

An Eye for an Eye

By H. F. W. Tatham

Marcus sat by the roadside and nursed his bruised face between his hands. Opposite to him his little cottage was burning; down the road the soldiers of the governor were driving off his cow and her calf; in front of the cottage lay chickens dead and wounded, beehives overset, flowers and vegetables trodden into an indistinguishable mass. By his side his fourteen-year-old daughter crouched sobbing in terror and misery.

Marcus spat from his mouth a broken tooth, and with a bitter imprecation rose to his feet. His fault had been small, and the punishment brutal and severe; and he cursed the governor and vowed vengeance in his heart. He picked up from the ground his bow and quiver of arrows—now almost his only property—and taking his daughter by the hand trudged off to seek his fortune elsewhere.

A rude turf hovel on the borders of the great wood, a little plot of land that by hard labour had been made to bear a few cabbages and other vegetables, such wild things of the fields and woods as he could snare or shoot with his arrows—these gave him shelter and sustenance for a while. But hard times came. The frost bound the earth in an iron grip, the animals were shy and wary, fuel and bread were well-nigh exhausted. His little daughter came crying to him for food one day. Marcus had just returned from the wood, after finding his snares empty, and seeing no beast or bird that he could slay. In despair he caught up his bow again, unable to bear his daughter's tears, and started out into the wood.

This time fortune seemed to favour him. He heard a rustling in the trees before him, and as he lay and peered through them, a great stag came out and passed into an open glade that lay not far in front: the animal stopped still, and, lifting its head, seemed to listen intently and sniff the air. There was not a moment to be lost. He set an arrow in the bow, and drawing it to the head, aimed behind the stag's shoulder at the heart. But a twig cracked, the creature started forward, and though the bow twanged and the arrow sped home, it struck but the flank of the deer, and the animal bounded away into the forest with the arrow sticking in the wound.

Marcus started up in disappointment, but not losing heart, darted forward in pursuit. The broken branches and the blood-drops, that (to his joy) grew thicker and thicker as he pressed on, told him he was on the trail. But though he hurried forward ever, he soon saw to his grief that the deer had crossed the fence that marked off the part of the forest that was the governor's property.

He gazed wistfully through the fence. What was that in front? Sure enough, some thirty yards inside, there lay the deer, seemingly dead.

Marcus stared in doubt and dismay. He knew the cruel penalties then in use for one who broke the forest laws. But his daughter was starving; there was no one near to see; after all, he had wounded his quarry fairly on the common ground. With a hasty glance about him, he climbed the fence and went in. There was no doubt about it; the deer was dead. He stooped down to pull out the arrow, and at that very moment he was seized roughly from behind. He struggled desperately; but two strong men had hold of him, and he was weakened by hunger. In a few moments he was overpowered, and with his hands bound behind his back dragged before his enemy, Julian the governor.

The forest laws were cruel, and maiming and mutilation were among the common punishments of the age. There was a dreadful appropriateness too in the punishments that befell those who

needed skill of eye to follow the pursuit that led them into crime. No need to describe what followed; but after a cruel scourging came a worse thing, and Marcus staggered forth, with his hands pressed in agony to the bleeding socket where his right eye had lately been.

Back to his hovel he made his way; and there he would have starved with his daughter but for the kindness of one of the very men who, doing therein his duty to his master, had seized him in the wood, but had afterwards pitied his sad fate. So he tided over the winter, and managed in time to make a living by hard daily labour, scanty but sufficient and his daughter grew older and thrived on the hard fare, and became beautiful—alas, too beautiful for her happiness.

For the governor saw her one day, as, like Virginia of old, she went to school to learn from the teachers of the new faith called Christian that had come into the land; and he marked her beauty and would take her for his slave, and for a worse fate than that. So he bade his followers seize the maid and carry her off. The poor girl shrieked and struggled, but her weak efforts were quickly being overpowered when a man broke from the field beside the road and came running to her help. It was her father. He held a hatchet in one hand, and so fierce were the blows he struck in his desperation that the soldiers gave back, and left the girl a moment free. But his axe was of no avail against armed men, and the soldiers, urged by the governor, closed in a circle on him and the girl. He did not hesitate; the fate that would be hers was worse than death; and he struck her one blow, whereat she sank on the ground, and found release.

But the soldiers seized him, and the governor, mad with rage, would for a moment have had him slain; but he checked himself, and with a cruel smile, ‘Thou shalt live,’ he said, ‘daughterless and eyeless that thou art, thou shalt be handless too. Smite off the hand that struck the blow.’

A blacksmith’s forge stood near; the hand was laid upon the anvil and struck off at the wrist with the hatchet that had slain the girl, and a red-hot iron that shone in the fire was clapped hissing on the bleeding stump, and stayed the flow of blood, checked already by a cord drawn tight round the arm till it cut into the flesh. Then they left him fainting in the road.

The Christian Fathers took him up and carried him to their dwelling, and brought him back to life, teaching him also the new faith, which he received gladly. But deep down in his heart, whatever the teachings of Christ told him, smouldered the desire for vengeance, ‘an eye for an eye, a hand for a hand, a tooth for a tooth.’

Those were the early days of Christianity, when men still believed that Christ or the Virgin or some Saint might appear to them visibly on earth, as Christ had appeared to St. Paul. And in Marcus’ poor distracted heart there grew a strange desire to see the Lord Jesus, and later by degrees a conviction that he would see Him. And still all the while he nursed his vengeance in his heart.

Meanwhile there came trouble on the land. The governor Julian’s oppressions were many and sore, and the people hated him; and when news came of a change of emperor at Rome, his enemies gathered courage and rose against him, and in a little Julian was overthrown, and escaped but by the swiftness of his horse. For a time none knew where he was; and, though Marcus rejoiced at his downfall, yet he longed to hear that some worse thing had befallen him, and was not content that he should escape thus.

It was Christmas night. The winter evening had fallen early, and there was but a little light in the west, where the sun had sunk behind a bank of vapour, leaving the stars shining in the frosty sky. Marcus had been working all day in the field for the monks, whose servant he was, and was coming home by a path that led to their dwelling. He was looking at the stars, when suddenly he was attracted by one that shone with unusual brightness, and what is more, seemed to him to

move. Marcus followed its movements, he knew not why, marvelling what this might portend; while at the same time the thought of the appearance of Christ came vividly into his mind. And the star, descending, seemed to lead him to a rough thatched building that stood near a farm. He went up to it and pushed the door open, and saw that it was a stable.

It was all fragrant with the scent of hay and the breath of oxen, and dimly lighted with a lantern that hung upon the wall. The oxen and asses stood meekly in their stalls, as they had stood that night in Bethlehem so many years ago, when the shepherds and the wise men came, mysteriously led, to see the place where the young child lay. And Marcus stood and gazed.

Then, taking down the lantern from the wall, slowly he went forward to the manger. There was some one lying in it. But it was no innocent child that met the eye of Marcus; no Virgin-Mother sat beside it; no angels folded their wings above. The figure was that of a man, the clothes foul and tattered; the face was pressed in the straw, and one arm covered it. Then, as Marcus stood and gazed, the sleeper stirred, raised his arm and turned his face, open-eyed and staring, towards him. And through the dirt and the tangled hair and matted beard he recognised the face of his enemy, Julian the governor.

Vengeance was in his grasp; 'an eye for an eye, a hand for a hand, a tooth for a tooth.' He could overpower his enemy easily, or, if need be, summon help from the farm close by; and yet—and yet—he waited.

The poor haggard wretch before him crept from the manger and fell upon his knees, with eyes turned on Marcus in mingled terror and supplication. And still Marcus waited, and there was no sound in the stable but the munching of the patient beasts that stood in their stalls.

He should see Christ on earth, he had believed! Was it to be as the Baby in the manger, or the Redeemer hanging on the cross, or the triumphant Risen King among the clouds of heaven? He knew in his heart that it was as none of these, but that beneath the tattered garment and emaciated form of his worst enemy Christ had shown Himself to him. And he took his enemy by the hand and raised him up, and led him to his own house.

And in this fashion Christ came once more upon the earth.