

Kitty's Bower

By H. Pease

When Eric Chesters of Chesters Castle married Miss Brocklebridge—the bold and handsome heiress of Sir William, ironmaster, baronet, and expectant baron, all the world and his wife clapped hands and cried ‘an ideal arrangement,’ and foretold long years of success and happiness for the happy pair.

At the club after the wedding the ‘best man,’ however, set forth a different view of the matter.

‘Of course on paper it’s ideal,’ he said; ‘Sir William is of the order of Melchisedec—having neither father nor mother, while Eric’s pedigree is the joy of the Heralds’ College. Edith’s money will pay off the mortgages on Chesters Castle, no doubt, but, as Stevenson shrewdly said, “*The Bohemian must not marry the Puritan.*” Now Eric is not naturally a marrying man; he yielded to his aged mother’s solicitations and the well-developed charms and black eyes of his wife. She sighs for a career, and thinks Chesters Castle a fine foundation for it, but her crest is a ladder; Eric’s is a pierrot. In short, she is an Alpine climber, and Eric a charming Prince Florizel of Bohemia. I give them a year in which to find each other out—*après cela le déluge.*’

The ‘best man’ proved right in his casting of their horoscope, for a prolonged honeymoon spent in going round the world revealed a rift in the lute which a season in town developed into an undoubted crack.

Thus, when Mrs. Chesters pressed on her husband the desirability of entering Parliament, he protested that he had only seven skins; and when she wished to pay a round of visits to distinguished people he maintained that they ought to reside at Chesters Castle for a while.

She yielded, but her husband’s castle completed her disillusion. She had thought of it as a social *point d’appui*—she found it in her own words ‘a gloomy shooting barrack.’

But her husband loved it, and rejoiced in the opportunity of renewing his youth with the salmon-fishing, the grouse and blackcock driving, and the great days of hunting on the wide moorlands of the Border, over which his ancestors in bygone centuries had ridden day and night on raid and foray. Mrs. Chesters could ride, had enjoyed the social advantages of the Quorn and Pytchley, but she hated what she called disdainfully, ‘bogtrotting with Picts and Scots.’

She had not yet become indifferent to her husband, but she was terribly disappointed with his total lack of ambition.

Now that the salmon-fishing was over and the covers shot, she pined for town, but her husband begged for a few more weeks of hunting first.

What joy could he find in the long days out on the barren fells? She realised that he had become indifferent to her, though his charm of manner to herself was externally the same.

She grew suspicious, if not jealous. Then one day an anonymous letter came to her—signed ‘Your Well-Wisher,’ which corroborated her own uneasy thoughts—suggesting coarsely that her husband was chasing a *vixen*—not a fox.

No name was actually mentioned, but Mrs. Chesters realised at once who ‘the woman’ was.

She remembered noticing a young girl at an early meet held at the castle, who had attracted, her attention by her air of breeding, beauty, and faultless seat on her mare. She had learnt that the girl was the daughter of an old yeoman farmer who lived on his farm, quaintly called ‘The Bower,’ far outbye on the moorland beside the Blackburn Lynn.

She had mentioned the matter to her husband, and asked him where the girl had acquired her good looks and her breeding. He had replied—and she thought now—with a slight uneasiness of manner, that Miss Todd came of a ‘grayne’ that had lived on the Border before ever the Normans came into the land, that by intermarrying with a few other ancient yeomen families a distinct and natural aristocratic type had resulted. ‘Clean living, fresh air, and as much hunting as possible,’ have all assisted. Nature also has assimilated the lines of her children’s faces to the classical lines wind-chiselled of her great fells. Their oval faces, blue eyes, fair hair, and clean-chiselled features are her endowment.

‘The Todds,’ he had concluded with a laugh, ‘have a tradition that they descend from Eylaf—one of the bodyguard of St. Cuthbert and his coffin—who, in a time of famine stole a cheese, and was for a time turned into a tod. The tod, or fox, is their totem, and him they diligently pursue.’

All that he had said then came back now with special meaning. Mrs. Chesters pondered deeply as to how she had best act in this conjuncture, and had not yet determined, when on the next afternoon she overheard a scrap of conversation as she was passing beside the stables.

She heard the head groom call to the stable lad to saddle a second horse and ride out to meet the Master on his way home from hunting that afternoon.

‘Which way will I take?’ asked the lad in reply.

‘The Master rode the airt o’ Ladiesdale,’ the head groom had replied, for he was somewhat of a wag. *Ladiesdale* for Liddesdale! Mrs., Chesters fled; her cheek was burning, but her mind was made up.

She got out maps and discovered where ‘The Bower’—ominous name—lay, and what tracks led thereto. Thither she would ride on the next hunting day and confront the girl, settle the matter with her husband, and put an end to his shameful intrigue at once.

She had not very long to wait, for in the week after the Meet was advertised at the Craig, which was, she knew, some few miles west of The Bower, overlooking the Black Burn.

Early in the afternoon she rode out ‘to meet her husband,’ as she told the groom, when she mounted, but in reality to catch him, if she could, with the girl on his way back with her to her home.

She mounted up the fell to the southward on whose crest the track showed like a wisp of hay left by the reaper. Gaining the top she paused and looked athwart the mighty view outstretched before her. To her husband she knew it was as Swinburne’s ‘great glad land that knows not bourne nor bound,’ but to herself it was a desert.

Below her the barren moorlands spread away—‘harvestless as ocean’—till they met the white-lands of the further fells, where wandering sheep sought their living. On the sky’s verge ran the line of Rome’s great barrier of wall. This seemed to increase the sense of infinity already given by the landscape, for the mighty wall was now but a wreck upon Time’s shore.

In the mid way ’twixt moor and whiteland lay The Bower. Mrs. Chesters rode on down towards the farmhouse, where it stood eminent upon a knoll beyond the burn, covered with ivy, and sheltered by ash trees from the blasts of the west wind.

She had marked a clump of rowans and geans a hundred yards or so from the burn where she determined to stop her horse and reconnoitre before going up to the farm itself.

Concealing herself as best she could within the small copse she noticed that the track descended to where usually a ford was discoverable. She could note horses’ hoofs on the bank top, but the cart road to the farm ran on the farther side of the burn, winding in and out of the rolling pasture. To the right hand fifty yards away, a light wooden bridge with hand-rail leapt from rock to rock above the foaming water.

Boiling amidst the rocky chasm it poured an amber flood across the ford below.

A bold rider might have perhaps leaped his horse across; that might possibly have been safer than to walk a horse through where a stumble might mean doom to both.

No, Mrs. Chesters decided; if she went up to the farm she would have to dismount and walk across the little bridge. As she reflected thus the farm door opened, and a young girl came out and gazed steadily to the west as though expecting some visitor. Then she moved onward, and came slowly down towards the ford.

Mrs. Chesters crouched lower upon her horse's shoulder, waited till the maiden had reached the water's edge, then turned her horse and trotted swiftly down to battle with her rival across the water.

'And so it's you who dare to set your cap at my husband, Mr. Chesters of Castle Chesters, is it? And you're waiting at the ford for his returning, like a sweet, innocent, rustic maiden?'

Kitty's cheek had blanched a little when she saw who the rider was, but her voice was unshaken as she replied quietly, 'I ne'er set my cap at him, not I. The Todds hae lived and owned land here years before ever a Chesters came to Chesters Castle.'

Mrs. Chesters had scrutinised with harsh eyes every detail of her rival's face and figure. Those delicate lines of hip and waist were surely no longer as fine as before. She felt her worst fears were realised. Losing her temper she said roughly:

'You little fool! Don't you know you're making a scandal of yourself up and down the whole countryside? Have you no sense of shame?'

'I can fend for myself,' said Kitty quietly, though a touch of colour had showed on her cheeks.

'There's but one way for you to avoid further trouble for every one and eventual ruin for yourself, and that is, to promise me never to see my husband again.'

'I'll mak nae such promise,' retorted the other hotly. 'Maybe,' she added quietly, '*it's your ain blame that ye canna keep your man at hame.*'

Mrs. Chesters flamed. She was furious with rage. She struck out with the thong of her hunting crop at her rival across the burn, but she was a yard or more short of the hateful, delicate form confronting her so steadily.

'Why don't ye ride through the ford?' asked Kitty unabashed, and even smiling. She knew that her rival was afraid and despised her, while Mrs. Chesters knew that Kitty knew, and hated her all the more therefore. She would have cheerfully given a thousand pounds for one clean cut with the whip across that oval cheek.

As Mrs. Chesters was trying to choke her wrath down and regain her speech, she saw Kitty's eye turn westward with a swift look of delight.

Mrs. Chesters followed the line; she saw a black dot riding down the 'Slack' of the fell, and guessed instantly it was her husband returning to The Bower after hunting.

In an instant she had made up her mind. Evidently the girl was expecting him to come by the ford. Well, she, Mrs. Chesters would ride out to meet him and intercept him before ever he won thither to his paramour.

She turned the horse's head with never a word and rode quickly up the burn, keeping out of sight as far as possible. A few hundred yards on there was an outcrop of rock with alder and scrub oak intermingling. The track seemed to run through it, by the edge of the Blackburn Lynn. Pressing onward, Mrs. Chesters determined to ensconce herself there behind the rocks, or in the trees, and surprise her husband as he rode through. On he came, gaily whistling, happy as a thrush in spring rejoicing in his mate; on he came, his horse trotting swiftly, scenting a 'feed' at The Bower's stable.

‘So I’ve caught you, Eric!’ cried his wife, as she thrust her horse across his path from behind an adjacent rock.

Eric’s mare shied violently, missed her footing on the narrow rocky path, staggered, then rearing upward on a vain spring forward fell backward over like some huge stone into the black belly of the lynn.

Mrs. Chesters followed with her eyes—she felt herself turned to marble; then she was conscious that a horse had reappeared in the black eddies below, but no rider was on its back. Was this some horrid nightmare she could not awake from?

Then she saw the girl on the opposite bank who cried accusingly, ‘What hae ye done wi’ him, ye wicked woman?’

Mrs. Chesters was now released from her spell.

‘His horse shied,’ she called across the waters, ‘and fell into the lynn with him. You search that side and I this.’ So saying she got down from her horse, tied the bridle to a tree, and sought as best she could for any trace of her husband’s body on her side of the black cauldron of waters.

‘Ye hae been his deid,’ Kitty had shouted above the tumult of the lynn. Not another word did the rival mourners address to each other.

Kitty had helped to lead the fallen horse out of the channel on her side of the burn, then smitten with a sudden thought she jumped into the saddle and rode off down the water thinking the corpse must have been carried down stream by the heavy current.

Mrs. Chesters vainly wandered up and down the rocky edges of the lynn, peered into the black, circling cauldron in the centre, but seeing nothing emerge she made her way to the farm, promised a great reward to any one who could bring her news of her husband’s body being found, then rode wearily home across the weary moors.

That night Kitty lay sleepless on her bed caught in a storm of sobbing; she recalled all the sweet details of her love episode, all the charms of her lover—which were now buried for ever in the black lynn. Then she sang to herself softly,

‘Nae living man I’ll love again,
Now that my lovely knight is slain.
With ae lock of his gowden hair
I’ll bind my heart for evermair.’

She had scarcely finished her lament when she saw a faint light show beside her window. Formless and nebulous at first it seemed to be growing quickly into particular shape and cognisance. Kitty had watched the strange light, paralysed with terror, then, with a sudden inspiration

‘Eric!’ cried she, starting up on her bed, ‘Eric! Is it thou? I knew thou wouldest return to me.’

The apparition answered only by beckoning with a forefinger.

‘Lead me to him,’ she cried, as she rose and hastily flung on her clothes.

The wraith led onward; Kitty let herself out of the window, and thence to the ground by help of the ivy roots.

The night was still and thronged with stars, that seemed to watch her tenderly and to be cognisant of her love. ‘He is alive, he is alive,’ she cried to them, as she followed hot foot after the wraith that led to the rocky lynn.

Onward with steady foot and without a trace of fear she followed—in through a tangle of alder, thence through a cleft in a big rock, and there below her, stretched on a ledge from which the ebbing waters had just receded, lay her ‘Man.’

‘My man!’ she murmured with a little cry between a laugh and a sob, ‘my man is alive.’

‘Eric,’ and she bent down over him, lifted the wet hair from his brow and kissed him on the forehead.

‘Kitty,’ he replied faintly, trying to lift his head to hers, ‘I knew thou wouldst find me, beloved; my soul went forth to seek thee.’

‘I was badly stunned,’ he went on presently, ‘but it is nothing serious. The flood lifted me upon this ledge, and so saved me.’

‘Well, there is but one thing now to do, my love. I am dead to my wife, and she is dead to me. Let the dead bury their dead,’ he added with a smile.

‘Now go fetch me dry clothes. I will change, and then we will ride away to Heathdown junction, and thence away to a new life in a new land.’

Kitty drew in her breath. ‘But are ye able? Are ye strong enough, Eric? Art sure thou canst give up all for a life with me?’

‘Faith of a Borderer!’ he answered gaily, as he kissed her hand. ‘Now go and do as I bid. There’s no time to be lost. See! I grow stronger every minute,’ and he rose up on his knee and crawled forth from his refuge assisted by Kitty. Then she went swiftly back to the farm and brought with her dry clothes and a plaid, a second time she returned for meat and drink for her lover, and the third and last time for his horse, which she had already stabled in the byre.

‘And now,’ said Eric in her ear, as he lifted her into the saddle, ‘we’ll ride westward where we ‘ll buy another “Bower” in another land.’

Through the early mist that morning an old shepherd was making his way home from a late mart, when he encountered what he swore was ‘the wraith o’ a great muclde moss-trooper wi’ his marrow ahint him ridin’ the ae black horse.’

Arrived at home, he roused his wife, and imparted his information.

‘Whisht, man, haud your whisht,’ retorted she. ‘Noo get intil your ain bed. Ye aye see *double* after a mart day.’