THE BROAD HIGHWAY

By JEFFERY FARNOL

A Tale of 19th Century England, Full of the Thrills of Adventure and Spirit of Romance.

My Uncle's Will

CHAPTER I

"AND to my nephew, Maurice Vibart, I bequeath the sum of 20,000 pounds in the fervent hope that it may help him to the devil within the year, or as soon after as may be.'"

Here Mr. Grainger paused in his reading to glance up over the rim of his spectacles, while Sir Richard lay back in his chair and laughed loudly. "Gad!" he exclaimed, still chuckling, "I'd give a hundred pounds if he could have been present to hear that," and the baronet went off into another roar of merriment.

Mr. Grainger, on the other hand, dignified and solemn, coughed a short, dry cough behind his hand.

"Help him to the devil within a year," repeated Sir Richard, still chuckling.

"Pray proceed, sir," said I, motioning towards the will. * * * But instead of complying, Mr. Grainger laid down the parchment, and removing his spectacles, began to polish them with a large silk handkerchief.

"You are, I believe, unacquainted with your cousin, Sir Maurice Vibart?" he inquired.

"I have never seen him," said I; "all my life has been passed either at school or the university, but I have frequently heard mention of him, nevertheless."

"Egad!" cried Sir Richard, "who hasn't heard of Buck Vibart—beat Ted Parraway, of Swansea, in five rounds—drove coach and four down Whitehall—on sidewalk—ran away with a French marquise while but a boy of 20, and shot her husband into the bargain. Devilish celebrated figure in 'sporting circles,' friend of the Prince Regent—"

"So I understand," said I.

"Altogether as complete a young blackguard as ever swaggered down St. James's." Having said which, Sir Richard crossed his legs and inhaled a pinch of snuff.

"Twenty thousand pounds is a very handsome sum," remarked Mr. Grainger ponderously and as though with the intention of saying something rather than remaining silent just then.

"Indeed it is," said I, "and might help a man to the devil as comfortably as need be, but—"

"Though," pursued Mr. Grainger, "much below his expectations and sadly inadequate to his present needs, I fear."

"That is most unfortunate," said I, "but—"

"His debts," said Mr. Grainger, busy at his spectacles again, "his debts are very heavy, I believe."

"Then doubtless some arrangement can be made to—but continue your reading, I beg," said I.

Mr. Grainger repeated his short, dry cough, and taking up the will, slowly and almost as though unwillingly, cleared his throat and began as follows:

"'Furthermore, to my nephew, Peter Vibart, cousin to the above, I will and bequeath my blessing and the sum of 10 guineas in cash, wherewith to purchase a copy of Zeno or any other of the stoic philosophers he may prefer.'"

Again Mr. Grainger laid down the will, and again he regarded me over the rim of his spectacles.

"Good God!" cried Sir Richard, leaping to his feet, "the man must have been mad. Ten guineas—why, it's an insult—damme!—it's an insult—you'll never take it, of course, Peter."

"On the contrary, sir," said I.

"But—10 guineas!" bellowed the baronet; "on my soul now, George was a cold-blooded fish, but I didn't think even he was capable of such a despicable trick—no—curse me if I did! Why, it would have been kinder to have left you nothing at all—but it was like George—bitter to the end—10 guineas!"

"Is 10 guineas," said I, "and when one comes to think of it, much may be done with 10 guineas."

Sir Richard grew purple in the face, but before he could speak Mr. Grainger began to read again:

"'Moreover, the sum of £500,000, now vested in the funds, shall be paid to either Maurice or Peter Vibart aforesaid, if either shall, within one calendar year, become the husband of the Lady Sophia Sefton of Cambourne.'"

"Good God!" exclaimed Sir Richard.

"'Failing which,'" read Mr. Grainger, "'the said sum, namely, £500,000, shall be bestowed upon such charity or charities as the trustees shall select. Signed by me this tenth day of April, eighteen hundred and——, George Vibart. Duly witnessed by Adam Penfleet, Martha Trent.'"

Here Mr. Grainger's voice stopped, and I remember, in the silence that followed, the parchment crackled very loudly as he folded it precisely and laid it on the table before him. I remember also that Sir Richard was swearing vehemently under his breath as he paced to and fro between me and the window.

"And that is all?" I inquired at last.

"That," said Mr. Grainger, not looking at me now, "is all."

"The Lady Sophia," murmured Sir Richard as if to himself, "the Lady Sophia!" And then, stopping suddenly before me in his walk, "Oh, Peter!" said he, clapping his hand down upon my shoulder, "oh, Peter, that settles it; you're done for, boy—a crueler will was never made."

"Marriage!" said I to myself. "Hum!"

"O damnable iniquity!" exclaimed Sir Richard, striding up and down the room again.

"The Lady Sophia Sefton of Cambourne!" said I, rubbing my chin.

"Why, that's just it," roared the baronet; "she's a reigning toast—most famous beauty in the country, London's mad over her—she can pick and choose from all the finest gentlemen in England. Oh, it's 'good-by' to all your hopes of the inheritance, Peter, and that's the devil of it."

"Sir, I fail to see your argument," said I.

"What?" cried Sir Richard, facing round on me, "d' you think you'd have a chance with her then?"

"Why not?"

"Without friends, position or money? Pish, boy! don't I tell you that every buck and dandy—every mincing macaroni in the three kingdoms would give his very legs to marry her—either for her beauty or her fortune?" spluttered the baronet. "And let me inform you further that she's devilish high and haughty with it all—they do say she even rebuffed the Prince Regent himself."

"But then, sir, I consider myself a better man than the Prince Regent," said I.

Sir Richard sank into the nearest chair and stared at me open-mouthed.

"Sir," I continued, "you doubtless set me down as an egoist of egoists. I freely confess it; so are you, so is Mr. Grainger yonder, so are we all of us egoists in thinking ourselves as good as some few of our neighbors and better than a great many."

"Referring to the Lady Sophia, I have heard that she once galloped her horse up the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral—"

"And down again, Peter," added Sir Richard.

"Also, she is said to be possessed of a temper," I continued, "and is above the average height, I believe, and I have a natural antipathy to termagants, more especially tall ones."

"Termagants!" cried Sir Richard. "Why, she's the handsomest woman in London, boy. She's none of your milk-and-waterway, meek-mounted misses—curse me, no! She's all fire and blood and high mettle—a woman, sir—glorious—divine—damme, sir, a black-browed goddess—a positive plum!"

"Sir Richard," said I, "should I ever contemplate marriage, which is most improbable, my wife must be sweet and shy, gentle-eyed and soft of voice, instead of your bold, strong-armed, horse-bestriding creature; above all, she must be sweet and clinging——"

"Sweet and sticky, oh, the devil! Hark to the boy, Grainger," cried Sir Richard, "hark to him—and one glance of the glorious Sefton's bright eyes—one glance only, Grainger, and he'd at her feet—on his knees—on his confounded knees, sir!"

"The question is, how do you propose to maintain yourself in the future?" said Mr. Grainger at this point; "life under your altered fortunes must prove necessarily hard, Mr. Peter."

"And yet, sir," I answered, "a fortune with a wife tagged on to it must prove a very mixed blessing after all; and then again, there may be a certain amount of satisfaction in stepping into a dead man's shoes, but I, very foolishly, perhaps, have a hankering for shoes of my own. Surely there must be some position in life that I am competent to fill, some position that would maintain me honorably and well; I flatter myself that my years at Oxford were not altogether barren of result——"

"By no means," put in Sir Richard; "you won the high jump, I believe?"

"Sir, I did," said I; "also 'throwing the hammer.'"

"And spent two thousand pounds per annum?" said Sir Richard.

"Sir, I did, but between whiles managed to do fairly well in the Tripos, to finish a new and original translation of Quintilian, another of Petronius Arbiter and also a literal rendering into the English of the Memoirs of the Sieur de Brantome."

"For none of which you have hitherto found a publisher?" inquired Mr. Grainger.

"Not as yet," said I, "but I have great hopes of my Brantome, as you are probably aware this is the first time he has ever been translated into the English."

"Hum!" said Sir Richard, "ha!—and in the meantime what do you intend to do?"

"On that head I have as yet come to no definite conclusion, sir," I answered.

"I have been wondering," began Mr. Grainger, somewhat diffidently, "if you would care to accept a position in my office. To be sure the remuneration would be small at first and quite insignificant in comparison to the income you have been in the receipt of."

"But it would have been money earned," said I, "which is infinitely preferable to that for which we never turn a hand—at least, I think so."

"Then you accept?"

"No, sir," said I, "though I am grateful to you, and thank you most sincerely for your offer, yet I have never felt the least inclination to the practice of law; where there is no interest one's work must necessarily suffer, and I have no desire that your business should be injured by any carelessness of mine."

"What do you think of a private tutorship?"

"It would suit me above all things were it not for the fact that the genus 'Boy' is the most aggravating of all animals, and that I am conscious of a certain shortness of temper at times, which might result in pain to my pupil, loss of dignity to myself, and general unpleasantness to all concerned—otherwise a private tutorship would suit most admirably."

Here Sir Richard took another pinch of snuff and sat frowning up at the ceiling, while Mr. Grainger began tying up that document which had so altered my prospects. As for me, I crossed to the window and stood staring out at the evening. Everywhere were trees tinted by the rosy glow of sunset, trees that stirred sleepily in the gentle wind, and far away I could see that famous highway, built and paved for the march of Roman legions, winding away to where it vanished over distant Shooter's Hill.

"And pray," said Sir Richard, still frowning at the ceiling, "what do you propose to do with yourself?"

Now, as I looked out upon this fair evening, I became, of a sudden, possessed of an overmastering desire, a great longing for field and meadow and hedgerow, for wood and coppice and shady stream, for sequestered inns and wide, wind-swept heaths, and ever the broad highway in front. Thus I answered Sir Richard's question unhesitatingly and without turning from the window:

"I shall go, sir, on a walking tour through Kent and Surrey into Devonshire, and thence probably to Cornwall."

"And with a miserable 10 guineas in your pocket? Preposterous—absurd!" retorted Sir Richard.

"On the contrary, sir," said I, "the more I ponder the project the more enamored of it I become."

"And when your money is all gone—how then?"

"I shall turn my hand to some useful employment," said I; "digging, for instance."

"Digging!" ejaculated Sir Richard, "and you a scholar—and what is more, a gentleman!"

"My dear Sir Richard," said I, "that all depends upon how you would define a gentleman. To me he would appear, of late years, to have degenerated into a creature whose chief end in life is to spend money he has never earned, to reproduce his species with a deplorable frequency and promiscuity, habitually to drink more than is good for him, and, between whiles, to fill in his time hunting, cock-fighting or watching entranced while two men pound each other unrecognizable in the prize ring. Occasionally he has the good taste to break his neck in the hunting field or get himself gloriously shot in a duel, but the generality live on to a good old age, turn their attention to matters political and, following the dictates of their class, damn all reform with a whole-hearted fervor equaled only by their rancor."

"Deuce take me!" ejaculated Sir Richard feebly, while Mr. Grainger buried his face in his pocket handkerchief.

"To my mind," I ended, "the man who sweats over a spade or follows the tail of a plow is far nobler and higher in the scheme of things than any of your young 'bloods' driving his coach and four to Brighton to the danger of all and sundry."

Sir Richard slowly got up out of his chair, staring at me open-mouthed. "Good God!" he exclaimed at last, "the boy's a revolutionary."

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders, but before I could speak Mr. Grainger interposed, sedate and solemn as usual:

"Referring to your proposed tour, Mr. Peter, when do you expect to start?"

"Early tomorrow morning, sir."

"I will not attempt to dissuade you, well knowing the difficulty," said he, with a faint smile, "but a letter addressed to me at Lincoln's Inn will always find me and receive my most earnest attention." So saying, he rose, bowed and, having shaken my hand, left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Peter," exclaimed the baronet, striding up and down, "Peter, you are a fool, sir, a hot-headed, self-sufficient, pragmatical young fool, sir, curse me!"

"I am sorry you should think so," I answered.

"And," he continued, regarding me with a defiant eye, "I shall expect you to draw upon me for any sum that—that you may require for the present—friendship's sake—boyhood and—and all that sort of thing, and—or—oh, damme, you understand, Peter?"

Sir Richard," said I, grasping his unwilling hand, "I—I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Pooh, Peter, dammit!" said he, snatching his hand away and thrusting it hurriedly into his pocket, out of further reach.

"Thank you, sir," I reiterated; "be sure that should I fall ill or any unforeseen calamity happen to me, I will most gladly, most gratefully accept your generous aid in the spirit in which it is offered, but——"

"But?" exclaimed Sir Richard.

"Until then——"

"Oh, the devil!" said Sir Richard, and, ringing the bell, ordered his horse to be brought to the door, and thereafter stood with his back to the empty fireplace, his fists thrust down into his pockets, frowning heavily and with a fixed intentness at the nearest armchair.

"I needs must turn to look at the tall, black shaft of the gibbet, and the grisly horror that dangled beneath its chains and iron bands; and from this back again to my companion, to find him regarding me with a curiously twisted smile, and a long-barreled pistol held within a foot of my head."

Sir Richard Anstruther is tall and broad, ruddy of face, with a prominent nose and great square chin, whose grimness is offset by a mouth singularly sweet and tender, and the kindly light of blue eyes; he is in very truth a gentleman. Indeed, as he stood there, in his plain blue coat with its high roll collar and shining silver buttons, his spotless moleskins and heavy, square-toed riding boots, he was as fair a type as might be of the English country gentleman. It is such men as he, who, fearless upon the littered quarter-decks of reeling battleships, undismayed amid the smoke and death of stricken fields, their duty well and nobly done, have turned their feet homeward to pass their latter days amid their turnips and cabbages, beating their swords into pruning hooks, and glad enough to do it.

"Peter," said he, suddenly.

"Sir?" said I.

"You never saw your father to remember, did you?"

"No, Sir Richard."

"Nor your mother?"

"Nor my mother."

"Poor boy—poor boy!"

"You knew my mother?"

"Yes, Peter, I knew your mother," said Sir Richard, staring very hard at the chair again, and I saw that his mouth had grown wonderfully tender. "Yours has been a very secluded life hitherto, Peter," he went on after a moment.

"Entirely so," said I, "with the exception of my never-to-be-forgotten visits to the Hall."

"Ah, yes; I taught you to ride, remember."

"You are associated with every boyish pleasure I ever knew," said I, laying my hand upon his arm. Sir Richard coughed and grew suddenly red in the face.

"Why—ah—you see, Peter," he began, picking up his riding whip and staring at it, "you see your uncle was never very fond of company at any time, whereas I——"

"Whereas you could always find time to remember the lonely boy left when all his companions were gone on their holidays—left to his books and the dreary desolation of the empty schoolhouse and echoing cloisters——"

"Pooh!" exclaimed Sir Richard, redder than ever. "Bosh!"

"Do you think I can ever forget the glorious day when you drove over in your coach and four, and carried me off in triumph, and how we raced the white-hatted fellow in the tilbury——?"

"And beat him!" added Sir Richard.

"Took off his near wheel on the turn," said I.

"The fool's own fault," said Sir Richard.

"And left him in the ditch, cursing us!" said I.

"Egad, yes, Peter! Oh, but those were fine horses—and though I say it, no better team in the south country. You'll remember the 'off wheeler' broke his leg shortly after and had to be shot, poor devil."

"And later, at Oxford," I began.

"What now, Peter?" said Sir Richard, frowning darkly.

"Do you remember the bronze vase that used to stand on the mantelpiece in my study?"

"Bronze vase?" repeated Sir Richard, intent upon his whip again.

"I used to find bank notes in it after you had visited me, and when I hid the vase they turned up just the same in most unexpected places."

"Young fellow—must have money—necessary—now and then," muttered Sir Richard.

At this juncture, with a discreet knock, the butler appeared to announce that Sir Richard's horse was waiting. Hereupon the baronet, somewhat hastily, caught up his hat and gloves, and I followed him out of the house and down the steps.

Sir Richard drew on his gloves, thrust his toe into the stirrup, and then turned to look at me over his arm.

"Peter," said he.

"Sir Richard?" said I.

"Regarding your walking tour——"

"Yes?"

"I think it's all damned tomfoolery!" said Sir Richard. After saying which he swung himself into the saddle with a lightness and ease that many younger might have envied.

"I'm sorry for that, sir, because my mind is set upon it."

"With 10 guineas in your pocket!"

"That, with due economy, should be ample until I can find some means to earn more."

"A fiddlestick, sir—an accursed fiddlestick!" snorted Sir Richard. "How is a boy, an unsophisticated, hot-headed young fool of a boy, to earn his own living?"

"Others have done it," I began.

"Pish!" said the baronet.

"And been the better for it in the end."

"Tush!" said the baronet.

"And I have a great desire to see the world from the viewpoint of the multitude."

"Bah!" said the baronet, so forcibly that his mare started; "this comes of your damnable revolutionary tendencies. Let me tell you, Want is a hard master, and the world a bad place for one who is moneyless and without friends."

"You forget, sir, I shall never be without a friend."

"God knows it, boy," answered Sir Richard, and his hand fell and rested for a moment upon my shoulder. "Peter," said he, very slowly and heavily, "I'm growing old—and I shall never marry—and sometimes, Peter, of an evening I get very lonely and—lonely, Peter." He stopped for a while, gazing away toward the green slopes of distant Shooter's Hill. "Oh, boy!" said he at last, "won't you come to the Hall and help me to spend my money?"

Without answering I reached up and clasped his hand; it was the hand which held his whip, and I noticed how tightly he gripped the handle, and wondered.

"Sir Richard," said I at last, "wherever I go I shall treasure the recollection of this moment, but ——"

"But, Peter?"

"But, sir ——"

"Oh, dammit!" he exclaimed, and set spurs to his mare. Yet once he turned in his saddle to flourish his whip to me ere he galloped out of sight.

I Set Out

CHAPTER II

THE clock of the square-towered Norman church, a mile away, was striking the hour of four as I let myself out into the morning. It was dark as yet, and chilly, but in the east was already a faint glimmer of dawn. Reaching the stables, I paused with my hand on the door hasp, listening to the hiss, hissing that told me Adam, the groom, was already at work within. As I entered he looked up from the saddle he was polishing and touched his forehead with a grimy forefinger.

"You be early abroad, Mr. Peter."

"Yes," said I. "I wish to be on Shooter's Hill at sunrise; but first I came to say 'good-by' to 'Wings.'"

"To be sure, sir," nodded Adam, picking up his lantern.

Upon the ensuing interview I will not dwell; it was affecting both to her and to myself, for we were mutually attached.

"Sir," said Adam, when at last the stable door had closed behind us, "that there mare knows as you're a-leaving her."

"I think she does, Adam."

"'Oozes be wonderful wise, sir."

"Yes, Adam."

"This is a bad day for Wings, sir—and all of us, for that matter."

"I hope not, Adam."

"You be a-going away, they tell me, sir?"

"Yes, going away," I nodded.

"Wonder what'll become o' the mare, sir?"

"Ah, yes, I wonder," said I.

"Everything to be sold under the will, I think, sir?"

"Everything, Adam."

"Excuse me, sir," said he, knuckling his forehead, "you won't be wanting ever a groom, will you?"

"No, Adam," I answered, shaking my head, "I shan't be wanting a groom."

"Nor yet a body servant, sir?"

"No, Adam, nor yet a body servant."

Here there ensued a silence during which Adam knuckled his right temple again and I tightened the buckle of my knapsack.

"I think, Adam," said I, "I think it is going to be a fine day."

"Yes, sir."

"Good-by, Adam!" said I, and held out my hand.

"Good-by, sir." And, having shaken my hand, he turned and went back into the stable.

So I set off, walking beneath an avenue of trees looming up gigantic on either hand. At the end was the lodge and, ere I opened the gates, I paused for one last look at the house that had been all the home I had ever known since I could remember. As I stood thus, with my eyes upon the indistinct mass, I presently distinguished a figure running toward me and, as he came up, recognized Adam.

"It ain't much, sir, but it's all I 'ave," said he, and thrust a short, thick, well-smoked clay pipe into my hand—a pipe that was fashioned to the shape of a negro's head. "It's a good pipe, sir," he went on, "a mortal good pipe, and as sweet as a nut!" saying which, he turned about and ran off, leaving me standing there with his parting gift in my hand.

And having put the pipe into an inner pocket, I opened the gate and started off at a good pace along the broad highway.

In the knapsack at my back I had stowed a few clothes, the strongest and plainest I possessed, together with a shirt, some half-dozen favorite books, and my translation of Brantome; Quintilian and Petronius I had left with Mr. Grainger, who had promised to send them to a publisher, a friend of his, and in my pocket was my uncle George's legacy, namely, ten guineas in gold. And, as I walked, I began to compute how long such a sum might be made to last a man. By practicing the strictest economy, I thought I might manage well enough on two shillings a day, and this left me some hundred odd days in which to find some means of livelihood, and if a man could not suit himself in such time, then (thought I) he must be a fool indeed.

The Hold-up

CHAPTER III

THAT day I passed through several villages, stopping only to eat and drink; thus evening was falling as, having left fair Sevenoaks behind, I came to the brow of a certain hill, a long and very steep descent which (I think) is called the River Hill. And here, rising stark against the evening sky, was a gibbet, and standing beneath it a man, a short, square man in a somewhat shabby coat of a bottle-green, and with a wide-brimmed beaver hat sloped down over his eyes, who stood with his feet well apart, sucking the knob of a stick he carried, while he stared up at that which dangled by a stout chain from the cross-beam of the gibbet—something black and shriveled and horrible that had once been human.

As I came up the man drew the stick from his mouth and touched the brim of his hat with it in salutation.

"An object-lesson, sir," said he, and nodded toward the loathsome mass above.

"A very hideous one!" said I, pausing, "and, I think, a very useless one."

"He was as fine a fellow as ever thrust toe into stirrup," the man went on, pointing upward with his stick, "though you'd never think so to look at him now!"

"It's a horrible sight!" said I.

"It is," nodded the man, "it's a sight to turn a man's stomach, that it is!"

"You knew him, perhaps?" said I.

"Knew him," repeated the man, staring at me over his shoulder, "knew him—ah—that is, I knew of him."

"A highwayman?"

"Nick Scrope his name was," answered the man with a nod, "hung at Maidstone assizes last year, and a very good end he made of it too; and here he be—hung up in chains all nat'ral and reg'lar, as a warning to all and sundry."

"The more shame to England," said I; "to my thinking it is a scandal that our highways should be rendered odious by such horrors, and as wicked as it is useless."

"'Od rot me!" cried the fellow, slapping a cloud of dust from his coat with his stick, "hark to that now."

"What?" said I, "do you think for one moment that such a sight, horrible though it is, could possibly deter a man from robbery or murder whose mind is already made up to it by reason of circumstances or starvation?"

"Well, but it's an old custom, as old as this here road."

"True," said I, "and that of itself but proves my argument, for men have been hanged and gibbeted all these years, yet robbery and murder abide with us still, and are of daily occurrence."

"Why, as to that, sir," said the man, falling into step beside me as I walked on down the hill, "I won't say yes and I won't say no, but what I do say is—as many a man might think twice afore running the chance of coming to that—look!" And he stopped to turn, and point back at the gibbet with his stick. "Nick can't last much longer, though I've know'd 'em hang a good time—but they made a botch of Nick—not enough tar; you can see where the sun catches him there!"

Once more, though my whole being revolted at the sight, I must needs turn to look at the thing—the tall, black shaft of the gibbet, and the grisly horror that dangled beneath with its chains and iron bands; and from this, back again to my companion, to find him regarding me with a curiously twisted smile, and a long-barrelled pistol held within a foot of my head.

"Well?" said I, staring.

"Sir," shaid he, tapping his boot with his stick, "I must trouble you for the shiner I see a-winking at me from your cravat, likewise your watch and any small change you may have."

For a moment I hesitated, glancing from his grinning mouth swiftly over the deserted road, and back again.

"Likewise," said the fellow, "I must ask you to be sharp about it." It was with singularly clumsy fingers that I drew the watch from my fob and the pin from my cravat, and passed them to him.

"Now your pockets," he suggested. "turn 'em out."

This command I reluctantly obeyed, bringing to light my ten guineas, which were as yet intact, and which he pocketed forthwith, and two pennies—which he bade me keep.

"For," said he, "'twill buy you a draught of ale, sir, and there's good stuff to be had at The White Hart yonder, and there's nothin' like a draught of good ale to comfort a man in any such small adversity like this here. As to that knapsack," he pursued, eyeing it thoughtfully, "it looks heavy and might hold valleybels, but then, on the other hand, it might not, and those there straps takes time to unbuckle and——" He broke off suddenly, for from somewhere on the hill below us came the unmistakable sound of wheels. Hereupon the fellow very nimbly ran across the road, turned, nodded, and vanished among the trees and underbrush that clothed the steep slope down to the valley below.

The Bagman

CHAPTER IV

I WAS yet standing there, half stunned by my loss and the suddenness of it all, when a tilbury came slowly round a bend in the road, the driver of which nodded lazily in his seat while his horse, a sorry, jaded animal, plodded wearily up the steep slope of the hill. As he approached I hailed him loudly, upon which he suddenly dived down between his knees and produced a brass-bound blunderbuss.

"What's to do?" cried he, a thick-set, round-faced fellow, "what's to do, eh?" and he covered me with the wide mouth of the blunderbuss.

"Thieves!" said I; "I've been robbed, and not three minutes since."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a tone of great relief and with the color returning to his plump cheeks, "is that the way of it?"

"It is," said I, "and a very bad way; the fellow has left me but twopence in the world."

"Twopence—ah?"

"Come," I went on, "you are armed, I see; the thief took to the brushwood here, not three minutes ago; we may catch him yet——"

"Catch him?" repeated the fellow, staring.

"Yes, don't I tell you he has stolen all the money I possess?"

"Except twopence," said the fellow.

"Yes——"

"Well, twopence ain't to be sneezed at, and if I was you——"

"Come, we're losing time," said I, cutting him short.

"But—my mare, what about my mare?"

"She'll stand," I answered; "she's tired enough."

The Bagman, for such I took him to be, sighed, and, blunderbuss in hand, prepared to alight, but in the act of doing so paused.

"Was the rascal armed?" he inquired, over his shoulder.

"To be sure he was," said I.

The Bagman got back into his seat and took up the reins.

"What now?" I inquired.

"It's this accursed mare of mine," he answered; "she'll bolt again, d'ye see—twice yesterday and once the day before she bolted, sir, and on a road like this——"

"Then lend me your blunderbuss."

"I can't do that," he replied, shaking his head.

"But why not?" said I impatiently.

"Because this is a dangerous road, and I don't intend to be left unarmed on a dangerous road; I never have been and I never will, and there's an end to it, d'ye see!"

"Then do you mean to say that you refuse your aid to a fellow-traveler—that you will sit there and let the rogue get away with all the money I possess in the world——"

"Oh, no; not on no account; just you get up here beside me and we'll drive to The White Hart. I'm well known at The White Hart; we'll get a few honest fellows at our heels and have this thieving, rascally villain in the twinkling of an——" He stopped suddenly, made a frantic clutch at his blunderbuss and sat staring. Turning short round, I saw the man in the beaver hat standing within a yard of us, fingering his long pistol and with the same twisted smile upon his lips.

"I've a mind," said he, nodding his head at the Bagman, "I've a great mind to blow your face off."

The blunderbuss fell to the roadway with a clatter.

"Thievin', rascally villain—was it?" Dammel I think I will blow your face off."

"No—don't do—that," said the Bagman, in a strange, jerky voice, "what 'ud be—the good?"

"Why, that there poor animal wouldn't have to drag that fat carkiss of yours up and down hills, for one thing."

"I'll get out and walk."

"And it might learn ye to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"I—I didn't mean—any—offense."

"Then chuck us your purse," growled the other, "and be quick about it." The Bagman obeyed with wonderful celerity, and I heard the purse chink as the footpad dropped it into the pocket of his greatcoat.

"As for you," said he, turning to me, "you get on your way and never mind me; forget you ever had ten guineas and don't go a-riskin' your vallyble young life; come—up with you!" and he motioned me into the tilbury with his pistol.

"What about my blunderbuss?" expostulated the Bagman, faintly, as I seated myself beside him, "you'll give me my blunderbuss—cost me five pound it did."

"More fool you!" said the highwayman, and, picking up the unwieldy weapon, he hove it into the ditch.

"As to our argyment—regardin' gibbetin', sir," said he, nodding to me, "I'm rayther 'nclined to think you was in the right on it arter all." Then, turning toward the Bagman: "Drive on, fat-face!" said he, "and sharp's the word." Whereupon the Bagman whipped up his horse and, as the tired animal struggled forward over the crest of the hill, I saw the highwayman still watching us.

Very soon we came in view of "The White Hart," an inn I remembered to have passed on the right-hand side of the road, and scarce were we driven up to the door than down jumped the Bagman, leaving me to follow at my leisure, and running into the tap, forthwith began recounting his loss to all and sundry, so that I soon found we were become the centre of a gaping crowd, much to my disgust. Indeed, I would have slipped away, but each time I attempted to do so the Bagman would appeal to me to corroborate some statement.

"Galloping Dick himself, or I'm a Dutchman?" he cried for the twentieth time; "up he comes, bold as brass, bless you, and a horse-pistol in each hand. 'Hold hard!' says I, and ups with my blunderbuss?" he inquired, turning to me.

"Quite well," said I.

"Ah, but you should have seen the follow's face when he saw my blunderbuss ready at my shoulder; green it was—green as grass, for if ever there was death in a man's face, and sudden death at that, there was sudden death in mine, when, all at once, my mare, my accursed mar, jibbed—"

"Yes, yes?" cried half a dozen breathless voices, "what then?"

"Why, then, gentlemen," said the Bagman, shaking his head and frowning round upon the ring of intent faces, "why then, gentlemen, being a resolute, determined fellow, I did what any other man of spirit would have done—I——"

"Dropped your blunderbuss," said I.

"Ay, to be sure I did——"

"And he pitched it into the ditch," said I.

"Ay," nodded the Bagman dubiously, while the others crowded nearer.

"And then he took your money, and called you 'Fool' and 'Fat-face,' and so it ended," said I. With which I pushed my way from the circle, and, finding a quiet corner beside the chimney, sat down, and with my last twopence paid for a tankard of ale.

The White Hart

CHAPTER V

WHEN a man has experienced some great and totally unexpected reverse of fortune, has been swept from one plane of existence to another, that he should fail at once to recognize the full magnitude of that change is but natural, for his faculties must of necessity be numbed more or less by its very suddenness.

Yesterday I had been reduced from affluence to poverty with an unexpectedness that had dazed me for the time being, and, from the poverty of an hour ago, I now found myself reduced to an utter destitution, without the wherewithal to pay for the meanest night's lodging. And, contrasting the careless ease of a few days since with my present lamentable situation, I fell into a gloomy meditation; and the longer I thought it over, the more dejected I became. To be sure, I might apply to Sir Richard for assistance, but my pride revolted at even the thought, more especially at such an early stage; moreover, I had determined, beforehand, to walk my appointed road unaided from the first.

From these depressing thoughts I was presently aroused by a loud, rough voice at no great distance, to which, though I had been dimly conscious of it for some time, I had before paid no attention. Now, however, I raised my eyes from the spot upon the floor where they had rested hitherto, and fixed them upon the speaker.

He was a square-shouldered, bullet-headed fellow, evidently held in much respect by his companions, for he occupied the head of the table, and I noticed that whenever he spoke the others held their peace, and hung upon the words with an appearance of much respect.

"'Yes, sirs,' says I," he began, louder than ever before, and with a flourish of his long-stemmed pipe, "'yes, sirs, Tom Cragg's my name, an' craggy's my natur,' says I. 'I be 'ard, sirs, dey-vilish 'ard an' uncommon rocky!' 'Ere's a face as likes good knocks,' I says, 'why, when I fought Crib Burke o' Bristol, 'e broke 'is 'and again' my jaw, so 'e did, an' I scarce knowed 'e'd 'it me till I see 'im 'oppin' wi' the pain of it. Come, sirs,' says I, 'who'll give me a black eye; a fiver's all I ask.' Well, up comes a young buck, ready an' willin.' 'Tom,' says 'e, 'I'll take two flaps at that figger-head o' yourn for seven guineas, come, what d'ye say?' I says, 'done,' says I. So my fine gentleman lays by 'is 'at an' cane, strips off 'is right-'and glove, an' 'eavin' back leta fly at me. Bang comes 'is fist again' my jaw, an' there's my gentleman a-dabbin' at 'is broken knuckles wi' 'is 'ankercher. 'Come, my lord,' says I, 'fair is fair, take your other whick.' 'Dammation!' says 'e, 'take your money an' go to the devil!' says 'e, 'I thought you was flesh an' blood an' not cast iron!' 'Craggy, my lord,' says I, gathering up the rhino, 'Craggy by name an' craggy by natur', my lord,' says I."

"Now, Tom," said a tall, bony individual, chiefly remarkable in possessing but one eye, and that so extremely red and watery as to give one the idea that it was very much overworked, "now Tom," said he, setting down the refilled tankard at the great man's elbow with a triumphant flourish, "tell us 'ow shook 'ands wi' the Prince Regent."

"Ah! tell us," chimed in the rest.

CONTINUED TOMORROW.