The Red Night At Raglan.

Being a tale of Master Roger Selby, once esquire in the service of His Grace the Marquis of Worcester.

By ANNA ROBESON BROWN,
Author of "Alain of Halfdene."

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PART I.

Those of my lord marquis' household who like myself were noble, or at least gentle-born, were wont to serve him at his meat, and to remain in attendance, until my lord went into his closet. This was at high noon; therefore it chanced oftentimes that Scudamore, Clough and others among my mates were not risen from their meal until three of the clock. In faith, on this July eventide, 1645, 'twas nigher four when we saw the tables bare, and set to play at bowls in the lower pleasaunce. The troublousness of the times rumoring his majesty's defeat, kept us within bounds, and the confinement which it occasioned caused us heaviness of spirit, so that the sport went but tamely. Truth to tell, I was as deep in the dumps as well could be a stout lad of seventeen, and was idly kicking my ball over the clipped turf, when one of the pages came to the wicket, crying that peddlers were at the great gate with news of the war. At the word, we were all off, spurning the grass with our heels, nor were we late at the feast, for on near approach we found old Cooke, the gate-keeper, two men-at-arms, and a score of idle grooms holding parley with the chap-men. Scudamore and I stood aside, hearkening of the fellow's tale, which, as we saddened to learn later on, was a very tissue of lying, but which then, as it spoke of victory to the king's forces, warmed us to the heart. We or Raglan had been perforce so well kept within wall, that we were wearied out and so gave the tale more credence that at busier moments. Yet even I, although I held the fellow's words in a fair belief, did not spare my doubts, by reason of his villainous appearance and shifty eye, and was no less inclined to credit him for the glibness of his tale. Moreover I fell to inward laughing at the simplicity of the audience, who stood about with their mouths agape swallowing the tale as t'were their small-beer, and breaking in with a reverential 'oh!' "ah!" "marry now!" as though the peddler were no less than Prince Rupert.

Cooke was such an old shrew, that I was not loathe to behold him so gulled, and fell to much laughter when the peddler was borne off to revel in the Kitchen tower. Strangers were not readily admitted to Raglan in those days, nor perchance would this one have been, had my Lord Charles, or my lord of Worcester himself, been stirring to see him pass. But earlier that day dispatches had been brought in haste to the marquis; he had at dinner shown much preoccupation of countenance, and was even now closely conferring with my Lord Charles and Dr. Bailey, so that 'twas no great wonder he was not about to behold the peddler's triumph.

I was deeper than ever in the dumps, and was returning slothfully to my distaseful pastime when Moyle, my lord's usher, called to me that I was looked for instantly in the closet. So thither I turned my steps, glad of any occupation, and tapped respectfully upon the panel.

'Twas my lord himself bade me enter, and the instant I closed the door behind me I felt a plucking at my heart that told me that this was no trivial errand; that here lay my chance to make or mar my fortunes. For my lord's voice rang deeper than with its accustomed garrulous pipe of age, his brow was deeply ploughed with thought, and when he fixed me with his eye 'twas with a dreadful, probing gaze, as 'twere to challenge my fidelity, very different from his usual habit of jesting tolerance.

Mine honored master, then gray in years, was a man of girth and great bulk, much enfeebled by his infirmities, so that he rarely stood or walked about, but sat continually in a great chair by the window. Dr. Bailey, his chaplain, sat over against him, and made a squint at me to express reassurance, for my lord's sternness of visage had cast me into a hurried self-catechism as to my misdoings.

My lord began without preliminary, hearkening at once to the core of the matter.

"Roger Selby," he said, folding before him one withered hand, "Dr. Bailey here has given me such hopes of you, that I have, on his advice, chosen you from those of my household, for an especial service."

This preface so gladdened and amazed me that I could make him no adequate answer beyond bowing and murmuring my fidelity.

"You are, I know, a hardy and active youth," proceeded my lord, in the same deepened voice. "I have the assurance of Dr. Bailey that you are faithful and brave. That you are discreet I have voucher by your bearing in my household. This is, above all, an opportunity for your discretion and dispatch. If you are content to do my bidding with swiftness and exactitude, asking no questions, seeking to know no more than what is under your nose—and keeping a close tongue in your mouth afterwards, now is your chance equally to serve me, your king and country."

"I thank your lordship," I made reply. "In this matter I shall move as your lordship's hand—will you tell me your lordship's desire?"

"You make no protestations," he said, knitting his brows at me.

"There is no need, my lord. They will but make my weakness apparent should I fail, your lordship, and they honor me but little if I do well."

"Then to work," pursued my lord, in kindlier tones, as one not ill-pleased with my reply; "hearken to me, lad. This night upon eleven of the clock receive a visitor of whose coming no soul in Raglan must be cognizant save our three selves. It will be your task to conduct this person to me. You know the bill beyond Raglan village where the thorn hedge grows?"

I signified assent.

"Good." My lord's voice grew sharp and commanding. "Leave Raglan when ten o'clock has sounded, by the secret passage in the Yellow tower. Your departure must of course be swift, and unchallenged by friend or foe. Bear a lantern with you, but take heed you set it not alight till you are well under the brow of the hill beyond Raglan walls. There wait by the roadside till you are accosted by a mounted cavalier, to whom you shall address the words: 'Whose horse ride you?' If he reply 'The king's,' 'tis very well; take you the bridle-reins and lead him instanter to the door of the passage, where he will dismount. Thence lead him straightway here, to me. You can use a sword?"

"On occasion, yes, my lord," I replied, gaining more assurance, and Dr. Bailey interposed, lauding my swordsmanship with such praise as, minding me of many a bygone trick on the good man, my cheeks reddened to hear.

"Then remember that on this occasion you must use it well," my lord cried out, shaking one gouty hand at me. "Should you be stayed, or questioned—I care not by whom—'tis a turn of your sword, I say! Bear it naked before you, and never let past the thought that you are the safe-guard of him you lead."

"I will bear a brace of pistols likewise, an' your lordship think it well."

"I do assuredly, but with this armament, my cockerel, be not reckless either, but bear yourself with the caution of a man-of-arms."

I entreated my master to repeat his instructions, which I then felt tolerably sure of, and on this I bowed and left him, containing my excitement, and with as unmoved a face as ever I wore in my life. The one question I longed to put, I choked into my teeth, namely why he had chosen me, a lad, for so important a mission when he was surrounded by old and tried servi-

THE DOOR OPENED UPON A DITCH.

tors. Upon reflection, however, I made a shrewd guess that my lord would rather entrust to the enthusiasm and youthful romance of a boy, than to the keener sight and calmer brains of one who bore knowledge of his affairs.

'Twas among the softest of July days, and the sweet summer air breathed on my forehead as I crossed the court. All things looked fair to me; I was touched with pride; my pulse beat with adventure, and my heart with loyalty; in imagining I beheld myself early in advancement, guerdoned with the trust of my superiors. What the service signified to which I was hidden, I hazarded no guess, my lord had forbidden such conjecture. Nevertheless I could not but surmise from the secret manner of this embassy, that it concerned some weighty business of state, some turn of fortune's wheel for king or parliament, some anchor for the storm-tossed bark of the Stuarts. And my soul glowed at the thought that I, Roger Selby, bore a part in this, and that perchance the roll of history might bear by name among those great.

Plunged into high thoughts, I shunned my mates, and among the fragrant paths of the Pleasaunce wandered musingly until sundown.

Now I was by nature studious, given to spending my hours over Tacitus or Sully, so it was remarked of none present that I drew apart after the evening meal, and got me to my chamber. From by window-pane the Fountain court seemed a blazing chequer-work of light; music flowed forth in snatches on the night air; and although dark clouds had risen to gloom the heavens, all Raglan glowed like a beacon. Speedily as might be I got me into my buff coat and riding breeches, buckled on my sword-belt and tried my weapon, and fitted a tallow dip into the horn lantern Dr. Bailey had caused to be placed in my room. Thus equipped I bent my spirit to patience for more than an hour, which time of waiting I passed in fitting meditations, and in the repetition of my lord's instructions. As time sped on, light after light glimmered out, the music ceased, the velvet soft turf was overhung with a pall of blackness, and night seemed to brood over Raglan like some mighty bird. When the hour had struck I rose, opened cautiously the door of my chamber court, and at the Yellow tower, without the tap of a footfall. The hidden passage, by which I was to make my sortie, was no secret to the inmates of the castle, being but lately digged at my lord's command, and leading under the moat of the Keep to the highway beyond the outer wall. The bolts, I found, had been touched with oil, and it opened without a creak of the hinges. In our good days, many a time had I raced through the blackness of it, so that the procedure had naught of novel for me. I stepped firmly, knowing each step, and laying my hand without fail on the knob which led me out into the night air.

I now stood under the curve of the hill, up to my knees in mire, for the door opened upon a ditch, and out of gaze of the castle shrouded in its veil of trees. No sound of man smote my ears as I stood allistening, naught save the whistle of the night wind that had set up his pipe at sundown. This wind made a pretty crackling and rustling among the thorn bushes, and blew bits of straw into my face as I strove to shield the wick of my lantern while setting it alight. This done, I clambered to the thorn hedge, the wind's noise leading me to it, and there sat me down to wait. The highway curled by me, going up hill on my left hand and down hill on my right. The wind flowed cold along it, but I was sheltered by the kindly thorn-bush and did not feel it unduly. There was no moon, nor even a star, so I was fain to turn from the heavens to my own lantern wherein the flame twisted and swayed.

Thus sat I, for what seemed a long space, when suddenly the breeze brought to my ears a faint and steady sound, the tread of horses, more than

I THRUST OUT MY LANTERN.

one and stepping slowly. My heart rang loud in my ears at this, and I thrust my tell-tale lantern deep into the thorn-bush till I should know what this portended. The sound came nearer, climbing up the hill toward me, then ceased a little way off, and I could hear the shifting of the horses as they rubbed and muzzled each other. This continued for a space along with the whisperings of men's voices, than over the brow of the hill, dark against the one clear quarter of the sky, grew the figure of a man on horseback, one who rode with drooping head and slack rein. He came on slowly, looking to right and left, until he all but overrid me; but I rose under the horse's foot and thrust out my lantern, so that he might see the light.

PART II.

"Fair sir, whose steed ride you?" I asked, with as much firmness of tone as I could muster.

A very gentle voice made answer to me:

"The king's."

Upon this there fell a silence, for as I had made no manner of guess at the rank of my accoster, I was put to it by what title to address him. He himself spoke the next word.

"I am at your leadership, sir. I follow you."

I slipped to the horse's head, and took his bridle rein and, doing this, the lantern's light fell clear on me, for the gentleman moved in the saddle, saying: "My lord of Worcester has in good sooth chosen a young messenger!"

"And therefore the better to serve him with all my strength," I answered.

"Yet, methinks, for so dangerous an errand he has more fitting and tried esquires?" the voice remained gentle, and emboldened me in replying: "Mayhap, he thought it best if there be danger, that these should not suffer it, my lord."

The man sighed, and we spoke no further.

We gained the ditch, fighting the new arisen wind, and I assisted the cavalier to alight, opened the door for him and put the lantern into his hand, bidding him enter. This he did with firm step, while I tethered the horse to a near stump, and returned bearing my bared sword. The night was quiet, yet I felt a shiver of distrust.

"You go well armed," said he, as we prepared to set forth.

"There may be need," I replied. "Will your honor permit me to be your candle-bearer?"

In this manner we set forward, I going first with the light held aloft, and naked blade cleaving the darkness of the passage. 'Twas of necessity a slower journey than when I had come alone, for my companion stumbled at the irregularities of the way, groped somewhat fearfully with his hands, and muttered under his breath. Although I turned on moments to aid him, yet I never clearly saw what manner of man I was conducting, save that he wore fair hair curled over the lace collar of his buff-coat, and was in figure thin, not much over my own height. His dress was that of a simple cavalier, but there was wrought hold-work at his sword-hilt, at his ear I caught the gleam of a great pearl, and on his breast hung the miniature of a lady, richly encased and rimmed with brilliants. The hand that caught betimes at my shoulder, or the wall, was white and delicate, but of the face under the shadow of his beaver, I saw not a feature.

We passed on, neither speaking, save a word on my part to charge him of a step or pitfall, till we came out in the gallery of the Keep, and thence upon the draw-bridge, where, to be sure, I snuffed my lantern. The castle lay in utter silence, as 'twere empty of life, in my lord's closet not the tiniest spark showed that we were stayed for. But my heart sung as we crept upon the stair, and I thought at once to taste the sweetness of my patron's praise. This as it turned out I was not yet to have, for when we stood, the visitor and I, before my lord marquis' door 'twas open to my companion only, and I was bidden by Dr. Bailey in a few short words to remain in attendance in the ante-

I NEVER SAW CLEARLY WHAT MANNER OF MAN I WAS CONDUCTING.

chamber. This, to make no lies about the matter, very greatly disconcerted me. I had been appointed to a place of trust, responsible actions had been thrust into my hands, and I looked foolishly for something further; to enter where the other had entered, to share with him the counsel of my betters.

Instead of which I was here, on the wrong side of the door, like any wardrobe page, bidden to stand like a child till I was spoken to. Such was my vanity, and such my discomfiture. Nevertheless as I stood on guard in the silence of the sleeping room my head began to hum with visionary honors. I saw myself foremost in the turmoils of war, a belted knight at the feet of his majesty. Then the excitement which had throbbed till now in my veins flowed out, leaving me weak and weary; I recalled that the hour was past midnight, and in my despite mine eyes began to glue together.

The opening of the door against whose panel I had leaned my heavy head started me broad awake, as a man came forth, the strong light of the wax torches beating against his face. He stood regarding me; and in that gaze, kind, weary and unutterably sorrowful, by the high white forehead, the flowing hair, I saw in a flash it was no other than the king himself. Dazed as I was by sleep and bewilderment, this conviction struck me like a hand on the shoulder to my knees, saying no word.

"Ah," said Charles, playfully, "it is our candle-bearer!"

Still I spoke not, for my voice would not come.

"Your majesty must assuredly be fatigued, will you not at once to your chamber?" said my lord's voice. "Alas that circumstance forbid my offering your majesty a suitable train! Myself as waiting gentleman and the good doctor for usher, but for sewer and page—"

"Good friend," broke in the king, "I am too proud after this night that you should serve me as a waiting-gentleman. Get you to your rest, we beseech you. And bethink you, my lord, we are now soldiers; we live in tents; we have cast aside the ceremonious trapping of a court. This lad here will serve my turn as page; that is," he continued, "if he will consent, even for a night, to exchange your service for that of an unhappy gentleman who has no gold nor preferment to offer him?" He tendered me his hand as he spoke, and I set my lips to it, though indeed, I found it icy cold. A few broken words only could I say, but they caused him to smile on me the kindlier.

"Then let us forward," said the king, more cheerfully, turning once more to his host. My lord had, by the help of Dr. Bailey's arm, gotten to his knees. His face, as I could see, looked strange and sad, as he strove to kiss his majesty's hand, but the king prevented him.

"Old and tried servant," he said, and the sweetness of his tone accounted at once for the devotion of his friends; "between thou and us this night there must be none of this. Age and good deeds should kneel to God alone."

My lord was, as I could see plainly, affected by this to the breaking point of tears.

"Sire," he said, as Charles helped him once more to his feet, "I have not a thought in my heart that tends not to the services of my God and you!" Upon this he waved us away, that we might not behold him weep.

Dr. Bailey lighted the king in silence to his chamber, which he had oftentimes occupied, the casement thereof opening upon a fair wide sweep of field and park. In this prospect his majesty had been wont to take much delight, and 'twas a token of his heavy spirit that he said no word of it on entering.

The king unbuckled his sword upon a table and flung himself, silent, into an arm-chair, while the doctor, having set down the waxen candle, respectfully withdrew. I, as page, stretched myself before the arras till I should be needed, for the king had refused all proffers of our respectful assistance, and now sat in his chair, head on hand, sorrow visibly widening upon his brow, the very picture of one who had abandoned hope.

THE KING TOOK HIS ASSAILANT BY THE WRIST.

I was no fool, and knew better than to intrude on his privacy, but my throat swelled with tears at his desolate plight and the gentle kindliness of his countenance. Yet even at this hour, and in this place, I must have slept an hour or so, for when I looked again dawn showed a shrunken face at the casement, the candles spluttered pale upon the table and the figure of his majesty sat where it had been, sleeping perchance, or sunk deep in bitter waters of thought.

I was stiff, and I was shifting foot, but warily so as not to annoy him; when on a sudden my heart leaped to my throat, and there stuck. The door behind the king's back leading into the ante-chamber moved, very gently, a face peered into the crack, no other face than that of the lying Roundhead peddler with his evil eye. Then a hand came through, curled about the hilt of a great knife such as cooks use, and this made a pass in the direction of the king's back. All this was so noiseless that I took myself to be dreaming until I saw the creature make a stealthy step forward. At that, without more ado I leapt to my feet, and flung open the door crying shrilly: "Run, sire! For God's sake!"

The king started to his feet with a violent movement, glanced behind and saw the murderer between him and the table whereon lay his sword, and then sprang, but not too soon, for the blade sawed in the air, and stood upright, quivering, in his chair's silken cushion. Ere the man could recover it the king was through the door, which I had closed after him, flinging myself before it. I drew my sword and held it in readiness, but my fingers were limp upon the hilt. I am not certain what was in my mind at the time; I know my throat was dry, and that I commended my soul to God, thinking that my last hour drew near.

But the villian's affair was not with me, he gripped me by the elbows and dashed me, sword and all, against the wall, while he sped into the gallery after the king, the clatter of whose flying heels met mine ears on the opening of the door. Blood gushed from my nose at the blow, but I was after them in a trice, cursing the slippery floor where I slid and faltered. I was light-heeled, yet that vile rascal's feet were winged, and I saw that soon must the king come to grips with him, for he gained rapidly. Down the long, dark gallery sped the king, his fair hair streaming from his head; faster, and growing close, followed the wild beast, after them both the wilder I, screaming for help as I ran. So sunken are men in sleep just before the dawn that all this passed unnoted, and 'twas many seconds ere all Raglan began to hum with an alarm.

At the end of the gallery were two doors; the king whipped thro' one of them, up the stone stair, and so out on the battlement, where he doubtless looked to be seen of the men-of-arms. His pursuer was at his very heels; I put forth my best, a sob broke in my throat as I saw the man so close, I fairly flew, never had I run to such purpose.

Just as I sprang into view on the battlement the king doubled, turned, and took his assailant by the wrist. He was no wrestler; there was his opponent slashing the air with that ugly knife, but I was on them now, and beat my fist on the man's face as I would hammer a stone. With the knife he cut at me, laying open my shoulder. The king's quick breathing in my ear fired me. I stopped and pulled the man's ankles while the king twisted the wrist that held the knife. And all the time we were pulling him to the edge of the battlement. I heard shouts and the clang of mailed feet on the stone stairs, just as with one wrench I toppled the man into space, the knife making a glittering arc as it fell. The murderer gripped desperately at the stone edge, failed, slipped and pitched head foremost far below, where he lay still.

The blood on my face and shoulders had dyed my hands and my eyes were dizzy. The castle walls wavered before me like a candle flame, and only the king's arm kept me from falling.

When I awoke from my swoon I was in my chamber and my Lord Charles' face bent over me. It was even-tide, the king had ridden forth again in haste. I did not know it was to his death. At the head of my bed and falling to my pillow was a broad blue ribbon and a sparkling jewel, my greatest treasure, and the treasure of my children, the king's own "George" which he had left for me. Of my lord's goodness to me, here is no fitting place to speak, that and my "George" remain to me, but all else has passed into oblivion of what was known in the country side as the "Red Night at Raglan."

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