

RICHARD BLACKMORE

TALES FROM THE
TELLING-HOUSE

Richard Blackmore

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Содержание

PREFACE	5
SLAIN BY THE DOONES	7
CHAPTER I	7
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	19
CHAPTER VI	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

R. D. Blackmore

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PREFACE

Sometimes of a night, when the spirit of a dream flits away for a waltz with the shadow of a pen, over dreary moors and dark waters, I behold an old man, with a keen profile, under a parson's shovel hat, riding a tall chestnut horse up the western slope of Exmoor, followed by his little grandson upon a shaggy and stuggy pony.

In the hazy folds of lower hills, some four or five miles behind them, may be seen the ancient Parsonage, where the lawn is a russet sponge of moss, and a stream tinkles under the dining-room floor, and the pious rook, poised on the pulpit of his nest, reads a hoarse sermon to the chimney-pots below. There is the home not of rooks alone, and parson, and dogs that are scouring the moor; but also of the patches of hurry we can see, and the be vies of bleating haste, converging by force of men and dogs towards the final *rendezvous*, the autumnal muster of the clans of wool.

For now the shrill piping of the northwest wind, and the browning of furze and heather, and a scollop of snow upon Oare-oak Hill, announce that the roving of soft green height, and the browsing of sunny hollow, must be changed for the durance of hurdled quads, and the monotonous munch of turnips. The joy of a scurry from the shadow of a cloud, the glory of a rally with a hundred heads in line, the pleasure of polishing a coign of rock, the bliss of beholding flat nose, brown eyes, and fringy forehead, approaching round a corner for a sheepish talk, these and every other jollity of freedom – what is now become of them? Gone! Like a midsummer dream, or the vision of a blue sky, pastured – to match the green hill – with white forms floating peacefully; a sky, where no dog can be, much less a man, only the fleeces of the gentle flock of heaven. Lackadaisy, and well-a-day! How many of you will be woolly ghosts like them, before you are two months older!

My grandfather knows what fine mutton is, though his grandson indites of it by memory alone. “Ha, ha!” shouts the happier age, amid the bleating turmoil, the yelping of dogs, and the sprawling of shepherds; “John Fry, put your eye on that wether, the one with his J. B. upside down, we’ll have a cut out of him on Sunday week, please God. Why, you stupid fellow, you don’t even know a B yet! That is Farmer Passmore’s mark you have got hold of. Two stomachs to a B; will you never understand? Just look at what you’re doing! Here come James Bowden’s and he has got a lot of ours! *Shep* is getting stupid, and deaf as a post. *Watch* is worth ten of him. Good dog, good dog! You won’t let your master be cheated. How many of ours, John Fry? Quick now! You can tell, if you can’t read; and I can read quicker than I can tell.”

“Dree score, and vover Maister; ‘cardin’ to my rackonin’. Dree score and zax it waz as us toorned out, zeventh of June, God knows it waz. Wan us killed, long of harvest-taime; and wan tumbled into bog-hole, across yanner to Mole’s Chimmers.”

“But,” says the little chap on the shaggy pony, “John Fry, where are the four that ought to have R. D. B. on them? You promised me, on the blade of your knife, before I went to school again, that my two lambs should have their children marked the same as they were.”

John turns redder than his own sheep’s-redding. He knows that he has been caught out in a thumping lie, and although that happens to him almost every day, his conscience has a pure complexion still. “‘Twaz along of the rains as wasshed ’un out.” In vain has he scratched his head for a finer lie.

“Grandfather, you know that I had two lambs, and you let me put R. D. B. on them with both my hands, after the shearing-time last year, and I got six shillings for their wool the next time, and I gave it to a boy who thrashed a boy that bullied me. And Aunt Mary Anne wrote to tell me at school

that my two lambs had increased two each, all of them sheep; and there was sure to be a lot of money soon for me. And so I went and promised it right and left, and how can I go back to school, and be called a liar? You call this the *Telling-house*, because people come here to tell their own sheep from their neighbours', when they fetch them home again. But I should say it was because they tell such stories here. And if that is the reason, I know who can tell the biggest ones."

With the pride of a conscious author, he blushes, that rogue of a John Fry blushes, wherever he has shaved within the last three weeks of his false life.

"Never mind, my boy; story-telling never answers in the end," says my Grandfather – oh how could he thus foresee my fate? "Be sure you always speak the truth."

That advice have I followed always. And if I lost my four sheep then, through the plagiarism of that bad fellow, by hook or crook I have fetched four more out of the wilderness of the past; and I only wish they were better mutton, for the pleasure of old friends who like a simple English joint.

R.D.B.

Old Christmas Day, 1896

SLAIN BY THE DOONES

CHAPTER I AFTER A STORMY LIFE

To hear people talking about North Devon, and the savage part called Exmoor, you might almost think that there never was any place in the world so beautiful, or any living men so wonderful. It is not my intention to make little of them, for they would be the last to permit it; neither do I feel ill will against them for the pangs they allowed me to suffer; for I dare say they could not help themselves, being so slow-blooded, and hard to stir even by their own egrimonies. But when I look back upon the things that happened, and were for a full generation of mankind accepted as the will of God, I say, that the people who endured them must have been born to be ruled by the devil. And in thinking thus I am not alone; for the very best judges of that day stopped short of that end of the world, because the law would not go any further. Nevertheless, every word is true of what I am going to tell, and the stoutest writer of history cannot make less of it by denial.

My father was Sylvester Ford of Quantock, in the county of Somerset, a gentleman of large estate as well as ancient lineage. Also of high courage and resolution not to be beaten, as he proved in his many rides with Prince Rupert, and woe that I should say it! in his most sad death. To this he was not looking forward much, though turned of threescore years and five; and his only child and loving daughter, Sylvia, which is myself, had never dreamed of losing him. For he was exceeding fond of me, little as I deserved it, except by loving him with all my heart and thinking nobody like him. And he without anything to go upon, except that he was my father, held, as I have often heard, as good an opinion of me.

Upon the triumph of that hard fanatic, the Brewer, who came to a timely end by the justice of high Heaven – my father, being disgusted with England as well as banished from her, and despoiled of all his property, took service on the Continent, and wandered there for many years, until the replacement of the throne. Thereupon he expected, as many others did, to get his estates restored to him, and perhaps to be held in high esteem at court, as he had a right to be. But this did not so come to pass. Excellent words were granted him, and promise of tenfold restitution; on the faith of which he returned to Paris, and married a young Italian lady of good birth and high qualities, but with nothing more to come to her. Then, to his great disappointment, he found himself left to live upon air – which, however distinguished, is not sufficient – and love, which, being fed so easily, expects all who lodge with it to live upon itself.

My father was full of strong loyalty; and the king (in his value of that sentiment) showed faith that it would support him. His majesty took both my father's hands, having learned that hearty style in France, and welcomed him with most gracious warmth, and promised him more than he could desire. But time went on, and the bright words faded, like a rose set bravely in a noble vase, without any nurture under it.

Another man had been long established in our hereditaments by the Commonwealth; and he would not quit them of his own accord, having a sense of obligation to himself. Nevertheless, he went so far as to offer my father a share of the land, if some honest lawyers, whom he quoted, could find proper means for arranging it. But my father said: "If I cannot have my rights, I will have my wrongs. No mixture of the two for me." And so, for the last few years of his life, being now very poor and a widower, he took refuge in an outlandish place, a house and small property in the heart of Exmoor, which had come to the Fords on the spindle side, and had been overlooked when their

patrimony was confiscated by the Brewer. Of him I would speak with no contempt, because he was ever as good as his word.

In the course of time, we had grown used to live according to our fortunes. And I verily believe that we were quite content, and repined but little at our lost importance. For my father was a very simple-minded man, who had seen so much of uproarious life, and the falsehood of friends, and small glitter of great folk, that he was glad to fall back upon his own good will. Moreover he had his books, and me; and as he always spoke out his thoughts, he seldom grudged to thank the Lord for having left both of these to him. I felt a little jealous of his books now and then, as a very poor scholar might be; but reason is the proper guide for women, and we are quick enough in discerning it, without having to borrow it from books.

At any rate now we were living in a wood, and trees were the only creatures near us, to the best of our belief and wish. Few might say in what part of the wood we lived, unless they saw the smoke ascending from our single chimney; so thick were the trees, and the land they stood on so full of sudden rise and fall. But a little river called the Lynn makes a crooked border to it, and being for its size as noisy a water as any in the world perhaps, can be heard all through the trees and leaves to the very top of the Warren Wood. In the summer all this was sweet and pleasant; but lonely and dreary and shuddersome, when the twigs bore drops instead of leaves, and the ground would not stand to the foot, and the play of light and shadow fell, like the lopping of a tree, into one great lump.

Now there was a young man about this time, and not so very distant from our place – as distances are counted there – who managed to make himself acquainted with us, although we lived so privately. To me it was a marvel, both why and how he did it; seeing what little we had to offer, and how much we desired to live alone. But Mrs. Pring told me to look in the glass, if I wanted to know the reason; and while I was blushing with anger at that, being only just turned eighteen years, and thinking of nobody but my father, she asked if I had never heard the famous rhymes made by the wise woman at Tarr-steps:

“Three fair maids live upon Exymoor,
The rocks, and the woods, and the dairy-door.
The son of a baron shall woo all three,
But barren of them all shall the young man be.”

Of the countless things I could never understand, one of the very strangest was how Deborah Pring, our only domestic, living in the lonely depths of this great wood, and seeming to see nobody but ourselves, in spite of all that contrived to know as much of the doings of the neighbourhood as if she went to market twice a week. But my father cared little for any such stuff; coming from a better part of the world, and having been mixed with mighty issues and making of great kingdoms, he never said what he thought of these little combings of petty pie crust, because it was not worth his while. And yet he seemed to take a kindly liking to the young De Wichehalse; not as a youth of birth only, but as one driven astray perhaps by harsh and austere influence. For his father, the baron, was a godly man, – which is much to the credit of anyone, growing rarer and rarer, as it does, – and there should be no rasp against such men, if they would only bear in mind that in their time they had been young, and were not quite so perfect then. But lo! I am writing as if I knew a great deal more than I could know until the harrow passed over me.

No one, however, need be surprised at the favour this young man obtained with all who came into his converse. Handsome, and beautiful as he was, so that bold maids longed to kiss him, it was the sadness in his eyes, and the gentle sense of doom therein, together with a laughing scorn of it, that made him come home to our nature, in a way that it feels but cannot talk of. And he seemed to be of the past somehow, although so young and bright and brave; of the time when greater things

were done, and men would die for women. That he should woo three maids in vain, to me was a stupid old woman's tale.

"Sylvia," my father said to me, when I was not even thinking of him, "no more converse must we hold with that son of the Baron de Wichehalse. I have ordered Pring to keep the door; and Mistress Pring, who hath the stronger tongue, to come up if he attempted to dispute; the while I go away to catch our supper."

He was bearing a fishing rod made by himself, and a basket strapped over his shoulders.

"But why, father? Why should such a change be? How hath the young gentleman displeased thee?" I put my face into his beard as I spoke, that I might not appear too curious.

"Is it so?" he answered, "then high time is it. No more shall he enter this" —*house* he would have said, but being so truthful changed it into — "hut. I was pleased with the youth. He is gentle and kind; but weak — my dear child, remember that. Why are we in this hut, my dear? and thou, the heiress of the best land in the world, now picking up sticks in the wilderness? Because the man who should do us right is weak, and wavering, and careth but for pleasure. So is this young Marwood de Wichehalse. He rideth with the Doones. I knew it not, but now that I know, it is enough."

My father was of tall stature and fine presence, and his beard shone like a cascade of silver. It was not the manner of the young as yet to argue with their elders, and though I might have been a little fluttered by the comely gallant's lofty talk and gaze of daring melancholy, I said good-bye to him in my heart, as I kissed my noble father. Shall I ever cease to thank the Lord that I proved myself a good daughter then?

CHAPTER II BY A QUIET RIVER

Living as we did all by ourselves, and five or six miles away from the Robbers' Valley, we had felt little fear of the Doones hitherto, because we had nothing for them to steal except a few books, the sight of which would only make them swear and ride away. But now that I was full-grown, and beginning to be accounted comely, my father was sometimes uneasy in his mind, as he told Deborah, and she told me; for the outlaws showed interest in such matters, even to the extent of carrying off young women who had won reputation thus. Therefore he left Thomas Pring at home, with the doors well-barred, and two duck guns loaded, and ordered me not to quit the house until he should return with a creel of trout for supper. Only our little boy Dick Hutchings was to go with him, to help when his fly caught in the bushes.

My father set off in the highest spirits, as anglers always seem to do, to balance the state in which they shall return; and I knew not, neither did anyone else, what a bold stroke he was resolved upon. When it was too late, we found out that, hearing so much of that strange race, he desired to know more about them, scorning the idea that men of birth could ever behave like savages, and forgetting that they had received no chance of being tamed, as rough spirits are by the lessons of the battlefield. No gentleman would ever dream of attacking an unarmed man, he thought; least of all one whose hair was white. And so he resolved to fish the brook which ran away from their stronghold, believing that he might see some of them, and hoping for a peaceful interview.

We waited and waited for his pleasant face, and long, deliberate step upon the steep, and cheerful shout for his Sylvia, to come and ease down his basket, and say – “Well done, father!” But the shadows of the trees grew darker, and the song of the gray-bird died out among them, and the silent wings of the owl swept by, and all the mysterious sounds of night in the depth of forest loneliness, and the glimmer of a star through the leaves here and there, to tell us that there still was light in heaven – but of an earthly father not a sign; only pain, and long sighs, and deep sinking of the heart.

But why should I dwell upon this? All women, being of a gentle and loving kind, – unless they forego their nature, – know better than I at this first trial knew, the misery often sent to us. I could not believe it, and went about in a dreary haze of wonder, getting into dark places, when all was dark, and expecting to be called out again and asked what had made such a fool of me. And so the long night went at last, and no comfort came in the morning. But I heard a great crying, sometime the next day, and ran back from the wood to learn what it meant, for there I had been searching up and down, not knowing whither I went or why. And lo, it was little Dick Hutchings at our door, and Deborah Pring held him by the coat-flap, and was beating him with one of my father's sticks.

“I tell 'ee, they Doo-uns has done for 'un,” the boy was roaring betwixt his sobs; “dree on 'em, dree on 'em, and he've a killed one. The squire be layin' as dead as a sto-un.”

Mrs. Pring smacked him on the mouth, for she saw that I had heard it. What followed I know not, for down I fell, and the sense of life went from me.

There was little chance of finding Thomas Pring, or any other man to help us, for neighbours were none, and Thomas was gone everywhere he could think of to look for them. Was I likely to wait for night again, and then talk for hours about it? I recovered my strength when the sun went low; and who was Deborah Pring, to stop me? She would have come, but I would not have it; and the strength of my grief took command of her.

Little Dick Hutchings whistled now, I remember that he whistled, as he went through the wood in front of me. Who had given him the breeches on his legs and the hat upon his shallow pate? And the poor little coward had skiddered away, and slept in a furze rick, till famine drove him home. But now he was set up again by gorging for an hour, and chattered as if he had done a great thing.

There must have been miles of rough walking through woods, and tangles, and craggy and black boggy hollows, until we arrived at a wide open space where two streams ran into one another.

“Thic be Oare watter,” said the boy, “and t’other over yonner be Badgery. Squire be dead up there; please, Miss Sillie, ’ee can goo vorrard and vaind ’un.”

He would go no further; but I crossed the brook, and followed the Badgery stream, without knowing, or caring to know, where I was. The banks, and the bushes, and the rushing water went by me until I came upon – but though the Lord hath made us to endure such things, he hath not compelled us to enlarge upon them.

In the course of the night kind people came, under the guidance of Thomas Pring, and they made a pair of wattles such as farmers use for sheep, and carried home father and daughter, one sobbing and groaning with a broken heart, and the other that should never so much as sigh again. Troubles have fallen upon me since, as the will of the Lord is always; but none that I ever felt like that, and for months everything was the same to me.

But inasmuch as it has been said by those who should know better, that my father in some way provoked his merciless end by those vile barbarians, I will put into plainest form, without any other change, except from outlandish words, the tale received from Dick Hutchings, the boy, who had seen and heard almost everything while crouching in the water and huddled up inside a bush.

“Squire had caught a tidy few, and he seemed well pleased with himself, and then we came to a sort of a hollow place where one brook floweth into the other. Here he was a-casting of his fly, most careful, for if there was ever a trout on the feed, it was like to be a big one, and lucky for me I was keeping round the corner when a kingfisher bird flew along like a string-bolt, and there were three great men coming round a fuzz-bush, and looking at squire, and he back to them. Down goes I, you may say sure enough, with all of me in the water but my face, and that stuck into a wutts-clump, and my teeth making holes in my naked knees, because of the way they were shaking.

“Ho, fellow!” one of them called out to squire, as if he was no better than father is, ‘who give thee leave to fish in our river?’

“Open moor,’ says squire, ‘and belongeth to the king, if it belongeth to anybody. Any of you gentlemen hold his majesty’s warrant to forbid an old officer of his?’

“That seemed to put them in a dreadful rage, for to talk of a warrant was unpleasant to them.

“Good fellow, thou mayest spin spider’s webs, or jib up and down like a gnat,’ said one, ‘but such tricks are not lawful upon land of ours. Therefore render up thy spoil.’

“Squire walked up from the pebbles at that, and he stood before the three of them, as tall as any of them. And he said, ‘You be young men, but I am old. Nevertheless, I will not be robbed by three, or by thirty of you. If you be cowards enough, come on.’

“Two of them held off, and I heard them say, ‘Let him alone, he is a brave old cock.’ For you never seed anyone look more braver, and his heart was up with righteousness. But the other, who seemed to be the oldest of the three, shouted out something, and put his leg across, and made at the squire with a long blue thing that shone in the sun, like a looking-glass. And the squire, instead of turning round to run away as he should have, led at him with the thick end of the fishing rod, to which he had bound an old knife of Mother Pring’s for to stick it in the grass, while he put his flies on. And I heard the old knife strike the man in his breast, and down he goes dead as a door-nail. And before I could look again almost, another man ran a long blade into squire, and there he was lying as straight as a lath, with the end of his white beard as red as a rose. At that I was so scared that I couldn’t look no more, and the water came bubbling into my mouth, and I thought I was at home along of mother.

“By and by, I came back to myself with my face full of scratches in a bush, and the sun was going low, and the place all as quiet as Cheriton church. But the noise of the water told me where I was; and I got up, and ran for the life of me, till I came to the goyal. And then I got into a fuzz-rick, and slept all night, for I durstn’t go home to tell Mother Pring. But I just took a look before I began

to run, and the Doone that was killed was gone away, but the squire lay along with his arms stretched out, as quiet as a sheep before they hang him up to drain.”

CHAPTER III

WISE COUNSEL

Some pious people seem not to care how many of their dearest hearts the Lord in heaven takes from them. How well I remember that in later life, I met a beautiful young widow, who had loved her husband with her one love, and was left with twin babies by him. I feared to speak, for I had known him well, and thought her the tenderest of the tender, and my eyes were full of tears for her. But she looked at me with some surprise, and said: “You loved my Bob, I know,” for he was a cousin of my own, and as good a man as ever lived, “but, Sylvia, you must not commit the sin of grieving for him.”

It may be so, in a better world, if people are allowed to die there; but as long as we are here, how can we help being as the Lord has made us? The sin, as it seems to me, would be to feel or fancy ourselves case-hardened against the will of our Maker, which so often is – that we should grieve. Without a thought how that might be, I did the natural thing, and cried about the death of my dear father until I was like to follow him. But a strange thing happened in a month or so of time, which according to Deborah saved my life, by compelling other thoughts to come. My father had been buried in a small churchyard, with nobody living near it, and the church itself was falling down, through scarcity of money on the moor. The Warren, as our wood was called, lay somewhere in the parish of Brendon, a straggling country, with a little village somewhere, and a blacksmith’s shop and an ale house, but no church that anyone knew of, till you came to a place called Cheriton. And there was a little church all by itself, not easy to find, though it had four bells, which nobody dared to ring, for fear of his head and the burden above it. But a boy would go up the first Sunday of each month, and strike the liveliest of them with a poker from the smithy. And then a brave parson, who feared nothing but his duty, would make his way in, with a small flock at his heels, and read the Psalms of the day, and preach concerning the difficulty of doing better. And it was accounted to the credit of the Doones that they never came near him, for he had no money.

The Fords had been excellent Catholics always; but Thomas and Deborah Pring, who managed everything while I was overcome, said that the church, being now so old, must have belonged to us, and therefor might be considered holy. The parson also said that it would do, for he was not a man of hot persuasions. And so my dear father lay there, without a stone, or a word to tell who he was, and the grass began to grow.

Here I was sitting one afternoon in May, and the earth was beginning to look lively; when a shadow from the west fell over me, and a large, broad man stood behind it. If I had been at all like myself, a thing of that kind would have frightened me; but now the strings of my system seemed to have nothing like a jerk in them, for I cared not whither I went, nor how I looked, nor whether I went anywhere.

“Child! poor child!” It was a deep, soft voice of distant yet large benevolence. “Almost a woman, and a comely one, for those who think of such matters. Such a child I might have owned, if Heaven had been kind to me.”

Low as I was of heart and spirit, I could not help looking up at him; for Mother Pring’s voice, though her meaning was so good, sounded like a cackle in comparison to this. But when I looked up, such encouragement came from a great benign and steadfast gaze that I turned away my eyes, as I felt them overflow. But he said not a word, for his pity was too deep, and I thanked him in my heart for that.

“Pardon me if I am wrong,” I said, with my eyes on the white flowers I had brought and arranged as my father would have liked them; “but perhaps you are the clergyman of this old church.” For I had lain senseless and moaning on the ground when my father was carried away to be buried.

“How often am I taken for a clerk in holy orders! And in better times I might have been of that sacred vocation, though so unworthy. But I am a member of the older church, and to me all this is heresy.”

There was nothing of bigotry in our race, and we knew that we must put up with all changes for the worst; yet it pleased me not a little that so good a man should be also a sound Catholic.

“There are few of us left, and we are persecuted. Sad calumnies are spread about us,” this venerable man proceeded, while I gazed on the silver locks that fell upon his well-worn velvet coat. “But of such things we take small heed, while we know that the Lord is with us. Haply even you, young maiden, have listened to slander about us.”

I told him with some concern, although not caring much for such things now, that I never had any chance of listening to tales about anybody, and was yet without the honour of even knowing who he was.

“Few indeed care for that point now,” he answered, with a toss of his glistening curls, and a lift of his broad white eyebrows. “Though there has been a time when the noblest of this earth – but vanity, vanity, the wise man saith. Yet some good I do in my quiet little way. There is a peaceful company among these hills, respected by all who conceive them aright. My child, perhaps you have heard of them?”

I replied sadly that I had not done so, but hoped that he would forgive me as one unacquainted with that neighbourhood. But I knew that there might be godly monks still in hiding, for the service of God in the wilderness.

“So far as the name goes, we are not monastics,” he said, with a sparkle in his deep-set eyes; “we are but a family of ancient lineage, expelled from our home in these irreligious times. It is no longer in our power to do all the good we would, and therefore we are much undervalued. Perhaps you have heard of the Doones, my child?”

To me it was a wonder that he spoke of them thus, for his look was of beautiful mildness, instead of any just condemnation. But his aspect was as if he came from heaven; and I thought that he had a hard job before him, if he were sent to conduct the Doones thither.

“I am not severe; I think well of mankind,” he went on, as I looked at him meekly; “perhaps because I am one of them. You are very young, my dear, and unable to form much opinion as yet. But let it be your rule of life ever to keep an open mind.”

This advice impressed me much, though I could not see clearly what it meant. But the sun was going beyond Exmoor now, and safe as I felt with so good an old man, a long, lonely walk was before me. So I took up my basket and rose to depart, saying, “Good-bye, sir; I am much in your debt for your excellent advice and kindness.”

He looked at me most benevolently, and whatever may be said of him hereafter, I shall always believe that he was a good man, overcome perhaps by circumstances, yet trying to make the best of them. He has now become a by-word as a hypocrite and a merciless self-seeker. But many young people, who met him as I did, without possibility of prejudice, hold a larger opinion of him. And surely young eyes are the brightest.

“I will protect thee, my dear,” he said, looking capable in his great width and wisdom of protecting all the host of heaven. “I have protected a maiden even more beautiful than thou art. But now she hath unwisely fled from us. Our young men are thoughtless, but they are not violent, at least until they are sadly provoked. Your father was a brave man, and much to be esteemed. My brother, the mildest man that ever lived, hath ridden down hundreds of Roundheads with him. Therefore thou shalt come to no harm. But he should not have fallen upon our young men as if they were rabble of the Commonwealth.”

Upon these words I looked at him I know not how, so great was the variance betwixt my ears and eyes. Then I tried to say something, but nothing would come, so entire was my amazement.

“Such are the things we have ever to contend with,” he continued, as if to himself, with a smile of compassion at my prejudice. “Nay, I am not angry; I have seen so much of this. Right and wrong stand fast, and cannot be changed by any facundity. But time is short, and will soon be stirring. Have a backway from thy bedroom, child. I am Councillor Doone; by birthright and in right of understanding, the captain of that pious family, since the return of the good Sir Ensor to the land where there are no lies. So long as we are not molested in our peaceful valley, my will is law; and I have ordered that none shall go near thee. But a mob of country louts are drilling in a farmyard up the moorlands, to plunder and destroy us, if they can. We shall make short work of them. But after that, our youths may be provoked beyond control, and sally forth to make reprisal. They have their eyes on thee, I know, and thy father hath assaulted us. An ornament to our valley thou wouldst be; but I would reproach myself if the daughter of my brother’s friend were discontented with our life. Therefore have I come to warn thee, for there are troublous times in front. Have a backway from thy bedroom, child, and slip out into the wood if a noise comes in the night.”

Before I could thank him, he strode away, with a step of no small dignity, and as he raised his pointed hat, the western light showed nothing fairer or more venerable than the long wave of his silver locks.

CHAPTER IV A COTTAGE HOSPITAL

Master Pring was not much of a man to talk. But for power of thought he was considered equal to any pair of other men, and superior of course to all womankind. Moreover, he had seen a good deal of fighting, not among outlaws, but fine soldiers well skilled in the proper style of it. So that it was impossible for him to think very highly of the Doones. Gentlemen they might be, he said, and therefore by nature well qualified to fight. But where could they have learned any discipline, any tactics, any knowledge of formation, or even any skill of sword or firearms? "Tush, there was his own son, Bob, now serving under Captain Purvis, as fine a young trooper as ever drew sword, and perhaps on his way at this very moment, under orders from the Lord Lieutenant, to rid the country of that pestilent race. Ah, ha! We soon shall see!"

And in truth we did see him, even sooner than his own dear mother had expected, and long before his father wanted him, though he loved him so much in his absence. For I heard a deep voice in the kitchen one night (before I was prepared for such things, by making a backway out of my bedroom), and thinking it best to know the worst, went out to ask what was doing there.

A young man was sitting upon the table, accounting too little of our house, yet showing no great readiness to boast, only to let us know who he was. He had a fine head of curly hair, and spoke with a firm conviction that there was much inside it. "Father, you have possessed small opportunity of seeing how we do things now. Mother is not to be blamed for thinking that we are in front of what used to be. What do we care how the country lies? We have heared all this stuff up at Oare. If there are bogs, we shall timber them. If there are rocks, we shall blow them up. If there are caves, we shall fire down them. The moment we get our guns into position –"

"Hush, Bob, hush! Here is your master's daughter. Not the interlopers you put up with; but your real master, on whose property you were born. Is that the position for your guns?"

Being thus rebuked by his father, who was a very faithful-minded man, Robert Pring shuffled his long boots down, and made me a low salutation. But, having paid little attention to the things other people were full of, I left the young man to convince his parents, and he soon was successful with his mother.

Two, or it may have been three days after this, a great noise arose in the morning. I was dusting my father's books, which lay open just as he had left them. There was "Barker's Delight" and "Isaac Walton," and the "Secrets of Angling by J. D." and some notes of his own about making of flies; also fish hooks made of Spanish steel, and long hairs pulled from the tail of a gray horse, with spindles and bits of quill for plaiting them. So proud and so pleased had he been with these trifles, after the clamour and clash of life, that tears came into my eyes once more, as I thought of his tranquil and amiable ways.

"'Tis a wrong thing altogether to my mind," cried Deborah Pring, running in to me. "They Doones was established afore we come, and why not let them bide upon their own land? They treated poor master amiss, beyond denial; and never will I forgive them for it. All the same, he was catching what belonged to them; meaning for the best no doubt, because he was so righteous. And having such courage he killed one, or perhaps two; though I never could have thought so much of that old knife. But ever since that, they have been good, Miss Sillie, never even coming anigh us; and I don't believe half of the tales about them."

All this was new to me; for if anybody had cried shame and death upon that wicked horde, it was Deborah Pring, who was talking to me thus! I looked at her with wonder, suspecting for the moment that the venerable Councillor – who was clever enough to make a cow forget her calf – might have paid her a visit while I was away. But very soon the reason of the change appeared.

“Who hath taken command of the attack?” she asked, as if no one would believe the answer; “not Captain Purvis, as ought to have been, nor even Captain Dallas of Devon, but Spy Stickles by royal warrant, the man that hath been up to Oare so long! And my son Robert, who hath come down to help to train them, and understandeth cannon guns – ”

“Captain Purvis? I seem to know that name very well. I have often heard it from my father. And your son under him! Why, Deborah, what are you hiding from me?”

Now good Mrs. Pring was beginning to forget, or rather had never borne properly in mind, that I was the head of the household now, and entitled to know everything, and to be asked about it. But people who desire to have this done should insist upon it at the outset, which I had not been in proper state to do. So that she made quite a grievance of it, when I would not be treated as a helpless child. However, I soon put a stop to that, and discovered to my surprise much more than could be imagined.

And before I could say even half of what I thought, a great noise arose in the hollow of the hills, and came along the valleys, like the blowing of a wind that had picked up the roaring of mankind upon its way. Perhaps greater noise had never arisen upon the moor; and the cattle, and the quiet sheep, and even the wild deer came bounding from unsheltered places into any offering of branches, or of other heling from the turbulence of men. And then a gray fog rolled down the valley, and Deborah said it was cannon-smoke, following the river course; but to me it seemed only the usual thickness of the air, when the clouds hang low. Thomas Pring was gone, as behooved an ancient warrior, to see how his successors did things, and the boy Dick Hutchings had begged leave to sit in a tree and watch the smoke. Deborah and I were left alone, and a long and anxious day we had.

At last the wood-pigeons had stopped their cooing, – which they kept up for hours, when the weather matched the light, – and there was not a tree that could tell its own shadow, and we were contented with the gentle sounds that come through a forest when it falls asleep, and Deborah Pring, who had taken a motherly tendency toward me now, as if to make up for my father, was sitting in the porch with my hands in her lap, and telling me how to behave henceforth, as if the whole world depended upon that, when we heard a swishing sound, as of branches thrust aside, and then a low moan that went straight to my heart, as I thought of my father when he took the blow of death.

“My son, my Bob, my eldest boy!” cried Mistress Pring, jumping up and falling into my arms, like a pillow full of wire, for she insisted upon her figure still. But before I could do anything to help her —

“Hit her on the back, ma’am; hit her hard upon the back. That is what always brings mother round,” was shouted, as I might say, into my ear by the young man whom she was lamenting.

“Shut thy trap, Braggadose. To whom art thou speaking? Pretty much thou hast learned of war to come and give lessons to thy father! Mistress Sylvia, it is for thee to speak. Nothing would satisfy this young springal but to bring his beaten captain here, for the sake of mother’s management. I told un that you would never take him in, for his father have taken in you pretty well! Captain Purvis of the Somerset I know not what – for the regiments now be all upside down. *Raggiments* is the proper name for them. Very like he be dead by this time, and better die out of doors than in. Take un away, Bob. No hospital here!”

“Thomas Pring, who are you,” I said, for the sound of another low groan came through me, “to give orders to your master’s daughter? If you bring not the poor wounded gentleman in, you shall never come through this door yourself.”

“Ha, old hunks, I told thee so!”

The young man who spoke raised his hat to me, and I saw that it had a scarlet plume, such as Marwood de Wichehalse gloried in. “In with thee, and stretch him that he may die straight. I am off to Southmolton for Cutcliffe Lane, who can make a furze-fagot bloom again. My filly can give a land-yard in a mile to Tom Faggus and his Winnie. But mind one thing, all of you; it was none of us that shot the captain, but his own good men. Farewell, Mistress Sylvia!” With these words he made

me a very low bow, and set off for his horse at the corner of the wood – as reckless a gallant as ever broke hearts, and those of his own kin foremost; yet himself so kind and loving.

CHAPTER V

MISTAKEN AIMS

Captain Purvis, now brought to the Warren in this very sad condition, had not been shot by his own men, as the dashing Marwood de Wichehalse said; neither was it quite true to say that he had been shot by anyone. What happened to him was simply this: While behaving with the utmost gallantry and encouraging the militia of Somerset, whose uniforms were faced with yellow, he received in his chest a terrific blow from the bottom of a bottle. This had been discharged from a culverin on the opposite side of the valley by the brave but impetuous sons of Devon, who wore the red facings, and had taken umbrage at a pure mistake on the part of their excellent friends and neighbours, the loyal band of Somerset. Either brigade had three culverins; and never having seen such things before, as was natural with good farmers' sons, they felt it a compliment to themselves to be intrusted with such danger, and resolved to make the most of it. However, when they tried to make them go, with the help of a good many horses, upon places that had no roads for war, and even no sort of road at all, the difficulty was beyond them. But a very clever blacksmith near Malmesford, who had better, as it proved, have stuck to the plough, persuaded them that he knew all about it, and would bring their guns to bear, if they let him have his way. So they took the long tubes from their carriages, and lashed rollers of barked oak under them, and with very stout ropes, and great power of swearing, dragged them into the proper place to overwhelm the Doones.

Here they mounted their guns upon cider barrels, with allowance of roll for recoil, and charged them to the very best of their knowledge, and pointed them as nearly as they could guess at the dwellings of the outlaws in the glen; three cannons on the north were of Somerset, and the three on the south were of Devonshire; but these latter had no balls of metal, only anything round they could pick up. Colonel Stickle was in command, by virtue of his royal warrant, and his plan was to make his chief assault in company with some chosen men, including his host, young farmer Ridd, at the head of the valley where the chief entrance was, while the trainbands pounded away on either side. And perhaps this would have succeeded well, except for a little mistake in firing, for which the enemy alone could be blamed with justice. For while Captain Purvis was behind the line rallying a few men who showed fear, and not expecting any combat yet, because Devonshire was not ready, an elderly gentleman of great authority appeared among the bombardiers. On his breast he wore a badge of office, and in his hat a noble plume of the sea eagle, and he handed his horse to a man in red clothes.

"Just in time," he shouted; "and the Lord be thanked for that! By order of His Majesty, I take supreme command. Ha, and high time, too, for it! You idiots, where are you pointing your guns? What allowance have you made for windage? Why, at that elevation, you'll shoot yourselves. Up with your muzzles, you yellow jackanapes! Down on your bellies! Hand me the linstock! By the Lord, you don't even know how to touch them off!"

The soldiers were abashed at his rebukes, and glad to lie down on their breasts for fear of the powder on their yellow facings. And thus they were shaken by three great roars, and wrapped in a cloud of streaky smoke. When this had cleared off, and they stood up, lo! the houses of the Doones were the same as before, but a great shriek arose on the opposite bank, and two good horses lay on the ground; and the red men were stamping about, and some crossing their arms, and some running for their lives, and the bravest of them stooping over one another. Then as Captain Purvis rushed up in great wrath, shouting: "What the devil do you mean by this?" another great roar arose from across the valley, and he was lying flat, and two other fine fellows were rolling in a furze bush without knowledge of it. But of the general and his horse there was no longer any token.

This was the matter that lay so heavily on the breast of Captain Purvis, sadly crushed as it was already by the spiteful stroke bitterly intended for him. His own men had meant no harm whatever, unless to the proper enemy; although they appear to have been deluded by a subtle device of the

Councillor, for which on the other hand none may blame him. But those redfaced men, without any inquiry, turned the muzzles of their guns upon Somerset, and the injustice rankled for a generation between two equally honest counties. Happily they did not fight it out through scarcity of ammunition, as well as their mutual desire to go home and attend to their harvest business.

But Anthony Purvis, now our guest and patient, became very difficult to manage; not only because of his three broken ribs, but the lowness of the heart inside them. Dr. Cutcliffe Lane, a most cheerful man from that cheerful town Southmolton, was able (with the help of Providence) to make the bones grow again without much anger into their own embraces. It is useless, however, for the body to pretend that it is doing wonders on its own account, and rejoicing and holiday making, when the thing that sits inside it and holds the whip, keeps down upon the slouch and is out of sorts. And truly this was the case just now with the soul of Captain Purvis. Deborah Pring did her very best, and was in and out of his room every minute, and very often seemed to me to run him down when he deserved it not; on purpose that I might be started to run him up. But nothing of that sort told at all according to her intention. I kept myself very much to myself; feeling that my nature was too kind, and asking at some little questions of behaviour, what sort of returns my dear father had obtained for supposing other people as good as himself.

Moreover, it seemed an impossible thing that such a brave warrior, and a rich man too – for his father, Sir Geoffrey, was in full possession now of all the great property that belonged by right to us – that an officer who should have been in command of this fine expedition, if he had his dues, could be either the worse or the better of his wound, according to his glimpses of a simple maid like me. It was useless for Deborah Pring, or even Dr. Cutcliffe Lane himself, to go on as they did about love at first sight, and the rising of the heart when the ribs were broken, and a quantity of other stuff too foolish to repeat. “I am neither a plaster nor a poultice,” I replied to myself, for I would not be too cross to them – and beyond a little peep at him, every afternoon, I kept out of the sight of Captain Purvis.

But these things made it very hard for me to be quite sure how to conduct myself, without father and mother to help me, and with Mistress Pring, who had always been such a landmark, becoming no more than a vane for the wind to blow upon as it listed; or, perhaps, as she listed to go with it. And remembering how she used to speak of the people who had ousted us, I told her that I could not make it out. Things were in this condition, and Captain Purvis, as it seemed to me, quite fit to go and make war again upon some of His Majesty’s subjects, when a thing, altogether out of reason, or even of civilisation, happened; and people who live in lawful parts will accuse me of caring too little for the truth. But even before that came about, something less unreasonable – but still unexpected – befell me. To wit, I received through Mistress Pring an offer of marriage, immediate and pressing, from Captain Anthony Purvis! He must have been sadly confused by that blow on his heart to think mine so tender, or that this was the way to deal with it, though later explanations proved that Deborah, if she had been just, would have taken the whole reproach upon herself. The captain could scarcely have seen me, I believe more than half a dozen times to speak of; and generally he had shut his eyes, gentle as they were and beautiful; not only to make me feel less afraid, but to fill me with pity for his weakness. Having no knowledge of mankind as yet, I was touched to the brink of tears at first; until when the tray came out of his room soon after one of these pitiful moments, it was plain to the youngest comprehension that the sick man had left very little upon a shoulder of Exmoor mutton, and nothing in a bowl of thick onion sauce.

For that I would be the last to blame him, and being his hostess, I was glad to find it so. But Deborah played a most double-minded part; leading him to believe that now she was father and mother in one to me; while to me she went on, as if I was most headstrong, and certain to go against anything she said, though for her part she never said anything. Nevertheless he made a great mistake, as men always do, about our ways; and having some sense of what is right, I said, “Let me hear no more of Captain Purvis.”

This forced him to leave us; which he might have done, for aught I could see to the contrary, a full week before he departed. He behaved very well when he said good-bye, – for I could not deny him that occasion, – and, perhaps, if he had not assured me so much of his everlasting gratitude, I should have felt surer of deserving it. Perhaps I was a little disappointed also, that he expressed no anxiety at leaving our cottage so much at the mercy of turbulent and triumphant outlaws. But it was not for me to speak of that; and when I knew the reason of his silence, it redounded tenfold to his credit. Nothing, however, vexed me so much as what Deborah Pring said afterward: that he could not help feeling in the sadness of his heart that I had behaved in that manner to him just because his father was in possession of our rightful home and property. I was not so small as that; and if he truly did suppose it, there must have been some fault on my part, for his nature was good to everybody, and perhaps all the better for not descending through too many high generations.

There is nothing more strange than the way things work in the mind of a woman, when left alone, to doubt about her own behaviour. With men it can scarcely be so cruel; because they can always convince themselves that they did their best; and if it fail, they can throw the fault upon Providence, or bad luck, or something outside their own power. But we seem always to be denied this happy style of thinking, and cannot put aside what comes into our hearts more quickly, and has less stir of outward things, to lead it away and to brighten it. So that I fell into sad, low spirits; and the glory of the year began to wane, and the forest grew more and more lonesome.

CHAPTER VI OVER THE BRIDGE

The sound of the woods was with me now, both night and day, to dwell upon. Exmoor in general is bare of trees, though it hath the name of forest; but in the shelter, where the wind flies over, are many thick places full of shade. For here the trees and bushes thrive, so copious with rich moisture that, from the hills on the opposite side, no eye may pick holes in the umbrage; neither may a foot that gets amid them be sure of getting out again. And now was the fullest and heaviest time, for the summer had been a wet one, after a winter that went to our bones; and the leaves were at their darkest tone without any sense of autumn. As one stood beneath and wondered at their countless multitude, a quick breathing passed among them, not enough to make them move, but seeming rather as if they wished, and yet were half ashamed to sigh. And this was very sad for one whose spring comes only once for all.

One night toward the end of August I was lying awake thinking of the happier times, and wondering what the end would be – for now we had very little money left, and I would rather starve than die in debt – when I heard our cottage door smashed in and the sound of horrible voices. The roar of a gun rang up the stairs, and the crash of someone falling and the smoke came through my bedroom door, and then wailing mixed with curses. “Out of the way, old hag!” I heard, and then another shriek; and then I stood upon the stairs and looked down at them. The moon was shining through the shattered door, and the bodies and legs of men went to and fro, like branches in a tempest. Nobody seemed to notice me, although I had cast over my night-dress – having no more sense in the terror – a long silver coat of some animal shot by my father in his wanderings, and the light upon the stairs glistened round it. Having no time to think, I was turning to flee and jump out of my bedroom window, for which I had made some arrangements, according to the wisdom of the Councillor, when the flash of some light or the strain of my eyes showed me the body of Thomas Pring, our faithful old retainer, lying at the foot of the broken door, and beside it his good wife, creeping up to give him the last embrace of death. And lately she had been cross to him. At the sight of this my terror fled, and I cared not what became of me. Buckling the white skin round my waist, I went down the stairs as steadily as if it were breakfast time, and said:

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