

Getting Home

BY J. R. WARREN

THE roads were deep in snow, and the chestnut slipped and slithered as she came down the hill. She was badly blown, faltered at every two or three steps. Her chest was white with foam, and her breath came in deep gasps.

Her rider shivered as the icy winds swept across the downs. Muffled as he was in a great three-caped coat, with the collar turned well up, and with a woollen shawl wrapped round the lower part of his face, and his three-cornered hat drawn down over his eyes, the cold seemed to cut down to his very bones.

The country-side was dazzlingly white in the moonlight; hill and valley, bare hedge and leafless tree, as far as the eye could reach. Horse and rider showed black against the shimmering background.

The man rode cautiously down to the bottom of the hill, where a little side-lane turned off to the right.

"Steady, lass," he murmured, patting his mount's heaving flanks with a warmly gloved hand. "Steady, then. 'Tis only another couple of miles, and Sussex Jack meets me at Black Dip with a fresh horse."

The chestnut shook her head and braced herself up. The snow lay deeper still in the lanes, and, sheltered as it was by the high ground on either side, was hardly frozen at all. It was over her fetlocks in no time, and she began to plod deeper and deeper.

The man reined in in consternation. "Slither me!" he exclaimed. "This won't do. 'Twill be up to her girths in a few yards. We must hark back. Come round, lass."

The filly needed little persuasion. She ploughed her way back to the main road readily. The man looked anxiously back up the hill.

"Not a sign of them yet," he murmured, "but they may be on my heels any minute." He listened, his hand to his ear. "'Tis horsehoofs, I vow. They're some way away yet, for sound travels far on a clear night like this. But we must waste no time. Come up, then, Margot. We must get up the hill and round to the Dip by the high-road. They're after us like hounds, and our tracks show clear in this snow."

He set the chestnut at the hill, lifting her all he could. She slipped and staggered again and again, panting heavily. It was evident that she could not last long. Time after time the man looked back anxiously over his shoulder. But so far there was no sign of his pursuers.

He reached the crest at last. The filly faltered, and almost fell. He rose in his stirrups, crying words of encouragement. She just topped the crest, nearly into the high-road, and then her forelegs doubled beneath her, and she went down heavily. The man only just slipped out of the saddle in time.

"Poor little girl!" he said, looking down at the animal's glassy eyes and distended nostrils. "Poor little girl! My hilt! What's that?"

A heavy rumble of wheels and the thud of hoofs broke in upon his words. He ran to the corner of the road and looked. A big, heavy, lumbering equipage was coming up, its yellow lamps gleaming on the spanking teams of greys that drew it.

"The coach, by all that's fortunate!"

He paused for a moment to think, and then ran wildly towards the coach.

"Stop!" he bawled. "Stop!"

"What's the matter, fellow?" growled the driver, without reining in.

"Stop! Nightriding Ned's after you!"

The heavy bits brought the greys to a standstill in no time.

"Now then. What's that about Nightriding Ned? And who are you, and what are you doing abroad alone at this time o' night?"

"I've ridden hard from Newbury to tell you. The highwayman means to stop you at Black Dip. He's coming up through Ten-Oak Lane."

"Ridden? Where's your horse?"

"Dead. Dropped down just round the corner of the lane. You can go and see if you don't believe me."

"Oh, what he says is true enough, I'll wager," broke in one of the outside passengers. "We'd best turn back, Bill."

"If you can force the pace, you'll beat him yet," said the stranger. "He's not reckoning to be there before nine o'clock."

The driver rubbed his nose with his thick woollen glove.

"If that's so," he said, "we'll get through the Dip before he comes. Like a lift, sir?"

"Thank you, I think I should," answered the stranger, drily.

He sprang lightly on to the hub of the

off fore-wheel and scrambled up to a seat beside the driver.

"Steady! Soho, then," called that worthy, slackening the ribbons a little. "On with you, then."

The long whip cracked over the greys' heads and they went off at a hand-gallop.

"Nightriding Ned," growled the driver to himself. "He's a daring fellow, and a clever one. He's never caught me yet, and I don't wish him to."

"He has caught me," responded the stranger quietly. "And I welcome every chance of foiling him."

The greys settled down to the pace finely. They were fairly fresh, and the keen air was the best of stimulants. Stretched well out, they covered the ground with a long, swinging stride, the coach rolling and bumping behind them. The outside passengers nuzzled themselves down into their

stranger, after one hasty glance at the road behind him, jumped from his perch, and began to unbuckle the fallen leader's harness. The beast lay quite still, frightened, seemingly, by her fall.

In a few minutes she was on her feet again, and pawing the ground impatiently. The stranger climbed back to his seat, the guard regained his perch, and Bill laid his whip across the greys' broad backs, sending them on again.

"You know how to handle a horse, sir," remarked the driver to the stranger, with a note of real respect in his voice at last.

"Lived among them all my life."

"So I should think. Demme, it was good of you to ride all those miles to warn us."

"'Tisn't many men would do the like."

"As I say, I owe this Nightriding Ned a grudge," answered the other indifferently, and leant back.



"I said I'd get home for Christmas, you see, Margot lass," he said tenderly, "and here I am."

greatcoats and mufflers and wondered how far it was to the next stopping-place, when they could warm themselves with something hot and spiced.

"Going far, sir?" queried Bill.

The stranger leant back and took a pinch of snuff meditatively.

"To the nearest inn where I can stay the night and get a fresh horse to ride back i' th' morning."

"That won't be till we get to Oxford, I fear. I—Whoa, steady, there!"

The off-leader slipped on a frozen puddle and plunged wildly. Bill hauled desperately on the reins. The guard jumped nimbly down and ran up. By the time he reached her the nag was down, and her mate was kicking wildly.

"Hold her head, Jim!" bellowed the driver. "Demme, hold her head! She'll be over the traces in a minute."

The guard seized the bridle of the plunging near horse, and held her steady. The

A sharp rise was before them and the driver, leaning forward, lashed his horses heavily. They broke into a rattling gallop and breasted the rise gallantly. Their impetus carried them well up over the crest. The driver was just reining in, the guard had just dropped down to slip the shoe under the back wheel to check them down the hill, when there suddenly came a rapid thudding of horsehoofs from behind. A dark knot of horsemen were just topping the rise half a mile back.

"It's Ned and his band!" shouted the stranger. "Drive for your life, man! Never mind the shoe!"

"They'll catch us up," grunted Bill surlily.

"Not they. Their horses are blown."

And before the astonished driver could reply, the stranger had snatched up the whip and cut the leaders across the flanks. They leaped forward and went tearing down the hill into Black Dip, the guard

only scrambling back into his seat just in time.

The coach rocked from side to side. Every moment it looked as if it must turn over. Bill's hand alone held them straight, his grim jaw thrust forward, his muscular hands rigid beneath their thick woollen gloves. They were just on the Dip, a hollow in the road shaded by pines and evergreens, with a narrow lane running out of it on one side. An ideal spot for waylaying a coach.

The horsemen, despite the stranger's confident remark, were gaining on them stride by stride. Every moment the passengers expected to hear the peremptory summons: "Stand and deliver!"

Or the still more emphatic pistol-shot ring out on the night air. The guard fingered the trigger of his blunderbuss. One or two of the passengers drew out horse-pistols. But not till the coach was right in the Dip did the summons reach them, and then it was:

"Hi, coach! Stop, in the King's name!"

"Demme, 'tis the runners!" cried Bill, and hauled on the ribbons.

The Bow Street men came up at a hand-gallop and reined in beside the coach.

"What in the devil's name did you race like that for?" demanded the leader.

"Thought you was highwaymen," answered Bill curtly. "Gentleman told us Nightriding Ned was going to stop us here at the Dip. Came up from Newbury to warn us, he did, and rode his horse to death on the way."

"Gentleman? What gentleman?"

"Here, beside me. Why, he's gone!"

The stranger had slipped unobserved from his seat, and was running like a hare into the shadows of the trees.

"You withered fool," bawled the Bow Street officer, "that's Ned himself! We've chased him out from Reading. Found his horse dead at the corner of the lane back there. Hi! stand there, or I fire!"

But Nightriding Ned was in the shadows where an impassive man, cloaked and masked, sat on a bay horse, holding another by the bridle. The highwayman scrambled on the spare horse, settled himself in the saddle, and with a cheery "Good night, Jack, merry Christmas!" smacked his new mount on the neck, and broke out into the moonlight.

A perfect fusillade of shots whistled past him, but he set his nag at the hill and was over the crest before the runners had collected themselves sufficiently to start after him. Then they gave chase in a bunch leaving the coachful of amazed passengers at the Dip.

Once over the crest, the road ran fairly level along the hillside, and Nightriding Ned kept his mount at a hand-gallop. He unbuttoned the flap of the near holster, and found a flask of spirit. In the other was a loaded horse-pistol.

The hoof-beats of his pursuers, muffled by the snow, grew fainter and fainter. At last they died away altogether, and he began to think he had outdistanced them. He eased the bay down into a canter. The road took a wide sweep round the base of a sparsely wooded hill, and the snow had drifted deep. It was not easy work ploughing through it. His pace degenerated to little more than an amble. In vain he urged the filly on. She was up to the fetlocks in snow, and began to pant and heave with the strain.

And then came a wild huzza on his left, and the Bow Street men broke cover from among the trees on the hillcrest, and came sweeping down the slope. They had done what he had not dared to attempt—cut across country, over the crest of the hill, and struck a bee-line for the curve of the road.

"Who, up with you!" shouted Ned, ramming in his spurs. "You must gallop now."

One of the officer's horses missed its footing, and went down with a crash, sending its rider rolling over and over down the slope. But the others came on, their figures looming larger every minute. Ned drew the pistol from his holster.

The bay was stretching herself out now, her head forward and her long tail streaming out behind her. The going was better, and Ned meant to make the most of it. She drew rapidly away. By the time the runners struck into the road, she was a hundred yards ahead. Ned leant well over his horse's neck. The officers opened fire. The bullets whistled round the highwayman's head. One struck off his hat, another grazed his bridle-arm.

And, worst of all, the bay was beginning to flag. She was only a filly, and the heavy strain had broken her wind. His pursuers were

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