

Carit Etlar

The White Stone



Fortælling nummer 9 fra

A Storck's Nest

Noveller samlet af

John Fulford Vicary

Udgivet i 1886 af
Frederick Warne & Co. i London og New York

In old times the road between Odense and Middelfart led through an undulating and fertile district, then thickly wooded. This part of the country had a bad reputation, as the woods afforded a harbour for robbers, and no one dared to go down Wissenberg lane at night. This lane was in the woods.

Many stories were related of robbery with violence and murder. If they were exaggerated, which was probable, still they were told and believed. The road at one place passed between two high banks, and it was said that in one of them the robbers had dug a hole, in which they lived. They hung a bell in this hole, to which a string was attached, and tied it across a dark part of the lane. When any one passed the bell of course rang, and the robbers were thus apprised of the approach of their prey. Another place to which a story was attached was a deep bog in the woods. A steep bank was on one side of it. The bank was sandy and free from bushes. It was said that the Wissenberg men scoured the woods one day in quest of robbers, and found a woman who had assisted in many crimes. The Wissenberg men put her in a barrel full of iron spikes, and rolled her down the bank into the bog.

The woods were thinner near the village of Skalsbjerg, and there were cultivated fields and small farmhouses here and there. The best farm belonged to Terkel Dam. He owned a considerable part of the woods, and had many cattle grazing in it, under the charge of a girl called Karen. She was little, and sad-looking, and lame of one foot. She was not much in favour with the other girls at the farm, and she generally kept a distance from them to avoid their teasing her. Her fine voice could often be heard in the woods, and even those who teased her most listened when she sang. In those days, any one who was maimed by accident was considered to have incurred God's special displeasure, and treated as an object to be despised. Karen herself thought she was a lower being than the others, and her face was never glad. No one had seen her laugh. Her grandmother said that when God smote her He had taken away the gladness of her mind too. Karen said it was not that, but because every one scorned and teased her.

When she grew older she went to the priest's school, and astonished every one at the quickness with which she learnt everything. The priest praised her energy and determination to learn.

"I cannot attain to what I want by learning only", said Karen, as she left the school.

The priest did not understand her, but the others did, and whispered the secret to one another. The fact was that Karen had fallen in love with Ebbe, Terkel Dam's son. It was too absurd for a cripple like her to think of marrying the son of a rich farmer, who could choose a wife amongst the best of his neighbours. She was also the poorest and least-valued of the servants on the farm. In the spring she brought Ebbe the first flowers that appeared after the snow. When the wild strawberries were ripe, a basin full of them was always by Ebbe's plate. He ate them, whilst the others laughed, but Karen said nothing.

"It looks as if you were going to marry Karen", said Terkel Dam one day to his son.

"The little girl is good and true, but she is lame", said Ebbe; and no more was said on the subject.

A little later there was much uneasiness in the district. Many travellers had been robbed; and a horse-dealer, who was known to have had a considerable sum of money in his possession, was never seen or heard of after his entering Wissenberg wood, and going down the lane. His relatives searched the woods, but found not the slightest trace of him.

One day a man was riding down the lane between the two high banks. Karen saw him from amongst the bushes where she was watching the cattle. She heard the bell ring in the

robbers" den, and immediately after the man on horseback was attacked by three men with clubs, and dragged off his horse. Karen ran to the village as fast as her lame foot would allow, and gave the alarm to the Foged, or person who acted in the combined offices of magistrate and police. He collected all the men he could, and, coming quickly to the place, arrested two men. They had buried the horseman, and were about to bury the horse. The two men were well known as having committed many crimes. The Foged cross-examined Karen very closely, and warned her that she must speak the truth in God's name. She was, she said, certain that she saw three men come from the robber's hole.

"You were with the cattle from early morning?"

Yes, she was.

"Then name all the persons you saw pass down the lane".

She did so.

An old man who was in the wood picking sticks was also examined, and he gave the same answers as to the persons who had gone down the lane that day. Every man that had been named was now called up one after the other, and the question put to Karen:

"Was that the third man?"

Karen shook her head. Terkel Dam had been seen by the old man when collecting firewood, and was named by him, but not by Karen.

Terkel Dam knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and said, "Now look at me, and be quite sure of what you say".

Karen shook her head.

The two men were condemned to be beheaded with a sword, and their bodies to be hung up on a gallows. As they were being taken in a cart, one of the robbers threw a large white stone at the entrance of Terkel Dam's farm, and said that when that stone changed to another colour death would call there. When the same man had his head on the block, he told the executioner that he would have to keep his sword sharp, as he would have occasion to use it once more for the murder in Wissenberg lane, as soon as the little girl that watched the cattle was not afraid to speak out.

There was much talk about what the robber had said, and people could not understand why he had thrown the white stone at Terkel Dam's fence.

Karen received notice to quit her service at the farm, and she was much blamed for saying there were three men who had committed the murder, thus casting suspicion on so many, whilst it was clear that there could have been but two.

When the day came that Karen had to leave, she went away crying, with her small bundle of clothes. Ebbe came and gave her a piece of wadmél (a stout woollen cloth used and made by the peasants themselves).

"That is for faithful service, Karen. Where are you going?"

"Wherever I can get service, since I am not allowed to remain here longer".

"Why do you want to stay here longer?"

"But to see you", said Karen, looking into his eyes.

"You have done very wrong in lying before the Foged, that there were three men when there were only two".

Karen looked at him with great earnestness, and whispered, "I could not name the third man because it was your own father".

Ebbe turned pale. After a while he said: "Let us go into the house again".

It was a little before supper-time, and there was no one in the house but Terkel Dam himself. Ebbe led Karen in.

"I have come to tell you the news, father", he said; "I am going to marry Karen".

"Then there will be two who will leave the house instead of one", said Terkel; "you shall not live here".

"You have to thank Karen, father, that you are allowed to remain here", said Ebbe; "she saw who the third man was in Wissenberg lane".

Terkel seemed as if struck by lightning, and fell against the wall.

"Take the farm and manage it as you like", he said after recovering himself somewhat.

After that day Terkel did little but look after the poultry and young stock. Every day he went out to see the white stone, but he did not attempt to move it. "It is getting black", he would say to himself as he cleaned it Every night Karen read a Psalm to him and spoke kindly.

There was to be a new bell to the church, and a collection was made at the farms of old brass and copper to cast it. When they came to Terkel, he said: "You need not go further; I will give the bell", and he went to his room and brought out the sum of money required.

When the men left, Karen took his hand and kissed it. "You are now on the right way", she said, "but there is much left to do".

Karen became bright and cheerful. Her sweet voice filled the house with song.

"You are so good and nice, Karen", said her husband.

"Yes, but I am lame".

"I cannot understand how it is that I never thought you good-looking before", he said, caressing her.

Years passed, some bad, some good; Karen was a blessing to every one in the house. She helped her neighbours and had always something for the poor. She never missed attending church whatever the weather was, to pray for Terkel Dam. The priest said that God's blessing rested on her house.

Terkel went every day to the white stone when he thought no one was looking at him, and cleaned it, but the fat man grew thin and wasted away, his chest grew flatter, and the once strong man had a difficulty to ascend the stairs to his bedroom.

"The church bell is ringing, Karen", he said one day. "It rings up to our Lord for me, a sinner".

Shortly after, he was a bed-lier, and Karen nursed him. He would lie hours awake talking to himself, and one morning she heard him say that the white stone would soon be black; she then knew that he thought his end was approaching. She begged him to allow her to fetch the priest to see him; at last he assented, and the priest came, late in the day. Terkel lay in his bed, talking, to himself, constantly repeating:

"Why don't they ring the church bell, with my bell to ring up to our Lord for me, a sinner?"

Ebbe would have come in with the priest to his father's bedroom, but Karen would not let him, and bolted the door. She knew that Terkel's sins were too black for his son to hear.

What passed no one ever heard, but it was midnight before the priest came out of Terkel's room. Ebbe asked the priest how his father was.

"He is dead", said the priest solemnly. "He has sinned much and deeply, but your good wife brought him to repent before his death. She is, in truth, a blessed woman".

The white stone lay for years where the robber had thrown it, and, to keep it from turning black, it was repeatedly whitewashed, but it has long since disappeared.

----- ooo0ooo -----