

The Capture of a Wolf.

Morris Price Williams, in Temple Bar.

I WAS broiling me a rasher for mine dinner in the little room back o' the shop, when long Luke Sparfit did thrust him in his head at the doorway, "to pass the time o' day," quoth he, but I would have it he had smelled the cooking.

Now Luke be kin o' mine, and the strongest man and smartest soldier (so his mate did oft tell me at their shaving) in the regiment of dragoons then quartered in our town, but daily looking to be summoned, boot and saddle, to the North.

For me, my trade be partly one of blood-letting, like to Luke's; but herein, methinks, have I the better of him, in that I shed me blood to cure, not kill, and am moreover paid by the pint. And, an I may say it without unseemly boasting, there be no better known sign i' the town than my barber's pole, which, by the same token, be new painted and looketh bravely.

In the days whereof I tell I was at much pains scraping me together wherewithal to wed Marjory Fox, whose father, Master Ezekiel Fox, the lorimer of East Street, was a man of substance and a right worthy, albeit with a rough side to his tongue (as I have reason good to know, having found me thrice under its lash), and somewhat close o' the fist.

I did hand Luke the gammon to cut him too a rasher and cook it for himself, and did fall to bethinking me of the days when we were playmates together; the merry pranks we did play, the miching from Dame Coskett's School, the raid on Master Timothy Dobb's orchard (wherein, I being stuck by the pouch of mine jerkin, which was full of apples, in the fork of a branch, did so taste of Master Dobb's dog-whip that I could sit me down but sidewise for many a day); the bathing us in Copple's Pool, which had been my drowning, but for Luke; how sore I bewailed me when my cousin did offer him for a soldier, since which sad day—now six years ago—I had seen not of him till Tuesday sen'night had brought me his regiment to his native town.

Lost was I in such-like musings ('tis a way of mine), when Luke did stretch a long arm athwart me for to turn my rasher, which was like to burn, and—

"Davie," quoth he, "fain would I know what was in our colonel's mind this forenoon. Heaven send the old man be not goin daft! For was there ever heard the like? The men turned out in skirmishing order without e'er a note of bugle and the word passed to ride, as quiet as mice, to the three elms at Porflake Corner, nigh to Thackton Moor! Why, an 'twere an ambuscade, could be no more pother! For me, 'twas my turn as Corporal on guard at the barracks, else would I—"

"Hark ye, Corporal Sparfit" (I drew me up very big and mouthed me my words of set purpose, for Luke being a man of simple mind was easy played on, and I did love the pastime; not but that I had in sooth somewhat to say), "these be matters too deep for thy plummet. Best leave them to the colonel and me—" ("List to the noble chin-scraper!" quoth Luke, mocking)—"for, I would have thee know, the colonel be a man well-meaning enough, albeit not perchance, in this particular, far-sighted." ("Now a plague on thine impudence!" quote Luke, and did hurl a crust at me.) "Meanwhile," and here I did lean forward to look him in the face, and did drop into mine own familiar speech, "knowest thou aught of one Saul Pratt?"

Luke's face, which had been all agrin, did of a sudden grow dark and stern.

"Faugh!" quoth he, "'twas a vile stoat and no man. He was once of my regiment, but did desert of a stormy November night after foully doing a young ensign to death ('twas a mere lad), in his sleep and robbing him. Ay, and not content therewith, for some wry freak of vengeance—the ensign, 'twas said, had chid him for a sloven on parade—he had cut him off both the lad's ears and lain them on each side of the dead face on the pillow. Which wanton mishandling of the corpse did set us against him well-nigh as much as the killing."

"And ye caught him not?"

"Nay, but we do hope yet to light on him. Myself I have never clapt eyes on the snake: for I was Bristol way with a draft of the regiment when he did join, and he was gone ere I found me back. But I mind me well o' the marks of him."

And he did tick them off on his fingers.

"'Square built; five foot nine; eyes of a light grey; red hair; birthmark just below Adam's apple.' Now mark, Davie, scarce a month had gone by, when grim tidings came of a lone farmhouse ten miles from Plymouth town, wherein were found stiff and stark the farmer and his dame with their throats slit, the handiwork of that same Saul Pratt, seeing that by the side of each dead body did lie its ears cut from the head. One Squire Trunkit, a justice of the peace, was foremost to raise the hue and cry thereat, and did vow he would lay his hand on the villain ere Christmas. And so did he, albeit not in the way he meant. For one night his horse did wend him home with empty saddle, and quest being made, the Squire was found 'neath a hedge stone-dead, with his head well-nigh hacked off his body and cropped of the ears, which did lie on the frosty grass by his side, and in his clenched hand a tuft of red hair. And even as a mole's path is known by the mole-hills, so is this Pratt's by the despite he doth to the dead who die by his felon hand; for I have told but a few of the dastard deeds of this wolf, but all do bear his mark upon them not to be mistook. Why he doth so mishandle those he slaughtereth the devil, his master, alone knoweth. Would God it were to work to his undoing! but 'tis a cunning beast, and hath not been took yet for all the hue and cry."

And Luke, shaking him his head, did turn him to the munching of his bread and bacon.

But I knew I could cap me his story when one o' the clock should have come.

And, on the instant, the great bell of St. Dunstan's did did thunder out the stroke.

"'Tis the signal," quoth I, "and I be free to speak." For Luke, he did lean back in his chair agape.

And thus ran the tale I had to tell:—

"This morning at eight of the clock I betook me, as is my wont, to Thackton Court to shave me my kind patron, Sir Paul Thrask. I had but lathered me his chin when Bates, his man, did bring word that Master Grafton, the thief-taker, did crave him audience on a matter of urgency.

"'Bid him in here,' quoth Sir Paul; and when Bates did seem to stick at it, 'in here I tell thee, thou block-head; 'tis plain enough English.'

"And anon did enter a tall, dark man, with an hook nose and eyes to look one through. Ne'er saw I the like of him. Keen as a razor was he, yet quiet withal."

"And hast seen the famed Grafton?" cried Luke. "Thou be'est a lucky dog, Davie."

"'Twas mine own thought at the time. But to my tale.

"'That will serve, Bates,' quoth Sir Paul, for Bates did linger on thorns to hear Grafton's errand; 'take thee off ere I throw the soap at thee.'

"And the door was bare shut when Sir Paul did turn him his face, with the lather drying thereon, to Grafton.

"'Now!'

"'Tis the Red Wolf, your worship, hath been ravaging again, and not two mile from this room.'

"Sir Paul did lean forward without a word, but all his face a query.

"'This time 'tis a lonesome house on Thackton Moor. An old miser woman lived there—'

"Sir Paul did make a quick motion of his hand.

"'Ay, old Betty Flake; I knew her well!'

"'At grey of dawn she was lying on her floor dead, with her windpipe cut—'

"'And the track of the Wolf?'

"'Was there, your worship.'

"'There be something more, Grafton, thou wouldst fain say. Out with it!'

"The thief-taker did dart a quick glance at me.

"'Tut!' quoth Sir Paul, 'tis a trusty youth, and hath not that prating fool Bates' tongue.'

"'I be come, your worship, for a warrant, for there be reason good to think he be e'en now in hiding on the moor.'

"Sir Paul did turn him to me.

"'Wipe me off this stuff, Davie. Grafton, ring me mine handbell. Off with thee, Davie, lad, and, hark ye, not a word of this to living soul till the soldiers be three hours gone.'

"Nor did I. As I did cross the bridge, after shaving me Parson Yates on mine way home, whom should I see kicking him his heels thereon, like to a boy who knoweth