

The Countess Kathleen

By H. F. W. Tatham

It was many years ago in Ireland. There had come a famine on the land, a famine dreadful and sore, when the corn had rotted on the hillsides and the sheep died in the fields, and even for the rich food was scarce and hard to buy, while the poor were starving by thousands. And as the winter drew nearer the distress grew even greater and greater.

It was in November, when the days grew dark and the nights were long and cold, that a stranger came to the district where the famine was worst. He was tall and dark, and wrapt in a long black cloak, and he rode up to the inn-door on his big black horse, and, flinging the bridle to an attendant, called for a room. Thereafter he stayed at the inn, seldom going out; but by degrees it came to be known that he was a trader, and was willing to purchase from the people their possessions at a price. So by degrees people came to him; at first only one now and again, and at nightfall; but afterwards more frequently, and in the broad daylight. And they came forth, some looking glad and some defiant; but more seemed ashamed, and a few glanced over their shoulders as though in deadly fear. Now it was noticed that those who came forth had great store of money, and were able to buy food and live easily. So that many more were led to the place, and the fame of the stranger spread over all the country-side.

But, by degrees, the secret of what the trading was was whispered abroad, and men talked of it over their hearths in the evening and shuddered at the tale. For it was known at last that what the stranger bought was human souls.

He gave a price for them, great or small, according to the circumstances of the case; the better, the purer, the more innocent a soul was, the higher was the price given; and those who went in pride of heart, hoping to get great wealth, were oftenest disappointed at what they received. The stranger's stock of money seemed inexhaustible; and ever more and more people came to the inn.

Now there dwelt near that place a certain lady, the Countess Kathleen. She was deeply beloved by all those who dwelt near, rich and poor alike, for she was the sweetest, purest, noblest lady that the world had ever seen; and she ever befriended the poor, who looked up to her as though she were an angel of heaven, though she was the gentlest and humblest creature that ever walked on God's earth. In this famine she had spared neither her gold nor her stores of corn and meat to feed the hungry; she had sold her jewels and her ornaments to buy them food, and she had visited them when weakened with hunger and with the diseases that hunger brings with it. But she had been unable to stay the famine, and at length had well-nigh despaired.

At first she heard nothing of the stranger, and, when she did, only vague rumours came to her ears, and she scarce credited them. But, on finding that certain people had money and food where there was none before, she began to make inquiries. And then she found that most of those whom she asked where the riches came from answered her either evasively or rudely; while in some cases they burst into tears, and showed signs of extreme shame or terror. But no one would tell her.

At last one night her waiting-maid, whose lover was a village lad, lately become rich, burst into tears when attending on her mistress, and, flinging herself at her feet, told her the whole story as her lover had told it to her. Kathleen raised the girl and spoke kindly to her, and gave her what comfort she could. Then, dismissing her, she went into her private chapel, and, kneeling down, spent the night in earnest prayer. It was only when the sun shone in through the window

that she rose; and on her face was a look in which hope and despair were strangely intermingled. She passed that day in her ordinary manner, doing what she could for the suffering people; but at nightfall she wrapped herself in a long cloak, and, covering her face, went silently down the road that led to the inn. Arrived there, she tapped at the door, and in a low voice asked for the stranger. She was not recognised, and in a few moments she stood within the door of his room. The stranger was seated at the table, but on her entry he rose and bowed low. 'Welcome, Countess Kathleen,' he said, 'wherein can I serve you?'

Kathleen started at his speaking her name, and then, seeing that further concealment was impossible, she threw back her cloak, and stood before him with all her innocent beauty fully revealed. For a moment there was silence.

Then the stranger said, 'You would speak with me?' Kathleen bowed her head, and again silence fell. It was broken by the girl. 'I would buy,' she said, 'from you the souls of all the poor people, my people, from whom you have bought them.'

The stranger smiled. 'And the price?' he asked.

'All that I have,' she replied. 'For myself, I will gladly starve, and all the revenues of my lands shall be yours for evermore.'

The stranger shook his head. 'That is not enough,' he said at last. And the fire leaping up flung his distorted shadow on the wall behind him, and it seemed in the shadow as if his head were horned.

Kathleen faced him bravely. 'What more can I give?' she said, and her voice was steady though her face was pale as death.

'Your own soul,' replied the stranger. And again the fire flickered, and a dog howled in the inn-yard outside.

Her own soul! It was so white, so pure, so clean, that it outweighed in value the hundred souls the stranger had bought; and great would be the joy in his own place if he brought such a prize back with him.

The silence was deep. Kathleen felt her knees tremble and her heart leap in her breast, and she could not pray. But her courage did not flinch; she looked the stranger full in the face, and then, 'I agree,' she said.

The flame blazed up on the hearth and sank down once more; and there came a crying of the wind outside, and some one laughed in the room.

Kathleen felt her way to the door, and passed out and back to her house. And the next morning the stranger had gone; and the famine grew less, and men's hearts rejoiced because they had food, and they felt, though none knew how, that their souls were their own again.

But the lady Kathleen went like a ghost, and her face grew whiter and whiter, and her eyes larger and larger, and her body thinner and thinner. A year and a day went by, and she was in her chamber at nightfall. It was the cold winter time again, and the ground outside was bound with a bitter frost, and the stars shone bright in the sky. She knelt by her bedside and strove to pray, but something lay upon her brain and tongue and she could not utter a word. Ever she grew weaker, and the spark of life within her burned faint and low. At last she fell forward with her arms flung out upon the bed, and at that moment there came a crying of the wind and the fire leaped in the grate.

With bowed head she waited, and there was silence, till below in the courtyard the old house—dog howled, and again the flame flickered and was still. Outside now there was no sound; only the wood in the grate crackled, and Kathleen's breathing sounded very faint.

Then the door-handle turned, and a figure entered. The flicker of the flame showed a tall dark man in a black cloak, and, as he uncovered his face, his eyes shone, red and beast-like, in the darkness. 'It is nearly time,' he said. Kathleen hid her face, and her heart scarcely beat. Surely it was very cold; an icy hand seemed laid upon her heart and to be holding it still. The stranger came further into the room and waited. But Kathleen knew no more; her eyes closed, and silently she ceased to breathe.

Then a dreadful change passed over the form and face of the stranger, and he stood revealed in his true nature, and slowly he advanced towards the fallen figure of the girl. But on a sudden he stopped. And slowly, between him and the Countess, there grew, as though from the floor, a form—shadowy and dim, but unmistakably the form of a man—and the stranger strove to pass on, but could not. The form raised a hand, a hand strangely scarred, and at that the stranger gave back a pace and stared like a wild beast at bay. Then, slowly backwards, backwards he recoiled, as though pressed by some unseen force, till suddenly there came a crash as of thunder, and the darkness fell thick and dense upon the room. And the dog howled in the yard outside, and a wind went crying round the house.

* * *

A shepherd that night, who had gone to the hills to look for a lost sheep, was coming back with it when he noticed a strange light round the castle tower, and stopped to wonder what it might be. And afar he saw two winged forms, radiant but faintly outlined, rise from the tower heavenwards, and they bore something between them, but he could not tell what it might be. And he seemed to hear a low music very far away.

They found Kathleen in the morning, dead, with her face upon her outstretched arms, but with a look upon it such as she had not worn for a year and a day. And so they knew that it was well with her at the end, though none could read her secret or learn how her great sacrifice had paid its own price, and how by losing her soul she had gained it at the last.