

**HENRY
BRERETON
WATSON**

THE HIGH TOBY

Henry Watson
The High Toby

«Public Domain»

Watson H.

The High Toby / H. Watson — «Public Domain»,

© Watson H.

© Public Domain

Содержание

UNDER THE MOON	6
THE DRAPER'S NIECE	14
MISS AND MY LADY	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

H. B. Marriott Watson
The High Toby / Being further chapters
in the life and fortunes of Dick /
Ryder, otherwise Galloping Dick,
sometime gentleman of the / road

To J. M. BARRIE

My Dear Barrie,—It is all but twenty years since we were first acquainted, for if we live till the spring of 1908, our friendship will have reached its majority. Of those far-off days I cherish, as I believe you do, a grateful memory. How many problems had we to discuss, how many ideals had we to satisfy, and how much ambition had we to fulfil! I think you, at least, have gone far to fulfil all yours, who have written your name indelibly in the literature of our generation. That name I am, after the long lapse of years, prefixing to this book of stories, in the hope that they will interest you, and as a testimony to the enduring quality of our friendship.

Yours always,

H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON.

January 1906

UNDER THE MOON

I ever had the name of one that kept to himself, nor was bedfellow to none upon the high toby. 'Tis true enough that I have mixed in one or two affairs with others of my kidney, but these were mainly in my heady youth and when I was raw upon the pad, and the issues for the more part were against me. For one, there was that business with Creech about the King's treasure chests, the which came near to hanging of us all through that toad, Timothy Grubbe. Indeed, I have never cared to participate in any act that was not of my own devising, and there was none on the road that I would ha' pinned my faith on—no, not even old Jeremy Starbottle, that was hanged afore my time. For this reason it was that I was used to avoid the Portsmouth Road, which, being so greatly traversed, and so set with wastes and wilds, was pretty much in favour with our gentry. I was often in the West, where my chief quarry lay, or the North Road was that on which I beat; but, Lord! there was no point nor parcel of these shires that knew me not at one time or another, and I warrant I kept the officers all over the country a-jigging. Yet I was once took for an affair near Petersfield, and swore not to touch that road again, but to leave it to the scurvy tiddlers that hold it. I came back, however, once after, and that was upon a late December night, and when the moon was shining and the sky alight and glistening.

I had rode across from Alton with two bottles of good wine under my jacket, and a pocket of gold guineas, and I was trotting across Witley Common whistling of an air, very merry, and with no thought but to come by town the easier, lying maybe by Guildford that night in a cosy private tavern that I knew. Some imp of mischief shook me up and cozened me that night, for I had no intent in the world but to walk like a plain citizen or any talking parson. Yet what happens but this—that I, like a sorry fool, spying of a coach that was running down from the hills with a great clatter, and two postilions before, set up a cry and a hulloa, and ere they or Dick Ryder himself was aware of what he would do, why Calypso was alongside, I had gotten the reins in my hands, and the nose of my pistol was through the window.

The body of that coach trembled under a concussion of someone that threw himself about within, but there came a voice on that.

"Stay, Nick, you fool, and let's guess at where we are."

"Sdeath," says another voice, "I will run this fellow through."

"Young man," says I, seeing the moon shine clear upon his face as he peered through the window, "you know not with whom ye are dealing. Heaven rest the soul of them that withstand Dick Ryder!"

At that the other man puts his head to the window also and looks out.

"Oh," says he, in a quiet voice, "so this is Captain Ryder! I ha' heard some talk of you, Captain; your name has travelled."

"Why, yes," said I, laughing, for this was no news to me; "you will find it from the Quantocks to the Humber, and that with a significance. I tell you, sirs, that Ryder spells terror to those that he chooses."

"Well, then," says the second gentleman, eyeing me queerly, "we are now to learn if Captain Ryder does so choose with us poor devils."

"Stab me!" cries t'other, who was a hot young blood, "I will snick the rogue through, Ivory."

"You will do nothing of the like, Nick," says he, sharply. "Would ye peril our precious lives? Hear ye not that I have some inkling of this gentleman's repute? Gad, I would keep my skin sound, so I would;" and turning to me he smiled pleasantly, beckoning away my pistol that was still directed on the window.

"We are at your mercy, Captain," said he, coolly. "What prize guess you that you have taken?"

"Why," said I, "I give not a goat for prize or no prize. I do what I list, and 'tis my whim to catch a pair of fine cocks thus."

"Well," says he to the other, "I see we must needs open our pockets. I thank Heaven that 'twas you won from me this evening; so I shall lose the less."

He was a tall fellow was this one, with a fair wig and two cold eyes, and he spoke in an equable fashion, with neither a smile nor a frown upon him. Yet he had clearly a command of the other, who prepared to empty his pockets. This set me thinking.

"What," says I to myself, "is amiss with this game cock that he will not venture his spurs?" and I looked sharply on him.

"Captain Ryder," says he, very deliberate, "there is on our bodies, as I assure you as a gentleman, but ten poor guineas, scant alms for this great office of yours, as I will admit."

"Deliver," said I. "'Twill serve me for some madam in town as well as you."

"That is very true, Ryder," said he, bending his golden eyebrows at me. "Yet consider this. Behind these fine apparels no doubt you will say there is a stout purse somewhere. Ay, so it is. We are upon our way to Godalming, where we lie at the Angel. What! D'ye suppose that any gentleman of the Court would travel abroad so ill provided?"

"What does this mean?" I asked bluntly, looking at both, but very wary; for I trusted him not.

"Look ye, Captain," he answered, showing his teeth, "I am in want of some such brave fellow as yourself, and you shall choose between two courses—whether to strip us of these few and paltry coins or to take service for a noble sum."

"There is some emprise you would do?" I asked surprised.

"Nay, a very easy task," said he, airily, "but one to be well paid, I warrant."

"What price would you put on this job?" said I, considering.

"I believe, Nick, there is one hundred guineas awaiting at the Angel, is't not?" said he, turning to his fellow.

He that was termed Nick nodded in a surly fashion.

"'Tis a nice round bag," said I, "and what should be done for this?" for I was sick of these approaches, and I liked him not.

"I have a runaway wife," says he, with a faint smile. "Faith, Captain, she is a madcap; she stalketh by day and by night, and she has taken wings from her dear husband. I would have you to unite us again."

I grinned on him, for I knew what this portended. "Sure this poor lady must be clipped, but where?" I asked.

"She rides from Midhurst," said he, "and doubtless will pass this way. I had intended with this friend, who is so kind to give me sympathy and his company—I had intended to have caught her myself and brought her to a meeting. But, Captain, you will understand my feelings. My emotions run. I am wax. She were best in your civil hands, that would not imbrue themselves in hasty deeds. You will soothe and dissuade her, I warrant, a man of your tongue. She needs but a sure hand and a cool heart, which I dare not promise. I am disaffected by my passion. I would use an instrument rather."

Again I corresponded with him in a grin, for I guessed at what fellow he was.

"This is very well," said I, "but by your leave I would learn what warranty have I of this payment."

"You have the honour of Sir Gilbert Avory," said he.

I knew him then for what he was, the greatest Cupid in the Court, and one that stood at no hazards to boot. There were tales of this Sir Gilbert, in sooth, upon every wench's tongue. But this was no business of mine.

"Very well," said I, "if 'tis a petticoat you are after I say no more. Faith, I have been about them myself, and I know no greater zest in a pursuit. 'Slife, your worship, I blame you not, and you shall come by your own."

"That is spoken with spirit," he answered, "and now there remains to set you on your quarry. The coach has a green body, and the lady—my lady that is—is crowned with a mass of red hair."

"There was never a nut," said I, "given Dick Ryder but he cracked it i' the jaw."

"Then," says he, smiling civilly out of his broad face, "we have your leave to depart."

"Go in Heaven's name," said I, laughing, "and if I get not those hundred guineas, call me catchpole."

With that I drew off, and the coach rolled away, disappearing into the shining distance; but I rode back a little distance until I had come to the Half Moon tavern in the middle of that wilderness. Here I sat for an hour or more, hob-a-nobbing with the landlord, and drinking of mulled wine to keep me warm. There was no sound upon the roads in all that time, so that I had grown to fear Sir Gilbert was mistaken, and that the lady was gone another way. A little on eleven, however, there comes a sound from far away, and the landlord sets his ear to the door.

"'Tis a coach," says he, "and they drive fast."

"They have a need," said I, with a yawn, "for 'tis growing late enough, and indeed, 'tis time I was upon my road." With which I called on the ostler for Calypso. By the time I was in the saddle, and standing ready before the tavern in that great open space of the woods, the coach had rolled up and fled past into the night with a huge clamour and the groaning of axles and shrieking of postilions. But in that glimpse of the lights I had seen that the body was of a greenish colour.

I pulled Calypso out on the highway, therefore, and, taking to my pistols, set her to canter sharply across the waste. The coach was flying like a frightened pigeon, and the lights dwindled afore me, shaking and rocking as they ran. But I was in no hurry, and fetched the mare nearer, keeping her at an even distance. Then it seemed that some suspicion took them, for the moonlight struck full upon me, throwing me out like a black shadow a-riding on them. So the postilions heightened their pace, plying their whips, and when that would not serve, they began to call out, and turned the horses from the highway upon a track that ran among vast and sombre pines. I cried to them to halt, but the fools only increased their terror and their efforts, and the big coach lurched and rumbled over the rough ground, crashing among the branches of the firs, while the horses galloped and leaped in a panic. I put spurs to the mare and went after them, cautiously enough, for the road was darkened by the trees about it. Yet I drew nigh foot by foot, being in no haste, for the wretches knew not whither they rushed. And presently I heard a woman's voice calling angrily and calling loudly, and then there was a stream of oaths from the postboys mingled with some shrill screaming. I came out at that instant from the cover of the firs, and there before me was the coach, sunk to its axles in a marshy place such as are thereabouts, with the devil of a commotion in progress.

"What ado is this?" I cried, coming up and pulling in the nag. But at that the screaming began again, and one of the postboys levelled a pistol at me. "Put up that toy," said I, sharply, "or by the Lord I will let light in your brains, you numbskull."

"Jerry, do as the gentleman bids you," said a woman's voice out of the coach, and looking in I saw plain enough that I had here what I wanted. She was a slim-bodied girl with a great canopy of guinea-coloured hair, her bosom moved quickly for all her brave voice. But that gave me a kindly sense of her.

"Who are you?" she says boldly enough, while the maid was still whimpering by her.

"Bless those red lips," says I, "but who should I be save one attracted by your distress who is come to help you?" She regarded me doubtfully. "Come," I went on, "let me give you a hand, mistress, for that pretty face will ere long kiss the mud else, which is no business for it."

She shrank away, but I took hold on her. "Come, come," said I, "by your leave, pretty miss."

She trembled, but she kept her face. "I will give you what you wish," she answered. "Put no finger upon me. Here is my purse. You would not rob my maid."

"'Tis not your purse I want," said I, laughing, "but your person, my dear."

"Oh," she cried out in alarm; and then, "Had not these cravens refused my commands we should be galloping into Milford and not thus at your mercy."

"I would ha' gone, not only to Milford, but to the gallows, for that sweet face," I said, bowing.

"What would you do with me?" she asked, now all of a flutter. "Know you not that I am Mrs Barbara Crawford, wife to Mr Crawford of Grebe?"

"Fie!" said I, laughing at her. "I would be ashamed at your years to talk so! What does a chit like you know of wives?"

She turned red, and then suddenly white, as I haled her from the coach, struggling with me like a vixen.

"Fire, Jerry, fire," she cried; but the lout was too frightened, and so I flung her before me on Calypso, and, with a discharge of my pistol through Jerry's hat as he fumbled with his blunderbuss, which set up a new alarm, I got out of the marsh swiftly, and was soon striking through the firs towards Milford.

This Mrs Barbara, as she called herself, wrestled like Satan, but presently came to be quiet, and, says she, in a cool voice,—

"I would sit up. Fear not; you have done your will with me."

"There is spirit in this wench," said I, and I fetched her up on the mare's crupper, where she sat, gaping out into the night.

"You go by blind ways," said she next. "This is not the road."

"Why," said I, "no, or that dulcet voice of yours would call louder than I like. You may squeal, my pretty," says I, "but you are bound upon what path your legs should go."

"And what path is that?" she asked soberly.

"'Tis where all women walk," I answered with a chuckle. "They know the road. I have seen 'em ride that way in troops."

"You have a generous knowledge of the sex," says she after a pause.

"I ha' been in many circumstances," said I, "and I know a stark wench—also, mark ye, I know when one kicks that would be fain."

"I think you mistake me, sir," said she with dignity. "But whither are we set?"

"What you shall see that you shall see," said I, lightly, for I had an acquaintance with women and knew what way was best to take them.

"Sir," says she to me on that, "I have no doubt that you are a man of honour."

"Ay, so it is there you would tickle me?" I cried, laughing. "Gadzooks, so I am, and one to keep my word whenever it is given."

"Then 'tis given against me?" she said, after a moment's silence, and very gravely.

"Faith, but you talk too much," I cried, in an irritation at her persistence. "You shall neither cajole nor trick me, and that's plain enough for you. I have shut my ears afore to many pleading tongues that wagged in dainty mouths. You are none so sweet as to dissuade me, madam, fair though you be."

She was silent again for a time, and then she spoke bitterly. "Ay," said she, "yet 'tis my fairness that has pulled this ruin upon me."

"Why, you gabble of ruin," said I, with a sneer, "as one that wears the buskin. I warrant there is that in you that knows well enough and laments not. I care not what ye think or what ye wish. You shall do my will and no other."

She made no answer, and now we were come to a hamlet upon the back parts of Milford, where a stream ran under a bridgeway and by high cliffs. 'Twas a place called Eashing. Here was an inn that I had once visited, with an old goose-neck for a landlord, and, taking pity on Mrs Barbara (if she were so called) and her white face, I stopped before the door and, demanding to be shown into a privy room, led her thither.

"You will have a glass of wine against your faintness," said I, quickly, "but I will have no speaking. Raise your voice and you shall learn the worst, and what it is to offend Dick Ryder."

She said nothing, but sat very still and pallid, watching me with fluttering eyes; nor would she take the wine I ordered.

"Drink, my little cockatrice," said I, with command, and on that she sipped at the liquor, making a pretence.

A little after comes the innkeeper, and, staring on us, beckons me forth with his finger. I stepped into the passage wondering what game this might be, when says he, suddenly,—

"I recognise you, Captain. Yonder are fine feathers. A precious morsel you ha' gotten somewhere," says he.

"Oh, damn your words," says I. "D'ye suppose I left my home to hear this muck?"

"No, Captain," says he, lowering his voice, "but there has been a pother on the heaths this past week, and the traps are about. There is one or more in the room behind you."

At that I whistled and thanked him. "I will put the wine in my gullet and mizzle," said I, not that I cared for the traps, but 'twas safer for the aim I was making. So I was not three minutes ere I was in the saddle with the girl as before, and we were riding amain for Godalming.

"You ride hard, sir," said she, presently; and when I made no answer, for to say the truth I wanted no more of her voice, and the job for the first time disaffected me, "I think I should say," she went on quietly, "that when you were with the taverner there was one looked in upon me from a further room."

"Why d'ye say this?" I asked abruptly.

"He was well armed," says she, "and there was another with him. I had but to raise my finger," she says quietly.

"Why did you not?" I asked in a surprise.

"I knew nought of them," she answered; "and I know this of you, that you are more honest than you seem, sir."

At that I laughed, though I will confess the wench took me by her talk, pretty parrot. "Well, you must know," I said, "that those were the officers of the law who watched you, and they would ha' been glad to lay hands on Dick Ryder."

"It may be," she replied thoughtfully. "But I regret not. There is that in your face I would rather trust."

At that I pulled in Calypso. "Look you!" said I, "who are you, and what do you here? I can get no ease of this puzzle. Are ye maid, saint or sinner?"

"Nay, but I am wife and maid, sir," says she, her face deepening with colour; "I am the Mistress Barbara Crawford, that was wed this day at Midhurst."

"What!" cried I, "you are wed this day!"

"Indeed," says she, "'tis so; and now am I stolen away and like to be no longer what I am."

"Where is your husband?" I asked sharply, fixing her with my eyes.

"He was called away almost ere the marriage was finished," she answered distressfully. "There was news brought of his father's illness, and he rode off. Yet was he to meet me this night at Guildford."

For a moment I was silent, for there leaped into my mind a notion of what that rogue, Sir Gilbert Avory, was about, and then—for the creature drew me compassionately, and she was but a chick for all her steady face,—

"By Heaven," says I, "but this is to go beyond me. I spoil no proper sport, not I; and you and your husband sup together to-night, I promise you, so shall ye."

She looked at me somewhat startled, but with a glow of colour on her face.

"I knew you were true, I knew you were true," said she, repeating it, and seizing of my hand.

"Oh, faugh," says I, "I am well enough," for it irked me to think for what I had taken her all along.

"Will you tell me," she asked in a hesitating voice, "who was it that put you to this?"

"You are welcome to that," I returned bluntly. "'Twas Sir Gilbert Avory himself."

She sighed. "So I had guessed," she said. "He has persecuted me a full year, and no doubt 'twas he that drew off my husband."

That, as I knew, was like enough, but there was no time to fall discussing of Mr Crawford nor Sir Gilbert neither. The hour was late and we must be pushing.

"You will take me back?" says she, softly.

I broke out laughing. "Lord no!" says I. "Bless your bobbing heart, d'ye think you will find the coach still a-sticking in the mud?"

"You will ride then to Guildford?" she asked with some diffidence, and regarding me beseechingly. "'Twould try your generosity to do this for me."

"Ay," said I, "we ride for Guildford, but by way of Godalming."

"What!" she cried, stricken with fear, "you would carry me where that man lies!"

"'Twas that very maggot was in my head, mistress," I said; for indeed I had taken a notion to have the laugh of this same smiling *beau*.

She clasped her hands, and would have appealed to me, but I broke in sharply on that silly pate. "Faith, you must render yourself to me, or I will none of it. I make my plans and so abide. You shall come off with a sound skin, and cry 'pap' to your husband. Have no fears."

To this soothing she said nothing, and presently we resumed our journey, and, getting into the town, pulled up afore the Angel. It was now close upon midnight, and there was but one light in the inn, which shone from a room above. Mrs Barbara looked on me in alarm when she saw this, but she still said nothing. As for me, I left the mare standing—a trick she was used to—and pressed up the stairway with the girl. It was not my design to seek Sir Gilbert Avory for the nonce, as I had other work to do; but, as it fell, the matter was taken out of my hands, for the man himself met us at the stair-head smiling and courteous.

"I give you welcome, madam," says he, bowing with ceremony. "There is a chamber all prepared for you, and a warming supper. You must ha' gotten a rare appetite with the winds."

She returned him no word, but shrank away towards me; and says he to me,—

"I fear my lady has lost her tongue i' the cold. You have had a rough journey; but 'tis well done. I swear the lady was never in more careful custody," and a little smile illumined his even features.

As we had come upon him there was nought to do save to make the best of the case, and though I will admit that at first I was put about I soon recovered my wits, and entered the chamber with him, whence the light shone, with some merry jest on my tongue.

Here was a table spread very generously, and some wine heating by the fire.

"By the Lord," said I, "I am fain of good liquor."

"You have earned it, Captain," says he, pouring forth a glass, but keeping his eyes on the girl.

I drained the glass. "And now," says I, "to business, Sir Gilbert."

"Ay, to business, sir," says he, and, with a gentle motion of his hands, he would have invited Mrs Barbara to an inner room. "These coarse facts are not for a lady, Ryder," says he.

"Seeing the lady is a main pawn in this business, by your leave she shall stay," said I, with a laugh.

"Why, yes," he says, controlling his lips into that little smile, "she is certainly of chief importance. But I would rather call her Queen, Captain."

"Call her what you will," said I, bluffly. "'Tis all you shall do with her, my master."

He turned slowly from considering her, and gazed on me quietly.

"Ha!" says he, without showing any perturbation, for he was a man of spirit, and he must have suspected that something was wrong. "Here we have a riddle for tobymen. What is the explanation, sirrah?"

"Very simple," said I, grinning at him. "I ha' made the lady's acquaintance, and ha' taken a fancy to her myself."

He raised his eyebrows, while he looked from one to the other of us, as though he would disentangle my real intention.

"I fear me you have been drinking, Ryder," said he, pleasantly.

"True," said I, "but none so deep as you think."

"Would you go back on your bargain?" he asked, bending his brows on me.

"Nay," said I, "I will take no unfair advantage of any man, huff or Bishop. We shall stand both of us where we stood, you and I."

"And where is that?" he asked as quietly as before.

"Upon the heath," I answered. "I had you under my hands, you and t'other, and there were ten guineas atween you, so ye said. Well," said I, "I will have those guineas and cry quits with you."

"Ten guineas, was it?" he says, considering—"ah, so 'twas. I would not cheat you, Captain Ryder," and smiling softly he drew a bag from his pocket. "I perceive you to be a man of honour," says he, equably. "I love to do business so! Sure, if there were more such at Court! Ten guineas, say you, Captain? Keep your tally," and he paid out the pictures on the table afore him.

I took them up with a nod, where I sat, but the girl, Mrs Barbara, watched us from the distance, standing with her arm resting upon a tall chair to support her.

"Then here's your good health, Sir Gilbert," said I, wondering what method he would take; for I was sure enough that he had a design against me.

"Now," says he, "we are quits, as you say; and that leaves us free, you to go your way, and me to ask the offices of the law to recover that which is stolen of me. Nick," cries he in a clear voice, and at the word the young fellow's nose was through the door. "An officer from the justice, Nick," he says. "I have been robbed," and smiled pleasantly in my face.

Now I will confess that this predicament had not occurred to me, for to say the truth, I had a thought that he would fall on me with his weapon, which I minded not, being as good a swordsman as ever any chamber knight in town. And on that astonishment followed also these sequels in my mind—that if so be he carried out the plan he had, I should not only go to the jug, but he would have the wife that was maid. This put me in a frenzy, yet I dared not attack him with Nick outside, and I knew not what other also. So, very quickly making my resolution, I broke out a-laughing, and said I,—

"You have me held, your worship, by Heaven you have. Yet I was but jesting. Am I a fool to peril a hundred guineas for a chitty face? Come, here are your ten guineas. Pay me down my price, and there stands your madam for you."

He cocked his eye on Mrs Barbara, smiling the while, as if pleased with his victory, but mightily civil.

"Madam," he says, "you will see that I have no responsibility in this insult. 'Tis the gentleman's manner, no doubt. I can but think myself fortunate to deliver you of his custody."

But she stood where she was, white and fearful, throwing her troubled eyes about; and part of her terror was no doubt feigned, but I think that in part it was earnest. She knew not, poor wretch, what I would be at.

But, Lord love you, I had no fears. "The hundred guineas," says I, "and I pray Mr Nick for witness," for I was resolved to get that young bantam into the room forthwith.

"Ho, Nick!" says Sir Gilbert, merrily. "Come in for a witness to me," and in steps that young and elegant ninny, looking very sour and sleepy. Sir Gilbert pulled out his bag and counted the money to me. "'Slife," says he, with a frown, "'tis like the thirty pieces," and then he shrugged his shoulders.

I took 'em up one by one, and with the very movement in which the last was taken to my pouch out slipped my sword, and,—

"Defend ye, defend ye," said I, "or I will run ye through. D'ye think to get even with Dick Ryder, you fool, you?"

Sir Gilbert started back and lugged out his iron, and Master Nick leaped forward.

"Let be, Nick, let be," says t'other. "The fellow shall have his way, devil take him! He shall feed the crows some way."

But in the course of my life I have never come upon any, save one, that was more than the match of Dick Ryder, and so he soon found. For he plied his point elegantly, but with no proper freedom; and presently down comes I with my favourite twist and took him through the left breast. He fell a-bleeding to the floor.

"Curse you!" he cried and gasped. But Nick then sprang at my throat with his weapon drawn; yet was I no such lambkin to be took unawares by such a raw smooth-face.

"What!" says I, "d'ye fancy that such as I will take thought to drill holes in veal? Not I, young master, not I," and dodging his point I drove the hilt of my rapier hard upon his forehead. He dropped like a shot partridge; and giving neither any further thought I turned to the lady.

"Fly!" says I, "down the stairway, mistress, for I have not a blink of wind more within me."

She ran in terror, and I clattered after her, being afraid lest the noise might have woke those in the inn. And so, indeed, it proved; for when we were got into the road, where Calypso stood, a commotion broke out behind us, and I heard Sir Gilbert's voice raised in angry oaths. 'Twas the work of a moment to set the lady on the mare and to leap after her. Calypso has carried heavier burdens than that, yet she has carried none so gallantly or so speedily. And thus it had grown to be scarce one o'clock in the morning on that frosty night when we reached Guildford in company, and drew up at the Red Lion.

THE DRAPER'S NIECE

'Twas late of night when I reached Wimbledon Common, out of the West, where I had been patrolling the roads for some two months or more, and with mighty little success, as it chanced that year. I love the West Country, not only because I have, as a rule, found there fat pockets jogging home untimely on a nag, or fine noblemen in rich chaises, very proud but tender to pick, but I have also a sentimental leaning towards that part, and that's the truth I will not deny. There is some that hanker after the Great North Road, and boast that there is no better toby-ground than 'twixt Stevenage and Grantham, while I have even known 'em to set up Finchley Common or Hounslow for choice. Old Irons, who never had much self-respect, and was not above turning common crib-cracker if it so served him, was wont to go no further than Finchley when he was lacking a goldfinch or two.

"Sink me!" says he in my presence once to the landlord of the King's Head, who spoke of his score there, "I will pay you to-morrow, and be hanged to you!" The which he did, sure enough, by a visit to Finchley and not so much as a charged pistol. That was never my way. I never could abide such sport. Give me a creditable fellow that shows fight and gives your wits some exercise. There's the true spirit in which to take the life of the road. I would not give a pint of mulled ale for it else.

But the West is after my heart, being big and populous and swarming with squires and comfortable warm folk. I know the North Road, and was once very well known there myself, and celebrated on the Yorkshire moors, a confounded cold, uncivil place. Indeed, there are few parts of the kingdom I have not traversed in my time. Well, I was newly out of the West that May night, but on this occasion in no very good humour, as you may imagine, when I say that I had been forced to leave a belt of guineas behind at Devizes—so close upon me were the traps. Indeed, I was very nearly taken in the night, all owing to the treachery of an innkeeper, roast him! 'Twas a fine, mild night, and I was for lying in Clerkenwell at a house I knew, but I had reached no further than Roehampton Lane, when of a sudden I reined in, for I remembered an inn there that I had sometimes used, and, to say the truth, I was thirsty.

"Well," thinks I, "maybe I will lie here and maybe not. I will let fortune decide," and I was turning the mare into the lane, when something comes up quick in the thick of the darkness, and rushes upon Calypso's rump.

The mare started and backed into the hedge, and I raised my voice and cursed, as you may guess.

"Why," says I, "you toad, you muckrake, you dung-fork—" and the Lord knows where I should ha' gotten to if a gleam of white in the blackness had not in that instant disclosed to me the blunderer. 'Twas a woman, or, at least, a slip so young and silly that maybe she should not be so styled; and I had no sooner made that out and ceased in the middle of my objurgations, than I made another discovery. It was her voice that did it, for no doubt she was mightily in terror, seeing me so wrathful and the night being so black and lonely.

"Oh, sir," she calls in a trembling voice, "I did not see—I—" and here she broke a-weeping.

Well, Dick Ryder is not the man to stand by while a pretty woman weeps (for I could have sworn she was pretty enough), and so down I popped off Calypso and approached her.

"Why," said I, "I love not to see a miss like you in tears, and as for my words, pray forget them. I thought you was some blundering, hulking bully that was meat for my bodkin, or my whip, if no more. But as it is," says I, "there's no more ado. So dry your eyes, my dear, for I am no ogre to eat pretty children."

"Oh," she says, with a gulp, "I was not afraid of you. I only feared I had angered you justly."

"Oh!" I said, trying for a look at her face in the darkness. "Why, I see you are a very brave girl, for sure. That I'll swear you are. And if those pearly drops be not for me, why, I should like to know what opened the wells, my dear? and then I will see if you have broken the mare's leg with

your onset, and get on to bed like any honest, sober man that leaves the witching hours to maids and misses and innocent children, as is only right and proper."

I do not suppose the girl took me, for women have but scant appreciation of irony, but she spoke glibly enough.

"I—I am thrown out into the night, sir!" she cries. "I have nowhere to go!"

Now you may imagine how this touched me, and what I felt; but she was innocent as a lamb and as foolish, as you might detect from her voice, to say nothing of her face, the which I saw later. So I considered a moment.

"That's just my case," said I. "And I was going to wake up some fat villain, to take me in and sup me. But," says I, "if you will find me the particular villain, fat or lean and cock or cockatrice, that has thrown out a ba-lamb like you, miss, well, 'tis he or she I will have awake and out, and something more beside, rip me if I don't!"

I had put her down as a child from her stature, which was small, and her body, which was slight, but I was to be undeceived in that presently.

"'Tis my uncle," she sobbed. "He has shut the door on me. He will not let me in. He vows he has done with me."

"Maybe," said I, "he has some cause for his anger. But uncles are not hard masters even to young misses that know not the world nor their own minds."

"Nay," she says, "he has a reason for his anger, and he will not relent. He has threatened me before, and he is full of burning fury. He will not have me back," she said in a voice of hesitating timidity; and, seeming of a sudden to have taken in the shame of her situation, she began to withdraw into the night.

"Not so fast, young madam," said I, "you have broken my mare's leg, I believe, and I must have a talk with you. What's the reason?" says I.

She paused, and then in a tremulous quick voice said, "He will not hear that George Riseley shall marry me."

"Oh, ho!" said I, "I begin to smell powder. And he has turned you out of doors?"

"No," she faltered. "He would not admit me."

"I begin to see beyond my nose," I said; "you were walking with this George, and returned late?" She hesitated. "Why, come," I said, rallying her, "I'd ha' done the same myself, although you would not credit it of a prim and proper youth like me. You was back late?"

"Yes," says she in a low voice.

"Well," said I, "old hunks shall take you in, never fear; so come along of me, and show me where Nunky lives and fumes and fusses."

At that I threw Calypso's bridle over my arm, and began to go along the road, the little miss walking by my side, something reluctant, as I guessed, but cheering as she went. Her uncle, says she, was a draper in the city with a good custom and a deep purse, while this George was but a 'prentice with small prospects.

"Well, I have no prospects myself," said I, "but I warrant I can get what I want in the end. 'Tis the same with George. Let him worry at it as a dog a bone. I'll wager he is a handsome fellow to have taken a pretty girl's eyes."

"He is very handsome," says miss, with enthusiasm; "and he is the best judge of calico in the city."

"Damme!" says I, smacking my thigh as we walked on together quite friendly, "damme! that's the lad for my money, and I don't wonder at you," said I.

Whereat, poor chit, she brings me forth tales of her blessed George's goodness and estimable virtues, and how his master trusted him, and how his neighbours loved him.

"Well," I said, "best let 'em not love him too much, or maybe this paragon will slip you."

And on that she came to a halt, and falling very tremulous again, pointed at a house.

"'Tis my uncle's," she says, "but there are no lights and he is gone to bed."

"So shall you," said I, and forthwith went up and banged upon the door.

Now I could guess very much what had happened in that house, and how old hunks had taken a fit of choler and, choking on it, had sent his niece packing for a peccadillo. To be sure she was out over-late for virtuous maids, but what's a clock in the balance with lovers' vows? And if any was to blame, 'twas this same George that should have been swung, not pretty miss like a dove. Thought I to myself—old hunks slams the door in an Anabaptist frenzy, and, presently after, while setting on his night-cap and a-saying his prayers, remembers and considers what a fool he is, and how the girl is under his authority and malleable, and that he has pitched her into the roads to come by what she may on a lone night. What does that come to, then, but this, that Nunky sits uneasy, and a-tremble at the first knock, and ready to open and take miss to his arms? Well, I was right about the readiness to open, but as for the rest you shall hear.

The door comes open sharply, and there was an old fat fellow with a candle in his hand, glaring at me.

"Who are you?" says he, for my appearance took him by surprise.

"Well," says I in a friendly way, "I'm not Old Rowley, nor am I the topsman, but something in between, and what that is matters nothing. But I found a poor maid astray on the heath, and have taken the liberty to fetch her home safe and secure."

He pushed his head further out, holding the candle so as to throw the light into the road. "It's you, Nelly!" said he, sharply. "Have I not said I have done with you? Go to your lover, you baggage!" and he made a motion to pull to the door, but my foot was inside.

"Softly," said I, "softly, gaffer. This is your niece, I believe," nodding over my arm to miss.

"Well," he snarled, "as she is mine and not yours I can do what I like with her."

"Oh! is that how the wind blows?" said I. "Then, sink me! but I shall have to go to school again to learn morals. But there is one thing I have no need to learn again, and that's how to knock sense and discretion into a thick head," said I, meaningly, and at the same time I threw the bridle over Calypso's ears and stood free before the old villain.

He looked at me a moment, the flame of the candle wagging before his face, and the grease guttering down the candlestick. "You do not understand, sir," he said in a quieter voice. "I have to give my niece lessons; I have to teach her by severity; but since it is probable that she has been sufficiently frightened by this night's adventure, and come to reason, let her enter." And so saying, he stepped back and held the door wide.

That he was of a savage, uncontrollable temper was evident, but I had not reckoned with the old bear's cunning, and I vow I was to blame for it. So old a hand as Dick Ryder should not have been caught by so simple a trick. Yet he was miss's uncle, and how was I to suspect him so deeply? At anyrate, the facts are that, on seeing him alter so reasonably, and step back with the invitation on his lips and in his bearing, I too stepped back from the doorway to leave way for miss to enter. Then of a sudden bang goes the door to, shaking the very walls of the house, and a great key is turned on the inside, groaning rustily.

I will confess I felt blank, but I recovered in a moment, when out of the window above the old rascal stuck his head.

"Let her go back to her lover!" he says with a sneer. "Or maybe you can take her yourself. I want no soiled pieces in a Christian house," and then the head was withdrawn, the window shut tight, and the house was plunged in darkness.

You may suppose how this usage annoyed me, who am not wont to be treated in so scurvy a fashion, or to come out of any contest so shabbily. I was, on the instant, for flying at the door and employing barkers and point forthwith, but it is not wise to leap too soon with your eyes shut, and so I held my temper and my tongue, only showing my teeth in an ugly grin as I turned to Mrs Nelly.

"Why," says I, "the old buck has said the truth. And there is something in his whimsies after all. It seems that George and I must fight or toss for you, my dear." You must remember that I had not seen her face all this time, for all the streaming candle the old gentleman carried, but I gathered that she was in distress from the note of her voice, which trembled.

"You cannot mean it, sir," she cried, and shrank away into the darkness, whence I caught the noise of sobbing.

"Why, bless you, child," said I, touched at the exhibition of her weakness and innocence, "such chitterkins as you are no meat for me, pretty as you be, I'll swear. No, you're for George, or may I perish! I would as leave mishandle a sucking babe as pink-and-white-and-fifteen; so I would, child."

"Sir," says she, staying her tears, and speaking with an air of dignity, vastly entertaining, "I am past eighteen."

"Well," says I, "if you are so old as that, I would I had a mother like you, granny. But as for old Suet yonder, rip and stab me if I do not pay him back in gold coin before two hours is out! And in the meantime you come along with me, grandam."

I think she was confused and fluttered to be so addressed, not understanding my sarcasm; but she followed me obediently, not having any ideas of her own, poor soul. I led the way towards Roehampton, where I had made up my mind she should lie meanwhile in the care of a wench I knew at the inn. I was fashioning in my mind a plan for the confounding of the old tub-of-lard as I went, for I never lose time, but am speedy at my aim; yet all the same I talked with miss pretty jovial, for she was a shrinking slip of a girl who was beginning now to get scared, and no wonder. When we were got to the tavern I came into the tap-room and called out for Costley, who had the house then, but is since dead of good liquor; and out runs he in his apron, with a lively face, for he was in a merry state enough, the hour being late.

"What, Dick Ryder!" says he in surprise.

"Yes, 'tis Dick Ryder!" says I; "and he wants a bed along of Sally for a little madam, and supper for both."

"A madam!" he calls out, and laughs broadly. "'Tis unexpected orders, Captain," says he. "At least 'tis put in an amazing odd way. But," he cries out, bursting with his news, "Old Irons is here!"

"What! that old damber," said I, annoyed, for I was no friend to Old Irons.

"Yes," said he, eagerly, "you'll sup along of him?"

"Damme, I won't!" said I. "I want no cutpurses in my company."

"Come, Captain," says he, protesting, for he had a fear of me, and knew of my repute on many roads. "Fair play and equality in a trade," says he.

I was on the point to give him the rough edge of my tongue—for it was like his impudence to try cozening me—when down the stairs into the passage came a man, walking very stiffly, and with his head in the air. I stopped at once, for I knew not who he might be, and down he stepped into the light, showing a foppish sort of a face, hair very particularly curled, and a becoming dress. No sooner did I clap eyes on him than I knew what kidney he was, and that he was not worth two blinks of the ogles, as they say. So I turned my back on him and was beginning on Costley again, when I was surprised by the girl's voice crying out from the entrance behind me.

"What the devil?" says I, flying about, for I thought she was insulted maybe by some of Costley's fellows, and I ran to the door. But there was she with her arms about the neck of this Jack-a-dandy.

"What's this, miss?" said I, beginning to think there was some truth in old Nunky's words after all; and at that she stepped into the inn, in her excitement, and I saw her plainly for the first time. Lord! there was nothing in her face that would not have convinced any Court at Old Bailey forthright. She was prettily handsome, like a doll that turns eyes up or down and smiles out of pink cheeks, in which were two dimples mighty enticing. Up she comes in a rush, almost breathless, and breaks out to me,—

""Tis he; 'tis he, sir!"

"Who the devil is he?" said I, sharply.

"'Tis Mr Riseley," she says, somewhat abashed. "He has been supping here, and is setting forth for his lodging."

"I commend his discretion," I said dryly; "an excellent good place for supper, so it is, specially for young bloods like that. Well," says I, "since you're content, as it seems, I will leave you and young Cupid, and be about my business."

At that she looked dumbfounded. "But—" she begins, stammering, and paused.

I threw a glance at Riseley, who stood by with an air something 'twixt arrogance and uneasiness. I plumbed his depths, for I have come across many such as he in my time—fine feathers enough and nothing behind 'em. But it was true that the coxcomb's appearance did not better her case, beyond the titillation of mutual affection; so I considered, and the idea I had taken suddenly bloomed forth in my mind. There was Old Irons, and here were we. I could have laughed aloud to think how I was for binding all the threads in one, to say nothing of Nunky's, on the Common. So I turned about to Costley.

"I was wrong," says I; "I will do Captain Irons the honour to sup with him, and this young gentleman, I make no doubt, will join me."

"I beg your pardon—I—I have supped," he stammered.

"'Tis a friend," I heard her whisper: "if it were not for him I know not what must have happened to me."

"Well," says I, "miss here will sup at anyrate," at which I saw his colour move.

"I will take the pleasure myself to keep you company, sir," said he, and forthwith we marched into the room. Here was Old Irons, rude, jovial, and blatant as ever, but happily not too far gone as yet. He stared at my guests hard enough, but seemed to be at a loss what to make of them or how to deal by them. So that he was for a time pretty silent, casting glances of perplexity at me and frowning, as if he would invite me to say what I was doing. He was drinking, however, of humpty-dumpty, which soon loosened his tongue.

"What cock and pullet have ye got here, Dick?" says he in a loud whisper.

"Friends of mine," says I.

"Oh!" says he, and stared; then passed off into a chuckle, with his eyes twinkling on miss; at which my apprentice in the fine clothes, not knowing, poor fool, what sort of man he had to deal with, fired up and demanded haughtily why he laughed at a lady. But Irons only roared the more, paying no more heed to him than if he were a babe in arms.

"Shut your mouth!" says I to him, seeing the girl's colour fly about.

"Why," says he, on the grin still, "you've turned Anabaptist, Dick. What fad's this? I will say it's as toothsome and sweet mutton as—"

"If you close not your cheese-trap," said I, sharply, "I will take leave to do it for you with my pistol-butt."

At that Old Irons stared at me, for he was never very quarrelsome save in his cups, and he had a respect for me. "Captain," says he, "don't go for to say you're going to commit assault on Old Irons, and shut his pretty peepers for ever. I'll warrant this pretty lady would be affrighted by it, and the gentleman too, rip me! when they see Old Irons a-lying in his gore—"

"Oh," says I, impatiently, "have done and pull up, for I maybe shall want you afore the day comes."

"Now that's like Dick Ryder's own self," said the old fool, and feigned to wipe a tear from his eye and regain his spirits. He whistled a snatch, and called for more ale and brandy, which was his favourite drink.

"I will now proceed to deliver a toast, Captain," says the dirty old rogue, holding his beaker up and ogling towards miss. "Here's to the beauty of Roehampton—rip me! no—of Putney Heath to Kingston! Toast me that, Dick."

I let him drink his toast, for I did not wish to thwart him too much in view of what I intended later, and he continued in a wheedling tone to address the girl, asking if she was not the Duchess of this or my Lady that, and feigning to inquire after his friends at Court in a mincing, fashionable voice that was grotesque to hear. But at last I stopped him, for I thought it was time to come to business, and moreover, Old Irons had taken enough within his jacket for my purpose.

"Irons," says I, "a man of heart and tenderness like you would be all agog to do service to a young lady that was in trouble," and I winked at him meaningly across the table.

"Service!" says he, starting up, "why, I've just been pining, Dick, all this time for you to come to it. 'What's Dick got?' says I to myself, and says myself to I, 'Maybe (and I hope) he will be for letting me strike a blow in behalf of youth and beauty?' Stab me, Dick! those was my very words to myself."

"Well," said I, bluntly, "you shall have your wish, old man, and this young gentleman too, who I see is regularly jumping for to join us."

"I—I know not what you mean," stuttered the peacock. "Having supped, and being called on to retire to my lodging, which is far hence, I will take the opportunity to thank you, sir, for your hospitality, and begone."

Now at that I was only confirmed in the opinion I had formed of him as nothing but a cur of no spirit: for here he was willing—nay, anxious, to fly off and leave his lady in the hands of those whom he knew not, with never a roof to cover her. He had taken a fear of Irons, maybe, or perhaps his suspicion was due to my masterful air. But I was not going to let him escape that way, specially as he was part of the plot I was laying against old Nunky. So I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Sit down," said I, cheerily. "You must not begone till you have put something inside of that brave coat of yours. Moreover," says I, "here is a lady in trouble, and if I read your honest face aright, you are not the man to leave a poor maid in the lurch—not you."

"Rip me, no!—he's a brave young gentleman. I can see it in his cheeks," chuckled Old Irons.

"I—I do not know what can be done," said the other, in confusion. "I am willing to help in any way. But her uncle refuses—"

"Well," said I, looking on him attentively, "you may be thankful that you have met one who, however inferior in courage, does not need to cry mercy to your wits. For here's my plan, plain and pat," and I gave it them, there and then. It had come into my head as I walked along the road with Mrs Nelly, but I had the whole form perfect only when I had encountered the apprentice and heard Irons was in the tavern. Old Irons and I were to make an entry into the house, and the peacock was to make the rescue, by which means, as you will see, the way would be cleared for Nunky's reconciliation with his niece's choice. But no sooner had I told them than cries the peacock, stammering,—

"But—but—I could not—'tis not seemly. I will be no party. 'Tis time I was gone home."

"Oh, very well," says I, "then we will adventure without you, and 'tis I will rescue miss from Old Irons."

The girl's eyes lighted up. "You will do it, George?" says she, beaming. "I believe it will convince my uncle of all that I have said of you."

He hesitated, and being pushed into the corner, knew not what to say.

"But," says he in a troubled voice, and glancing from Old Irons to me, and from me to Old Irons, anxiously, "I do not know who these gentlemen are. I—"

"Sink me!" says Old Irons in a cozening voice, "d'ye think we are really on the toby? Why, bless you, young master, we are both noblemen in disguise, so we are, and would think shame of this job if it were not to make an honest girl come by her own. We're only a-posing as crib-crackers," says he.

"George!" says the girl, in a voice of soft entreaty that would have persuaded a topsman.

"No good will come of it," said he with an air of protest. "'Twill fail," and he cast up his eyes in despair.

"Agreed like a brave lad!" said I, clapping him on the back; "and you shall drink to us and success," with which I filled him up a pot of humpty-dumpty, well laced.

He drank and coughed, but the compound mounting in his blood, fired him presently, so that he began to talk lightly and proffer advice and boast of what he would do and what part he would take.

"Why, yes," says Old Irons, "a pistol clapped at the head, and bang goes the priming, out flows the red blood. Sink me! there you are, as cold as clay, and with no more life in you than in a dead maggot. 'Slife! here's a jolly boy, Dick, that is handy with his barker, I'll vow."

But I stopped him ere he went too far, and he and I prepared the arrangements. We left miss behind in Sally's charge with strict instructions, and 'twas nigh three before we reached the house. There I set the popinjay outside the window to shiver, pot-valiant, until so be the time should come, while Irons and I went to the back of the house and made scrutiny of the yard. There was little trouble in the job, as it chanced, for Irons is skilled in the business, which I should scorn to be, holding it for a scurvy, mean-livered craft, unworthy of a gentleman. But I was committed to it for this occasion only, and so was resolved to go through with it. Irons fetched out his tools and got to work; and in a short time we were through the window of the kitchen, and Irons with his glim was creeping up the stairs. But he stopped half-way and whispered back to me—as if he had only then recalled something.

"What ken's this?" he asked, using his cant word.

"Why, an honest merchant's house," said I, "and he traffics in calicoes."

"Look ye, Dick Ryder," says he, sitting down on the stairs, "I may be dullard, but rip me if I know how you stand in this!"

"Why," says I, "you need only know where you stand, Irons, and that's pretty sure. You know me."

He stared at me a moment, and then said he, "Well, I'll empty old Nunky of his spanks, and we'll settle afterwards," and he resumed his journey.

Now, what I had arranged with the apprentice was that I should knock upon the window when the time was come, at which he would spring in with cries of alarm and fury, falling upon the rascals that had dared break into the merchant's house. At which Irons and I were to make off, and the old gentleman, rising in terror from his bed, should discover us in flight, and his deliverer George, full-armed, in possession. Yet it did not fall out quite in this way, owing, as I believe, to Old Irons's muddled head and his stopping on the stairs.

At anyrate, we were no sooner come to the hall, after Irons had visited two rooms, than we were surprised by the figure of the old gentleman moving down the staircase in his night-dress and a large blunderbuss in his hand.

"Stand!" says he, seeing Irons in the faint light. "Stand, rogue, or I fire!"

Old Irons uttered a curse, and, edging into the shadows, put up an arm to slip the catches of the window. But his knuckles fell on it with a rap as he withdrew the catch, and immediately after there was a loud, shrill cry, the window fell open, and there was our peacock in the midst, calling in his falsetto,—

"Surrender, or I will blow a hole in you! Surrender, by—!"

I could have broken out laughing at the sight, only the situation promised to grow risky. For Old Irons, taken aback at this, and never very particular when on his lay, jumped up sharply and smashed at t'other with his pistol-butt; while, to make confusion worse, the old man in the night-cap let off his blunderbuss. Such a screeching arose as would have astonished a churchyard of ghosts, for the truth was, old Nunky hit George somewhere in his hinderparts, and simultaneously down came Irons's blow on his head. That set his finger to work on the trigger of the pistol I had given him, and ere I was aware, something had took me in the big toe, and set me cursing.

"Here!" says I, grabbing Old Irons in the darkness, for he was ready to destroy both in his wildness, "this is no place for a tender-hearted chicken like you or me. We're no match for savage fire-eaters like these. We'd best go," and I dragged him through the window and we made off together. When we reached the inn, I called out the girl.

"What has happened?" she cried eagerly.

"Well," said I, "I think you had best walk home sharp. I'll wager Nunky will be calling for you presently to reward a gallant youth that has risked his life for to save him."

Her eyes glistened, and, Lord! I believe the poor fool thought her George *had* been brave. She clasped her hands. "Oh, I must thank you, sir!" she cried.

"Nay, never thank me," said I, "for, if I mistake not, Old Irons has taken thanks for us both, and would have had more if it had not been for young Jack-a-dandy."

"Split him!" cries Old Irons. "I would I had hit him harder."

"Hit!" she cries, and clutches at me.

"Nay, never fear," I said. "'Twas not Irons, but Nunky's blunderbuss. Faith, he took both wounds like a lamb. I would I had his courage, and was to be comforted like him. But he is in no danger."

"Oh, sir!" says she, gratefully, and if she were fool she was pretty enough, and her innocence touched me, for she had scarce understood anything of what we spoke.

"But run home," says I, "and I'll warrant you'll find him a-rubbing of his head, and Nunky a-hugging him for joy and gratitude."

But even ere I had finished she was gone, flying lightly into the grey of the coming dawn, and, as I heard afterwards from Costley, what I had forecast was pretty accurate. But I had finished with miss then, and the next business was to divide with Old Irons. 'Twas the first time that I had ever engaged in a job with him, and I vow 'twill be the last; so scurvy was he in the partition. But, then, I had always a detestation of so ungentlemanly a game as cracking cribs.

MISS AND MY LADY

There are few people that can truly say they have tricked Dick Ryder, and fewer still can say that in the end he did not wriggle out of his predicament (whatsoever it might be) and turn the tables on them. Yet of these few one, I will confess, was a woman, and a woman I had eyes for, though I am not fool enough to cast my wits away for a petticoat. I have always admired spirit in the sex, but there is a point at which it degenerates into vice, and of such shrews or vixens I wish any man joy. They are good to be beat if you be so inclined, but for myself I have never taken up stick, lash, or fist against any woman, and never would so long as I am free of the topsman.

The adventure happened when I was by Maidstone in the summer of 1683, coming up from Dover very merry. I had ridden round from Deal and lain at the Crown in Dover the night before, and I warrant I had made the people of the inn open their eyes with what tales I told of Court and Old Rowley and affairs of State. I cannot say why, but all the way from Deal to London I seemed possessed of a devil that would wag me, whether I willed it or not. I am not used to be so precipitate, but 'twas as if a cask of French brandy had gotten into my brains and set 'em a-quarrelling. At least, I was gay-headed and recked of nothing. Not that I care for any risk or peril under the sun if it be necessary; but this was to go rollicking, with the gait, so to say, of a drunken man, whistling on danger and leering at fate—a mighty foolish thing to do for any man. There is no question but I would not have fallen into that blunder by Leeds Castle if I had been in any other mood. But there it was—the devil was in me, as I say.

I pulled out of Dover pretty late, and with a parting wave of my hand at as sweet a kinxiewinsy as I have seen, I started on the London Road in good temper and good fettle. But ere I had gone a mile or so, I came up with a little fat, dark fellow that had been at the inn and had listened agog to my tales. It was, "Lord, sir, say you so?" and "Bless me, I would not ha' believed it!" and then again, "Save us, what shall we hear next?" Well, this little black man, as it seems, was steward, or factotum, or what-ye-may-call-it to my Lady Dane, who, also, as it seemed, had lain at Dover overnight, having crossed in a packet from France, and was on her way to Winchester by Reigate and Guildford. The fellow was not given to talking, but more to listening, with his "bless me-s," but he was a simple rustic, and you may fancy that I led him on so that he opened his mouth as wide as I my ears. For this Lady Dane was a rich widow (so he said), and, moreover, a woman that was greatly besought in marriage by many suitors of all degrees, and both for her looks and her money. 'Tis not I that would blame any man that saw his chance to seize beauty and booty alike together. 'Tis the worst of it that they generally go singly—at least, to judge by what I have seen of fine ladies. Well, says the little black man, my Lady Dane was on a journey to her home on the Itchin in the company of her niece, that was daughter to the late Sir Philip's brother, and he was going afore to prepare for them at Maidstone, as they were not yet started. It seemed that my lady had property in Maidstone, and was for giving a water-fountain to the town in her kindness.

"My lady," says he, puffing himself out, "rises late, like any lady of the Court."

"Why," said I, "she must be a rare fine woman—that she must, from your accounts. I would like to clap eyes on her, so that I might compare her with the beauties;" for he was the most obsequious in praise of his mistress that ever you heard, and vexed my soul. "And the niece," says I, "would be pretty handsome too."

"The niece!" says he, with a gesture of contempt, waving his hands in a foreign way in imitation of what he had seen in France, and thus nearly falling off his nag. "Oh! the niece is well enough," says he, and recovered himself carefully. "*Je ne sais quoi*," says he, and shook his head with a mighty knowing look. "She would do pretty well, but not in a capital, not in Paris or London, where there is need always of the most elegant style. You, sir, with your knowledge of cities, know that. You have the air."

It tickled me to see the little fool a-sitting uneasily on his big horse, with his toes cocked out on each side, looking for all the world like a radish that would split as he bobbed and bounced up and down upon the saddle, and mimicking foreign airs and tongues and manners as if 'twere natural to him. But I kept a grave face until I had gotten out of him what I wanted, by which time 'twas late in the afternoon (for we had ridden together all the way), and we were within ten miles of Maidstone. So I bade him good-bye and good-luck, for he was not worth any gentleman wasting his hands on, and, turning the mare up a lane, left him to pursue his way to Maidstone alone. But a mile or so along the lane I pitched on a wayside tavern, where I took leave to rest and refresh the mare and myself while waiting; for, from what I had gathered from the steward, the lady would make no start before twelve, in which case she would not be in Maidstone before six at the least. So there I sat and waited, with never a companion, and not even a serving-wench to clack tongues with. A little before six I rode down and came into the Maidstone highway near by Leeds Castle, where the moat was shining in the descending sun, and the pastures spread very ample and green to the heights beyond. I waited there for an hour in a convenient copse, and in the end got very tired.

"Damme!" says I, with a yawn, "this Mother Beauty has overslept herself for certain, and will save her jewels after all;" for I was in no mood to wait until the next day for the chance, being due in London. There was the lake, first gleaming with the sun, then with long shadows afloat and stretching, and at the last plunged in vacant blankness. This was near upon twilight, and I was for cursing myself as a fool to attend upon the whims of a woman, when there was the sound in the distance of rumbling wheels, and I pulled Calypso out and waited by the grassy border of the road.

'Twas not long before the chaise came up, rolling in a dignified way down the hill, and speaking of wealth and consideration in every spoke and appointment. There was the coachman with his fellow beside him, and two spirited horses, and, if you please, by the lackey was a huge and bell-mouthed blunderbuss, like a brass viol. I could ha' yelled for laughter at the sight of them and their brave preparations. Rip me! what a formidable array 'twas, with two gallant fellows in livery, all ready to blow the soul out of such as Galloping Dick and his kidney! Why, the first time I ever clapped peepers on 'em I could see that there was no fight in them. So I put the mare right across the way and waited. The twilight was come now, and the coachman called out to me to stand aside.

"Are you drunk?" says he, as he draws up of necessity.

"No," says I; "I am only a poor fellow that's thirsty and tired of waiting on you, and would like to be drunk," said I.

"'Tis a 'wayman!" shouted t'other lackey; and pulled up his blunderbuss. But I put the point of my sword in his wrist, and he dropped it with a howl.

"What's this?" now cried a voice from the interior of the chaise; and, pushing the mare to the window, I looked in. There was the lady, sure enough, of whom the little fat man had spoke; and he had been right about her looks, for in her anger she was mighty handsome. But her companion, that was the niece, according to the steward, was by no means what he had suggested, being a tall girl of a delicate beauty, with a gentle kindness in her eye, very becoming to modest virginity. My lady was in a storm of anger.

"Who are you?" she said furiously.

"Why," said I, "I know not if 'tis of consequence to your ladyship to discover who it is or who it isn't that rumpads you, so long as you be rumpadded; but if it be any convenience to you, why, set me down in your accounts as Galloping Dick of the Roads, and debit me with what you will," says I.

"You would rob me?" said she, looking at me sharply, and, as I could see, controlling herself with an effort.

"Your ladyship has a mind that flies direct to the point," said I, politely; "I call miss in witness of its quickness. Never so much as a word have I spoke afore you out with your guess. 'You would rob me,' says you. Why, damme! I will not deny a lady."

She looked at me in doubt for a moment, as if she would count me up, and then it was that I got my first idea of her quality, for her gaze pierced me through, and there was capacity in her very bearing.

"You would rob a poor woman?" said she next, in a softer voice. "I thought 'twas only fat, bloated purses that you gentlemen of the road would steal."

"No," says I, "I take nothing under five hundred guineas, and if there be some jewels to crown the pile I will not refuse them"—for this, I knew from the little fat fool's talk, was what her ladyship carried.

She bit her lip, but still kept her temper.

"I see you are pleased to jest with me," said she. "You gentlemen are as light of heart as of finger. Come, you shall have my twenty guineas, if you are so hard, and I will even refrain my curse, if you will kindly withdraw your head and allow me to proceed"—and at that she thrust towards me a little bag. She was as cool as ever I have seen man or woman, which was the more remarkable, seeing how evil was her real temper. But I took the bag and still kept my place.

"Hark you, madam," said I, for I was not ill-pleased to have a duel worthy of my tongue and skill; "Galloping Dick never makes a wanton boast, nor asks what he gets not, nor is afraid of his own mind. There is five hundred guineas with you, the which I will beg of you for a keepsake, and in kind memory also will ask those pretty toys." And I pointed at her necklace. "Had I not been kept yawning my head off the two hours by the wayside, maybe I would have taken the one and left t'other; but, sink me! I am of a mind for both now," says I.

Again she shot me a glance, and I thought for a moment that she would have shouted an order to her servants, and have driven on and trusted to chance. But perhaps she came to the conclusion that the hazard was too great, as indeed it was, for I would have clapped holes through chaise and coachman ere they had rolled three paces, and her ladyship might have come off in that case worse than I was for leaving her. At anyrate, she did nothing so foolish, but merely uttered an exclamation in which her fury and her chagrin were indicated, and says she, in angry despair,—

"Will nothing make you give up? Cannot I persuade you in any way to use me decently? Lord forgive you, I thought that the toby had some sense of gallantry."

"By the Lord!" said I, promptly, "and if there is any huff that says 'no' to that, I would run him through his midriff. We are no money-weasels, and least of all, Dick Ryder. And maybe that name is known to you, madam," said I.

"Why, I have heard it, sure," says she, eagerly. "And those that have spoken of you have given you a good name, for a brave and chivalrous fellow."

"I have a good repute, and that widely," said I, for 'twas true enough, and maybe she had heard of my adventure with Old Rowley and the Duchess of Cleveland, in which I played a pretty figure.

"Why, of course," said she; "I recall you now. Your name, Captain, has been bruited about the roads from one end of the kingdom to the other, and it has always come to my ears in good condition. If I recall aright, there was a tale in which you did some good to an honest woman."

"Does your ladyship refer to Mrs Barbara Crawford and to her abduction?" said I.

"Why," said she, "now 'tis what I did think of, more especially as a great friend of mine acquainted me with the facts."

"'Twas on the York Road," said I, looking at her, for her glib tongue of a sudden had made me shy at her, like a colt of two years.

"'Twas there, Captain, as I remember now well," said she.

"Well," says I, "'tis strange you should ha' happened upon some witnesses to that little episode, for I thought it had passed out of mind. But seeing your ladyship is so mindful of me, let me hang if I do not mark it upon my account with you."

This I said, having discovered how greatly false she spoke, for 'twas not on York Road, but by Guildford, that the affair happened, and I would swear that she had heard not a word of it, which, nevertheless, she might very well have done, seeing that it was notorious in the town at that time.

"I am always glad to meet a famous man," said she.

"No more than I a handsome lady," said I. "And to show how deeply I am in earnest, I will forego half the account and all the jewels for a salutation from miss there."

To say the truth, I had enjoyed my bout with the lady, and was disposed to be lenient to her for all her airs and sharpness. But the sight of the niece's eyes of a sudden warmed me and incited me; for she was looking at me gently, with an odd expression of interest and of wonder, and her bosom rose and fell swiftly. You may guess that that set it on even a swifter ebb and tide.

"What d'ye mean?" asked her ladyship.

"I am a gentleman adventurer," said I, "and, damme! I will not deny my calling; 'tis efficient at the least. But if miss there will permit me the salutation, rip me! you shall go scot-free."

At that, miss shrank into her corner, all the expression fled from her face, which was white and stark. But my lady turns on her.

"Hear you that, Celia?" says she. "Buss and let us get on, since this gallant gentleman must have already delayed himself over-long."

"You are right," said I. "'Tis a scurvy long time since I ha' been waiting here."

"If you haste not, Celia," says she, very ironic in tone, "the gentleman will be getting impatient—as well he may, seeing your pale beauty."

Now this (for 'twas nothing but a sneer) set me against her, the girl being mightily more handsome than herself and of a fine frailty. But I said nothing, only looked at miss, who seemed as if she would have withered out of the chaise.

"Celia!" cries her ladyship, sharply.

"You—you must be jesting, madam. You cannot mean it," says miss in a low voice. "I have stood much from you, but this insult—"

But my lady broke in, "You will do what I say," she said harshly; "I command you."

"I will not," says t'other. "Indeed, madam, I may not. Ask me not so to violate myself."

Upon that her ladyship turned about. "Hark ye," she said, and whispered in her ear, and upon that, observing her to wince, she said aloud, "What, d'ye hesitate, when 'tis to spare five hundred guineas and some odd jewels, including your own?"

"I—I value not mine, madam," says miss, trembling.

"Well, there is mine," said she, "and if they be of not much marketable value, there is a higher value I put upon them, since they were given me by your dear uncle. You shall save them."

But, Lord! I am a pretty judge of jewels, and she was lying; for there was more worth in her jewels far than in her guineas. But I said nothing, only listened, to hear what miss would answer.

She hesitated, and her ladyship made a peremptory gesture. "Why, 'tis cheap enough," said she, sardonically. Miss still hesitated, and then, as it seemed, on a rap from her ladyship, very white of face and drawn, leaned across to the window. I saw the large eyes gleam in the faint light, and they were like pools at even in which the stars do set; but her lips were trembling.

"I have never bought jewels so cheap," says my lady with her sneer, thinking, no doubt, that the bargain was struck now and the act consummated.

"No!" says I; "I kiss no maid against her will. Fetch forth the pieces and the toys, my lady."

Miss fell back, still white, and I saw something leap in her eye. She put her kerchief before her face and sobbed.

"Damme!" says I roughly, "out with the goldfinches, or must I make bold to help myself from ye? There is too much prattle here, and I have delayed long enough."

The lady had gone red with anger, and moved her arm as though she would have struck someone in her fury; but suddenly containing herself, and considering, as I must suppose, that 'twould put no embargo on the guineas and the diamonds, she says, says she,—

"If my niece will not save my jewels at the price, I, at anyrate, will save hers." And she leaned softly towards me.

Now in a flash I saw what she intended, and how she would go any length to preserve her property, the which gave me but a poor thought of her for a basely avaricious woman with no pretensions to honour, and (as was clear) a very brutal mind and temper towards the girl. So I did that which maybe I should not ha' done, though 'tis hard to say, and no one ever accused Dick Ryder justly of handling a woman harshly. But she would have put me in a hole else, with her quickness and her cunning; and there was only the one way out, which I took.

"No," says I, "there is no talk of miss's jewels. What she may have she may keep. I war not on pretty girls. And as for yours, madam—damme! there's nothing will save 'em! No, split me, there isn't!"

She fell quite white, as I could see even in the gloom, and for a perceptible moment hesitated. 'Twas then, I suppose, that she made up her mind, casting this way and that venomously and desperately for a way out.

"Well," said she, in a muffled voice, "I cry you mercy. Here's what ye are wanting!" And she flung her bag at me; and with her fingers, that trembled, undid the necklet she wore, and handed it to me.

"Come, that's the mood in which to take reverses," says I cheerfully. "I'll warrant there's more where these came from, and more behind them again; for I should think shame to rob the last jewel from a neck that so becomes 'em." This I said by way of consolation for her vanity, if that were touched at my previous refusal. But she said nothing to that; only put her head nearer, and addressed me with a chastened voice,—

"Look ye, Captain, I think you be a hard man, but not so hard perhaps as you may seem. I ask not for myself, as you've taken all I had, but for my niece here, who has had the privilege of your benevolence to retain what she has. You have said your name is Ryder, and I will believe you. 'Tis nothing to me now if it be Ryder or Creech, as—"

"Creech!" says I, for I knew Dan Creech well, and had, indeed, been in some surprises with him.

"Yes, Creech!" said she, looking me steady in the face. "I was warned of a ruffian named Creech that would haunt this road to Maidstone."

"Well, Creech," said I, "will reap nothing from bare acres."

"No," said she, "save from my niece."

And there she spoke truly enough, as I saw; for if Creech was on that road (and maybe he was), I knew him better than to suppose he would be content with their asseverations. He would rummage and overhaul, would Creech, and there was never gold or farden would escape Danny's notice, not if 'twas as pitch black as midnight.

"As you have been so generous," said my lady, "I thought that maybe you would go further, and save my niece from robbery and me from further needless alarms. It seems to me, though I may be prejudiced, that you owe me that at least."

I thought on that for a moment, and—well, I had not spared miss to let her fall a victim later; so says I,—

"You mean that I shall give you my protection?"

"I see that you are quick of your wits," said she, speaking evenly now, and not with any irony apparent.

"Done!" says I. "I will conduct ye to within a mile of Maidstone, and you shall go secure. I'll swear to that."

"Will ye not be afraid to venture so closely?" asked she.

"I will conduct ye up to the doors of Maidstone," said I. "Damme! I'll see you safe within the precincts."

"Spoken like a brave knight of the roads," said her ladyship, and lay back in her seat. "And now, perhaps, you will be good enough to bid my coachman drive on."

There was something in her tones which should have given me pause even then, if I had been less pleased with myself. But I had been hard with her, not in the matter of the jewels only, and I was disposed to meet her on a point, for all that I was sure she bullied the girl. So I rode on in the front and the coach rolled after me, for all the world as though I were advance guard in protection of beauty, which, after all, is pretty much what I was. There was no denying looks to her ladyship, but she was of a hard, handsome face that has never taken me. You would swear she would never change till the tomb swallowed her, but would grow old and fade white insensibly, battling for her beauty all the way, and holding its handsome ghost until the end. If there was anyone that would be attracted by her person (and there must ha' been many), to say nothing of her purse, why, thank the Lord, 'twas not I. I would sooner lie in shackles at Newgate than have lain in shackles to her at my lady's house. Not but what I can speak generously of her (as witness what I have wrote of her beauty), for I came out of the affair all right, yet by an accident, as you will see.

We had got near by Maidstone, within three miles, and the twilight had thickened into dark. There was never a soul upon the lonely road, for you may conceive that I kept a sharp eye, not only for Danny, if he should be about, as was possible, but also lest my lady should play any trick upon me by the way. But I was not much afraid of that, as I knew there was nothing between us and Maidstone save a few scattered cottages and an insignificant village or two, which I would have warranted to scare with a blank charge. So when we were, as I say, within three miles of the town, her ladyship put out her head and called to me.

"See you," said she, "there is the town drawing near, and you expose yourself in the front. It will serve if you ride behind and be for your better safety, Captain."

"Why," said I, "what the deuce do I mind of riding before or behind! There's none will take me, and I will fetch ye into Maidstone, as I have said."

"Well, Captain," said she, with a laugh, "I will confess 'twas not wholly your safety that moved me, which is not strange in the circumstances; but I should feel more secure myself were my escort in the rear, from which side 'tis more likely any assault would be made."

"I came at you in the front, madam," said I.

"Ah! Captain Ryder is Captain Ryder," said she, beaming, "and was not afraid of my blunderbusses and my rascals. But conceive a less brave and straightforward adventurer that sees not only blunderbusses and lackeys, but a gallant swordsman to boot in front. 'Tis surely from the rear such a one would attack!"

"Oh, well," said I indifferently, "afore or behind matters nothing. You will have no assault while Dick Ryder's sign-manual is on you, and that's his toasting-fork."

And so I fell behind, as she wished, and we proceeded. It was true enough, what she said, that the body of the coach would protect me from any eyes in front, and that I could make off more easily from the rear; but, Lord love you! I had no thoughts of that; and if I had been thinking of it, it might have occurred to me that, being in the van, I could see more plainly into what we were running than if I were in the rear. And, sure enough, that came near my undoing, for we had not gone two miles further, and were still some way out of the town bounds, when the coach suddenly pulled up before a tavern in a little village thereby, of which I cannot recall the name. We had passed several of these, and, as I have said, I cared not two straws for them, and so I was mildly exercised in my mind at this unexpected stoppage, and, coming to myself, moved the mare slowly round t'other side of the coach to see what was forward.

"If she is thirsty," said I to myself, "she shall drink," and, if it came to that, I was thirsty myself. And I was ready to hold up the innkeeper with a pistol-butt while we all drank a draught to our better

acquaintance and miss's eyes, maybe. But as I came round I was suddenly aware of a small crowd of people, some wearing uniforms, armed with halberds and lanthorns, and in the middle a short important gentleman with a paper in his hand. I had no sooner made this discovery than her ladyship shrieked out very loud,—

"Seize that man! He is a highwayman!"

At that, all alert, I pulled Calypso round and put my heels into her flanks; but there was a bank of people before me in that quarter and the chaise to one side and the tavern t'other, and ere I could draw half a dozen hands were on the mare, and two of a posse that was in the throng had their pistols on the level.

There was I, taken, netted like any duck in a decoy, for certain, and with no prospect even of a struggle, for the numbers against me were great. I saw that in the twinkling of an eye, and so sat still, making no effort to escape.

"What is this?" said I loudly. "Hands off, sirrah! Do you dare arrest an innocent man? Who is in authority here, and what's his foolish name?" said I.

At that the short man came forward, and I saw that he wore a long gown edged with some sort of fleece. "Who are you?" I asked, assuming the most haughty, arrogant air, "and under what pretence is a gentleman that is on the King's business arrested and delayed?"

"Sir," he said, hesitating, "I am Mayor of the town, and 'tis at her ladyship's request—"

"I know nothing of her ladyship," said I, interrupting angrily. "If her ladyship blunders, and you through her, you must take the consequence, Mr Mayor."

He seemed put about at that, but my lady herself intervened, or I would have managed things for myself pretty easily.

"I charge that man with stealing from me jewels and money to the amount of five hundred guineas, which you will find upon him," said she, for she was now out of the coach and standing in the road among them all.

"Yes, your ladyship," says the Mayor anxiously, "it shall be attended to."

"Well, someone shall smart for this," said I, "ere many days are out."

"And my witness," pursued her ladyship calmly, "sits in the coach, and is my late husband's niece."

"Oh, a witness," says Mr Mayor, brightening up.

"To say nothing of my two fellows," she ended.

With that I saw it was all up, for she was not one to lose her head, and with that plain issue before the Mayor, he could not blunder very far. So I said nothing more, but sat in the clutches of the officers cudgelling my wits for a way out.

"Celia," says she, "is this the man that attacked us upon the road and stole my jewels?"

"I—I cannot discern very well—'tis dark," stammered miss, and, rip me! I blessed the chit for that reluctance, though 'twas useless, as it happened, for says her ladyship,—

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.