

CHAPTER VII. - HAS THE FOLLY OF LOOKING INTO A WOMAN'S EYES BY WAY OF TEXT.

"This is the woman, captain," one of the policemen said in triumph; "and, begging your pardon, will you keep a grip of her till the sheriff comes back?"

Halliwell did not turn his head.

"You can leave her here." he said carelessly, "Three of us are not needed to guard a woman."

"But she's a slippery customer."

"You can go," said Halliwell; and the policemen withdrew slowly, eyeing their prisoner doubtfully until the door closed. Then the officer wheeled round languidly, expecting to find the Egyptian gaunt and muscular.

"Now then," he drawled, "why--By Jove!"

The gallant soldier was as much taken aback as if he had turned to find a pistol at his ear. He took his feet off the table. Yet he only saw the gypsy's girlish figure in its red and green, for she had covered her face with her hands. She was looking at him intently between her fingers, but he did not know this. All he did want to know just then was what was behind the hands.

Before he spoke again she had perhaps made up her mind about him, for she began to sob bitterly. At the same time she slipped a finger over her ring.

"Why don't you look at me?" asked Halliwell, selfishly.

"I daurna."

"Am I so fearsome?"

"You're a sojer, and you would shoot me like a crow."

Halliwell laughed, and taking her wrists in his hands, uncovered her face.

"Oh, by Jove!" he said again, but this time to himself.

As for the Egyptian, she slid the ring into her pocket, and fell back before the officer's magnificence.

"Oh," she cried, "is all sojers like you?"

There was such admiration in her eyes that it would have been self-contempt to doubt her. Yet having smiled complacently, Halliwell became uneasy.

"Who on earth are you?" he asked, finding it wise not to look her in the face. "Why do you not answer me more quickly?"

"Dinna be angry at that, captain," the Egyptian implored. "I promised my mither aye to count twenty afore I spoke, because she thocht I was ower glib. Captain, how is't that you're so fleid to look at me?"

Thus put on his mettle, Halliwell again faced her, with the result that his question changed to "Where did you get those eyes?" Then was he indignant with himself.

"What I want to know," he explained severely, "is how you were able to acquaint the Thrums people with our movements? That you must tell me at once, for the sheriff blames my soldiers. Come now, no counting twenty!"

He was pacing the room now, and she had her face to herself. It said several things, among them that the officer evidently did not like this charge against his men.

"Does the shirra blame the sojers?" exclaimed this quick-witted Egyptian. "Weel, that cows, for he has nane to blame but himsel'."

"What!" cried Halliwell, delighted. "It was the sheriff who told tales? Answer me. You are counting a hundred this time."

Perhaps the gypsy had two reasons for withholding her answer. If so, one of them was that as the sheriff had told nothing, she had a story to make up. The other was that she wanted to strike a bargain with the officer.

"If I tell you," she said eagerly, "will you set me free?"

"I may ask the sheriff to do so."

"But he mauna see me," the Egyptian said in distress. "There's reasons, captain."

"Why, surely you have not been before him on other occasions," said Halliwell, surprised.

"No in the way you mean," muttered the gypsy, and for the moment her eyes twinkled. But the light in them went out when she remembered that the sheriff was near, and she looked desperately at the window as if ready to fling herself from it. She had very good reasons for not wishing to be seen by Riach, though fear that he would put her in gaol was not one of them.

Halliwell thought it was the one cause of her woe, and great was his desire to turn the tables on the sheriff.

"Tell me the truth," he said, "and I promise to befriend you."

"Weel, then," the gypsy said, hoping still to soften his heart, and making up her story as she told it, "yestreen I met the shirra, and he tolled me a' I hae telled the Thrums folk this nicht."

"You can scarcely expect me to believe that. Where did you meet him?"

"In Glen Quharity. He was riding on a horse."

"Well, I allow he was there yesterday, and on horseback. He was on his way back to Tilliedrum from Lord Rintoul's place. But don't tell me that he took a gypsy girl into his confidence."

"Ay, he did, without kenning. He was gieing his horse a drink when I met him, and he let me tell him his fortune. He said he would gaol me for an impostor if I didna tell him true, so I gaed about it cautiously, and after a minute or twa I telled him he was coming to Thrums the nicht to nab the rioters."

"You are trifling with me," interposed the indignant soldier. "You promised to tell me not what you said to the sheriff, but how he disclosed our movements to you."

"And that's just what I am telling you, only you hinna the rumelgumption to see it. How do you think fortunes is telled? First we get out o' the man, without his seeing what we're after, a' about himsel", and syne we repeat it to him. That's what I did wi' the shirra."

"You drew the whole thing out of him without his knowing?"

"Deed I did, and he rode awa' saying I was a witch."

The soldier heard with the delight of a schoolboy.

"Now if the sheriff does not liberate you at my request," he said, "I will never let him hear the end of this story. He was right; you are a witch. You deceived the sheriff; yes, undoubtedly you are a witch."

He looked at her with fun in his face, but the fun disappeared, and a wondering admiration took its place.

"By Jove!" he said, "I don't wonder you bewitched the sheriff. I must take care or you will bewitch the captain, too."

At this notion he smiled, but he also ceased looking at her. Suddenly the Egyptian again began to cry.

"You're angry wi' me," she sobbed. "I wish I had never set een on you."

"Why do you wish that?" Halliwell asked.

"Fine you ken," she answered, and again covered her face with her hands.

He looked at her undecidedly.

"I am not angry with you," he said, gently. "You are an extraordinary girl."

Had he really made a conquest of this beautiful creature? Her words said so, but had he? The captain could not make up his mind. He gnawed his moustache indoubt.

There was silence, save for the Egyptian's sobs. Halliwell's heart was touched, and he drew nearer her,

"My poor girl--"

He stopped. Was she crying? Was she not laughing at him rather? He became red.

The gypsy peeped at him between her fingers, and saw that he was of two minds. She let her hands fall from her face, and undoubtedly there were tears on her cheeks.

"If you're no angry wi' me," she said, sadly, "how will you no look at me?"

"I am looking at you now."

He was very close to her, and staring into her wonderful eyes. I am older than the Captain, and those eyes have dazzled me.

"Captain dear."

She put her hand in his. His chest rose. He knew she was seeking to beguile him, but he could not take his eyes off hers. He was in a worse plight than a woman listening to the first whisper of love.

Now she was further from him, but the spell held. She reached the door, without taking her eyes from his face. For several seconds he had been as a man mesmerised.

Just in time he came to. It was when she turned from him to find the handle of the door. She was turning it when his hand fell on hers so suddenly that she screamed. He twisted her round.

"Sit down there," he said hoarsely, pointing to the chair upon which he had flung his cloak. She dared not disobey. Then he leant against the door, his back to her, for just then he wanted no one to see his face. The gypsy sat very still and a little frightened.

Halliwell opened the door presently, and called to the soldier on duty below.

"Davidson, see if you can find the sheriff. I want him. And Davidson--"

The captain paused.

"Yes," he muttered, and the old soldier marvelled at his words, "it is better. Davidson, lock this door on the outside."

Davidson did as he was ordered, and again the Egyptian was left alone with Halliwell.

"Afraid of a woman!" she said, contemptuously, though her heart sank when she heard the key turn in the lock.

"I admit it," he answered, calmly.

He walked up and down the room, and she sat silently watching him.

"That story of yours about the sheriff was not true," he said at last.

"I suspect it wasna," answered the Egyptian coolly, "Hae you been thinking about it a' this time? Captains I could tell you what you're thinking now. You're wishing it had been true, so that the ane o' you couldna laugh at the other."

"Silence!" said the captain, and not another word would he speak until he heard the sheriff coming up the stair. The Egyptian trembled at his step, and rose in desperation.

"Why is the door locked?" cried the sheriff, shaking it.

"All right," answered Halliwell; "the key is on your side."

At that moment the Egyptian knocked the lamp off the table, and the room was at once in darkness. The officer sprang at her, and, catching her by the skirt, held on.

"Why are you in darkness?" asked the sheriff, as he entered.

"Shut the door," cried Halliwell. "Put your back to it."

"Don't tell me the woman has escaped?"

"I have her, I have her! She capsized the lamp, the little jade. Shut the door."

Still keeping firm hold of her, as he thought, the captain relit the lamp with his other hand. It showed an extraordinary scene. The door was shut, and the sheriff was guarding it. Halliwell was clutching the cloth of the bailie's seat. There was no Egyptian.

A moment passed before either man found his tongue.

"Open the door. After her!" cried Halliwell.

But the door would not open. The Egyptian had fled and locked it behind her.

What the two men said to each other, it would not be fitting to tell. When Davidson, who had been gossiping at the corner of the town-house, released his captain and the sheriff, the gypsy had been gone for some minutes.

"But she shan't escape us," Riach cried, and hastened out to assist in the pursuit.

Halliwell was in such a furious temper that he called up Davidson and admonished him for neglect of duty.