shock, which at her age she will not easily get over.'

They manage, however, to force a few spoonfuls of hot brandy-and-water down her throat; and presently a faint colour flickers on her cheek, and the poor old eyelids begin to tremble. My wife raises her head and makes her swallow some cordial which Dr Bruce has brought with him, and then lays her back among the soft warm pillows. 'I think she will rally now,' says Dr Bruce, as her breathing becomes more audible and regular. 'Nourishment and warmth will do the rest; but she has received a shock from which, I fear, she will never recover;' and so saying, he takes his leave.

By-and-by I go up to the room and find my wife watching alone by the aged sufferer. She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. 'Poor old soul,' she says; 'I am afraid she will not rally from the cold and exposure.'

I go round to the other side of the bed and look down upon her. The aged face looks wan and pinched, and the scanty gray locks which lie on the pillow are still wet from the snow. She is a very little woman, as far as I can judge of her in her recumbent position, and I should think must have reached her allotted threescore years and ten. 'Who can she be?' I repeat wonderingly. 'She does not belong to any of the villages hereabouts, or we should know her face; and I cannot imagine what could bring a stranger to the moor on such a night.'

As I speak a change passes over her face; the eyes unclose, and she looks inquiringly about her. She tries to speak, but is evidently too weak. My wife raises her, and gives her a spoonful of nourishment, while she says soothingly: 'Don't try to speak. You are among friends; and when you are better you shall tell us all about yourself. Lie still now and try to sleep.'

The gray head drops back wearily on the pillow; and soon we have the satisfaction of hearing by the regular respiration that our patient is asleep.

'You must come to bed now, Jessie,' I say. 'I shall ring for Mary, and she can sit up for the remainder of the night.' But my wife, who is a tender-hearted soul and a born nurse, will not desert her post; so I leave her watching, and retire to my solitary chamber.

When we meet in the morning I find that the little old woman has spoken a few words, and seems stronger. 'Come in with me now,' says my wife, 'and let us try to find out who she is.' We find her propped into a reclining posture with pillows, and Mary beside her feeding her.

'How are you now?' asks Jessie, bending over her.

'Better, much better; thank you, good lady,' she says in a voice which trembles from age as well as weakness. 'And very grateful to you for your goodness.'

I hear at once by the accent that she is English. 'Are you strong enough to tell me how you got lost on the moor, and where you came from, and where you were going?' continues my wife.

'Ah! I was going to my lad, my poor lad, and now I doubt I shall never see him more,' says the poor soul, with a long sigh of weariness.

'Where is your lad, and how far have you come?'

'My lad is a soldier at Fort-George; and I have come all the way from Liverpool to see him, and give him his old mother's blessing before he goes to the Indies.' And then, brokenly, with long pauses of weariness and weakness, the little old woman tells us her pitiful story.

Her lad, she tells us, is her only remaining child. She had six, and this, the youngest, is the only one who did not die of want during the Lancashire cotton famine. He grew up a fine likely boy, the comfort and pride of his mother's heart, and the stay of her declining years. But a 'strike' threw him out of work, and unable to endure the privation and misery, in a fit of desperation he 'listed.' His regiment was quartered at Fort-George, and he wrote regularly to his mother, his letters getting more cheerful and hopeful every day; until suddenly he wrote to say that his regiment was ordered to India, and begging her to send him her blessing, as he had not enough money to carry him to Liverpool to see her. The aged mother, widowed and childless, save for this one remaining boy, felt that she *must* look on his face once more before she died. She begged from a few ladies, whose kindness had kept her from the workhouse, sufficient money to carry her by train to Glasgow; and from thence she had made her way, now on foot, now begging a lift in a passing cart or wagon, to within a few miles of Fort-George, when she was caught in the snow-storm; and wandering from the road, would have perished in the snow – but for Laddie.

My wife is in tears, and Mary is sobbing audibly as the little old woman concludes her simple and touching story; and I walk to the window and look out for a moment, before I am able to ask her what her son's name is. As I tell her that we are but a few miles from Fort-George, and that I will send over for him, a smile of extreme content illumines the withered face. 'His name is John Salter,' she says: 'he is a tall handsome lad; they will know him by that.'

I hasten down-stairs and write a short note to Colonel Freeman, whom I know intimately, informing him of the circumstances, and begging that he will allow John Salter to come over at once; and I despatch my groom in the dogcart, that he may bring him back without loss of time. As I return to the house after seeing him start, I meet Dr Bruce leaving the house.

'Poor old soul,' he says; 'her troubles are nearly over; she is sinking fast. I almost doubt whether she will live till her son comes.'

'How she could have accomplished such a journey at her age, I cannot understand,' I observe.

'Nothing is impossible to a mother,' answers Dr Bruce; 'but it has killed her.'

I go in; but I find I cannot settle to my usual occupations. My thoughts are with the aged heroine who is dying up-stairs, and presently I yield to the fascination which draws me back to her presence.

As Dr Bruce says, she is sinking fast. She lies back on the pillows, her cheeks as ashy gray as her hair. She clasps my wife's hand in hers, but her eyes are wide open, and have an eager expectant look in them.

'At what time may we expect them?' whispers my wife to me.

'Not before four,' I answer in the same tone.

'He will be too late, I fear,' she says; 'she is getting rapidly weaker.'

But love is stronger than death, and she *will* not go until her son comes. All through the winter's day, she lies dying, obediently taking what nourishment is given to her, but never speaking except to say: 'My lad, my lad! God is good; He will not let me die until he comes.'

And at last I hear the dogcart. I lay my finger on my lip and tell Mary to go and bring John Salter up very quietly. But my caution is needless; the mother has heard the sound, and with a last effort of her remaining strength, she raises herself and stretches out her arms. 'My lad, my lad!' she gasps, as with a great sob, he springs forward, and mother and son are clasped in each other's arms once more. For a moment they remain so. Then the little old woman sinks back on my wife's shoulder, and her spirit is looking down from Heaven on the lad she loved so dearly on earth.

She lies in our little churchyard under a spreading yew-tree, and on the stone which marks her resting-place are inscribed the words, 'Faithful unto Death.' Our Laddie has gained far-spread renown

for his good works; and as I sit finishing this short record of a tale of which he is the hero, he lies at my feet, our ever watchful, faithful companion and friend.

THE BRITISH ANGLER ON THE CONTINENT

It is a curious delusion, especially among writers of guide-books, that when an Englishman crosses the Channel and takes up his abode as a traveller in a strange country, he thereupon necessarily ceases to care for that truly English pastime, angling. The sportsman is expected to become a connoisseur of architecture, to delight in nothing but sweet or majestic landscapes, or to feel unwonted pleasure in a continual series of mountain walks. That some such delusion must exist is shewn by the persistent manner in which hundreds of persons who at home are ardent fishermen, and who would gladly take a holiday in Hampshire or seek some Scottish river, pass by the excellent streams and lakes which abound throughout the continent. The angler, with a martyr-like resignation, thinks only with a sigh of the trout feeding beneath the old gray willow-tree at home, but never attempts to try that skill in foreign waters which practice from boyhood has often rendered almost perfect. It is singular indeed how fishing is neglected on the continent by those who would find it a renewed pleasure; for in whatever land it may be pursued, no amusement is more refreshing to the brain-worker, with its variation of gentle or strong exercise, and its pleasant alternations of monotony and excitement.

A combination of fishing and travelling has the important advantage of rendering the traveller quite independent of that bugbear of all tourists, bad weather. In after-days he can call to mind how he has often seen the regular routine traveller pacing the *salon* of his hotel when the mists were rolling along the mountain-side and the passer-by in the valley was drenched with rain, whilst he was setting forth for a day among the grayling in some rushing Tyrolese stream, or pondering upon those charming and descriptive lines of Sir Henry Taylor's; and he will feel, we should hope, that not the least pleasurable days which the travelling angler meets with, have been those when the trout lay safely sunning themselves in the clear water:

> The peaks are shelved and terraced round;
> Earthward appear in mingled growth
> The mulberry and maize; above
> The trellised vine extends to both
> The leafy shade they love;
> Looks out the white-walled cottage here;
> The lonely chapel rises near;
> Far down the foot must roam to reach
> The lovely lake and bending beach;
> While chestnut green and olive gray
> Chequer the steep and winding way.

The number of those who ever cast a thought to the obtaining of their favourite amusement when they have left Dover behind them, is singularly small, or who seek to vary the regular tourist's round by a day or two by the side of some little stream where the inhabitants look upon a fishing-rod as quite an unusual phenomenon. And yet many a man who, as he drives along a Tyrolese valley or passes a sombre lake shaded by pine-trees, must involuntarily recall pleasant days spent by some Highland stream. The river ripples by the roadside, the trout are 'on the feed;' but flies and fishing-rod are safe at home, and the alpenstock alone is at hand!

But if angling is a fascinating pastime to numbers of thoughtful minds among the familiar scenes of an English landscape, it becomes even more attractive, at anyrate for a time, when practised amid the scenery of a country new to the beholder. The angler finds many features in the landscape, charming perhaps in their minuteness, which the through-going traveller, who rushes quickly from place to place, can never enjoy. Nor are the opportunities of mixing with the various country-folks

to be lightly prized; for the increasing number of large hotels, the numerous railways, and improved systems of travelling, not to speak of the numbers of actual travellers, render a leisurely acquaintance with the natives more and more difficult. And it must always be a pleasure to look back to the quaint, honest, and kindly folk with whom the traveller would never have come in contact had he left his rod and tackle at home.

We can remember a professional fisherman whose acquaintance we made one afternoon in a distant hamlet on an Alpine pass, from which the mighty mass of the Ortler Spitze could be seen glowing under the beams of the setting sun. The sporting instincts of this man were small, and like most foreigners, he looked upon fish solely as an article of food or merchandise. But how ready was he to explain every little detail that we inquired about; how genuinely pleased by the present of a few English flies; and how gratified to be asked for a brace of his own singular specimens of the fly-maker's art. Nor can the quaint stout landlord in the Black Forest be forgotten, who took such an ardent pleasure in telling of the manifold advantages of large hooks and a powerful line in order to haul the pike into the boat with as little of what an English angler would term 'play' as possible.

The fisherman intent on angling for angling's sake only, can obtain excellent sport with trout or grayling in the valleys of the Salzkammergut or in the Bavarian Highlands. Or among the orchards of Normandy when they are in their spring-tide bloom. No reasonable angler indeed can wish for better. But he who, besides being a lover of the gentle art, has a soul for scenery and a relish for the vicissitudes of travel, has advantages indeed. When tired of wielding his rod he turns to enjoy natural beauty under every mood – in its wildest or its most tranquil aspects. And he is ready, like De Quincey, to fraternise with and to observe every kind of man. He will, moreover, be one who, if works of art fall in his way, can find in reiterated views reiterated enjoyment. For if you find him in Normandy in quiet Evreux, fishing for the well-fed trout in the gently flowing, poplar-lined Iton, he will be paying frequent visits to the Gothic cathedral with a pleasure which increases every time he leaves the Hôtel du Cerf. When he is in the Black Forest, he knows that unless he puts himself *en rapport* with the simple husbandmen and industrious clockmakers of the Schwarzwald he cannot thoroughly enjoy himself; and as he walks through the meadows after a day on the Schluch See, he will feel that his landlord is his friend. Indeed, this kindly feeling which grows up between the travelling fisherman and those whom he meets, is one of the pleasantest features of this mode of holiday-making.

One of the great drawbacks to modern travel is the fact that only a few common features in the mere outward lives of the people, are observed; and even of their habits but few can really be properly gleaned by the passing traveller. The self-inflicted melancholy and unfortunate reserve of most English travellers is also a strong barrier against familiar intercourse with foreigners. John Bull has not yet acquired the secret of enjoyable outing, and gets but a poor return for his money. Certainly modern travellers would do well to notice how Dorothy Wordsworth, for instance, and her brother the poet associated with those among whom they travelled; how Dr Johnson would converse as readily with a gillie as he would argue with a Presbyterian minister; how Christopher North made the most of – Streams.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.