LORNA DOONE

B. R. D. BLACKMORE.

CHAPTER XIV

A MOTION WHICH ENDS IN A MULL

Instead of minding his New Year pudding, Master Huckaback carried on so about his mighty grievance, that at last we began to think there must be something in it after all, especially as he assured us that choice and costly presents for the young people of our household were among the goods divested. But mother told him her children had plenty, and wanted no gold and silver; and little Eliza spoke up and said, "You can give us the pretty things, Uncle Ben, when we come in the summer to see you." Our mother reproved Eliza for this, although it was the heel of her own foot; and then, to satisfy our uncle, she promised to call Farmer Nicholas Snowe to be of our council that evening, 'and if the young maidens would kindly come, without taking thought to smooth themselves, why it would be all the merrier, and who knew but what Uncle Huckaback might bless the day of his robbery, etc., etc.—and thorough good honest girls they were, fit helpmates either for shop or farm." All of which was meant for me; but I stuck to my platter, and answered not.

In the evening Farmer Snowe came up, leading his daughters after him, like fillies crimmed for a fair; and Uncle Ben, who had not seen them on the night of his mishap (because word has been sent to stop them), was mightily pleased and very pleasant, according to his town-bred ways. The damsels had seen good company, and soon got over their fear of his wealth, and played him a number of merry pranks, which made our mother quite jealous for Annie, who was always shy and diffident. However, when the hot cup was done, and before the mulled wine was ready, we packed all the maidens in the parlor and turned the key upon them; and then we drew near the kitchen fire to hear Uncle Ben's proposal. Farmer Snowe sat up in the corner, caring little to hear about anything, but smoking slowly and nodding backward like a sheep-dog dreaming. Mother was in the settle, of course, knitting hard, as usual; and Uncle Ben took to a three-legged stool, as if all but that had been thieved from him. Howsoever, he kept his breath from speech, giving privilege, as was due, to mother. "Master Snowe, you are well assured," said mother, coloring like the furze as it took the flame and fell over, "that our kinsman here hath received rough harm on his peaceful journey from Dulverton. The times are bad, as we all know well, and there is no sign of bettering them; and if I could see our lord the King I might say things to move him: nevertheless, I have had so much of my own account to vex for——"

"You are flying out of the subject, Sarah," said Uncle Ben, seeing tears in her eyes, and tired of that matter.

"Zettle the pralimbinaries," spoke Farmer Snowe, on appeal from us; "virst zettle the pralimbinaries; and then us knows what he be drivin' at."

"Preliminaries be d——d, sir!" cried Uncle Ben, losing his temper. "What preliminaries were there when I was robbed, I should like to know? Robbed in this parish, as I can prove to the eternal disgrace of Oare and the scandal of all England. And I hold this parish to answer for it, sir; this parish shall make it good, being a nest of foul thieves as it is; ay, farmers and yeomen, and all of you. I will beggar every man in this parish, if they be not beggars already; ay, and sell your old church up before your eyes, but what I will have back my tarlatan, time-piece, saddle and dove-tailed nag."

Mother looked at me, and I looked at Farmer Snowe, and we all were sorry for Master Huckaback; putting our hands up one to another, that nobody should brow-beat him; because we all knew what our parish was, and none the worse for strong language, however rich the man might be. But Uncle Ben took it a different way. He thought that we all were afraid of him, and that Oare parish was but as Moab or Edom for him to cast his shoe over.

"Nephew Jack," he cried, looking at me when I was thinking what to say, and finding only emptiness; "you are a heavy lout, sir; a bumpkin, a clod-hopper; and I shall leave you nothing, unless it be my boots to grease."

"Well, uncle," I made answer, "I will grease your boots all the same for that, so long as you be our guest, sir."

Now that answer, made without a thought, stood me for two thousand pounds, as you shall see by-and-by, perhaps.

"As to the parish," my mother cried out, being too hard set to contain herself, "the parish can defend itself, and we may leave it to do so. But our Jack is not like that, sir; and I will not have him spoken of. Leave him, indeed! Who wants you to do more than to leave him alone, sir; as he might have done you the other night, and as no one else would have dared to do. And after that, to think so meanly of me and of my children!"

"Hoity-toity, Sarah! Your children, I suppose, are the same as other people's."

"That they are not, and never will be; and you ought to know it, Uncle Reuben, if any one in the world ought. Other peoples children!"

"Well, well!" Uncle Reuben answered; "I know very little of children, except my little Ruth, and she is nothing wonderful."

"I never said that my children were wonderful, Uncle Ben; nor did I ever think it. But as for being good——"

Here mother fetched out her handkerchief, being overcome by our goodness; and I told her, with my hand to my mouth, not to notice him, though he might be worth ten thousand times ten thousand pounds.

But Farmer Snowe came forward now, for he had some sense sometimes; and he thought it was high time for him to say a word for the parish.

"Maister Huckaback," he began, pointing with his pipe at him, the end that was done in sealing-wax, "tooching of what you was plaised to zay 'bout this here parish, and no oother, mind me no oother parish but thees, I use the vreedom, zur, for to tell 'e that thee be a laiar."

Then Farmer Nicholas Snowe folded his arms across, with the bowl of his pipe on the upper one, and gave me a nod, and then one to mother, to testify how he had done his duty, and recked not what might come of it. However, he got little thanks from us; for the parish was nothing at all to my mother, compared with her children's interests; and I thought it hard that an uncle of mine, and an old man too, should be called a liar by a visitor at our fire-place; for we, in our rude part of the world, counted it one of the worst disgraces that could befall a man to receive the lie from any one. But Uncle Ben, as it seems, was used to it, in the way of trade: just as people of fashion are, by a style of courtesy.

Therefore the old man only looked with pity at Farmer Nicholas; and with a sort of sorrow too, reflecting how much he might have made in a bargain with such a customer, so ignorant and hot-headed.

"Now, let us bandy words no more," said mother, very sweetly; "nothing is easier than sharp words, except to wish them unspoken, as I do many and many's the time, when I think of my good husband. But now let us hear from Uncle Reuben what he would have us do to remove this disgrace from among us, and to satisfy him of his goods."

"I care not for my goods, woman," Master Huckaback answered, grandly; "although they were of large value, about them I say nothing. But what I demand is this, the punishment of those scoundrels."

"Zober, man, zober!" cried Farmer Nicholas; "we be too naigh Badgery 'ood to spake like that of the Dooneses."

"Pack of cowards!" said Uncle Reuben, looking first at the door, however; "much chance I see of getting redress from the valor of this Exmoor! And you, Master Snowe, the very man whom I looked to to raise the country, and take the lead as church-warden—why, my youngest shopman would match his eel against you. Pack of cowards!" cried Uncle Ben, rising and shaking his lappets at us; "don't pretend to answer me. Shake you all off, that I do—nothing more to do with you!"

We knew it useless to answer him, and conveyed our knowledge to one another, without anything to vex him. However, when the mulled wine was come, and a good deal of it gone (the season being Epiphany) Uncle Reuben began to think that he might have been too hard with us. Moreover, he was beginning now to respect Farmer Nicholas bravely, because of the way he had smoked his pipes, and the little noise made over them. And Lizzie and Annie were doing their best—for now we had let the girls out—to wake more lightsome uproar; also young Faith Snowe was toward to keep the old men's cups aflow, and hansel them to their liking.

So at the close of our entertainment, when the girls were gone away to fetch and light their lanterns (over which they made rare noise, blowing each the other's out, for counting of the sparks to come), Master Huckaback stood up, without much aid from the crock-saw, and looked at mother and all of us.

"Let no one leave this place," said he, "until I have said what I want to say; for saving of ill-will among us, and growth of cheer and comfort. May be I have carried things too far, even to the bounds of churlishness, and beyond the bounds of good manners. I will not unsay one word I have said, having never yet done so in my life; but I would alter the manner of it, and set it forth in this light. If you folks upon Exmoor here are loath and wary at fighting, yet you are brave at better stuff, the best and kindest I ever knew in the matter of feeding."

Here he sat down with tears in his eyes, and called for a little mulled bastard. All the maids, who were now come back, raced to get it for him, but Annie, of course, was foremost. And herein ended the expedition, a perilous and a great one, against the Doones of Bagworthy; an enterprise over which we had all talked plainly more than was good for us. For my part, I slept well that night, feeling myself at home again, now that the fighting was put aside, and the fear of it turned to the comfort of talking what we would have done.

CHAPTER XV

MASTER HUCKABACK FAILS OF WARRANT

On the following day Master Huckaback, with some show of mystery, demanded from my mother an escort into a dangerous part of the world, to which his business compelled him. My mother made answer to this that he was kindly welcome to take our John Fry with him; at which the good clothier laughed, and said that John was nothing like big enough, but another John must serve his turn, not only for his size, but because if he were carried away, no stone would be left unturned upon Exmoor until he should be brought back again. Hereupon my mother grew very pale, and found fifty reasons against my going, each of them weightier than the true, one, as Eliza (who was jealous of me) managed to whisper to Annie. On the other hand, I was quite resolved (directly the thing was mentioned) to see Uncle Reuben through with it; and it added much to my self-esteem to be the guard of so rich a man. Therefore I soon persuaded mother, with her head upon my breast, to let me go, and trust in God; and after that I was greatly vexed to find that this dangerous enterprise was nothing more than a visit to the Baron de Whichehalse, to lay an information, and sue a warrant against the Doones, and a posse to execute it.

Stupid as I always have been, and must ever be, no doubt, I could well have told Uncle Reuben that his journey was no wiser one than that of the men of Gotham; that he never would get from Hugh de Whichehalse, a warrant against the Doones; moreover, that if he did get one, his own wig would be singed with it. But for divers reasons I held my peace, partly from youth and modesty, partly from desire to see whatever please God I should see, and partly from other causes.

We rode by way of Brendon town, Illford Bridge, and Babbrook, to avoid the great hill above Lynmouth; and the day being fine and clear again, I laughed in my sleeve at Uncle Reuben for all his fine precautions. When we arrived at Ley Manor, we were shown very civilly into the hall, and refreshed with good ale and collared head, and the back of a Christmas pudding. I had never been under so fine a roof (unless it were of a church) before; and it pleased me greatly to be so kindly entreated by high-born folk. But Uncle Reuben was vexed a little at being set down side by side with a man in a very small way of trade, who was come upon some business there, and who made bold to drink his health after finishing their horns of ale.

"Sir," said Uncle Ben, looking at him, "my health would fare much better if you would pay me three pounds and twelve shillings, which you have owed me these five years back; and now we are met at the Justice's the opportunity is good, sir."

After that we were called to the Justice-room, where the Baron himself was sitting, with Colonel Harding, another Justiciary of the King's peace, to help him. I had seen the Baron de Whichehalse before, and was not at all afraid of him, having been at school with his son, as he knew, and it made him very kind to me. And indeed he was kind to everybody, and all our people spoke well of him; and so much the more because we knew that the house was in decadence. For the first De Whichehalse had come from Holland, where he had been a great nobleman, some hundred and fifty years agone. Being prosecuted for his religion, when the Spanish power was everything, he fled to England with all he could save, and bought large estates in Devonshire. Since then his descendants had intermarried with ancient county families—Cotwells, and Marwoods, and Walronds, and Welshes of Pylton, and Chichesters of Hall; and several of the ladies brought them large increase of property. And so, about fifty years before the time of which I am writing, there were few names in the West of England thought more of than De Whichehalse. But now they had lost a great deal of land, and therefore of that which goes with land as surely as fame belongs to earth—I mean big reputation. How they had lost it none could tell, except that as the first descendants had a manner of amassing, so the latter ones were gifted with a power of scattering. Whether this came of good Devonshire blood opening the sluice of Low Country veins, is beyond both my province and my power to inquire. Anyhow all people loved this last strain of De Whichehalse far more than the name had been liked a hundred years agone.

Hugh de Whichehalse, a white-haired man, of very noble presence, with friendly blue eyes and a sweet smooth forehead, and an aquiline nose quite beautiful (as you might expect in a lady of birth), and thin lips curving delicately, this gentlemad rose as we entered the room; while Colonel Harding turned on his chair, and struck one spur against the other. I am sure that, without knowing aught of either, we must have reverenced more of the two the one who showed respect to us. And yet nine gentlemen out of ten make this dull mistake when dealing with the class below them!

Uncle Reuben made his very best scrape, and then walked up to the table, trying to look as if he did not know himself to be wealthier than both the gentlemen put together. Of course he was no stranger to them, any more than I was; and, as it proved afterward, Colonel Harding owed him a lump of money, upon very good security. Of him Uncle Reuben took no notice, but addressed himself to De Whichehalse.

The Baron smiled very gently, so soon as he learned the cause of this visit, and then he replied quite reasonably:

"A warrant against the Doones, Master Huckaback? Which of the Doones, so please you? and the Christian names, what be they?

"My lord, I am not their godfather; and most like they never had any. But we all know old Sir Ensor's name, so that may be no obstacle."

"Sir Ensor Doone, and his sons—so be it. How many sons, Master Huckaback, and what is the name of each one?"

"How can I tell you, my lord, even if I had known them all as well as my own shop-boys? Nevertheless, there were seven of them, and that should be no obstacle."

"A warrant against Sir Ensor Doone, and seven sons of Sir Ensor Doone, Christian names unknown, and doubted, if they have any. So far so good, Master Huckaback. I have it all down in writing. Sir Ensor himself was there of course, as you have given in evidence——"

"No, no, my lord, I never said that; I never said——"

"If he can prove that he was not there, you may be indicted for perjury. But as for those seven sons of his, of course you can swear that they were his sons, and not his nephews, or grandchildren, or even no Doones at all."

"My lord, I can swear that they were Doones. Moreover, I can pay for any mistake I make. Therein need be no obstacle."

"Oh, yes, he can pay; he can pay well enough," said Colonel Harding, shortly.

"I am heartily glad to hear it," replied the Baron pleasantly; "for it proves, after all, that this robbery (if robbery there has been) was not so very ruinous. Sometimes people think they are robbed and then it is very sweet afterward to find that they have not been so: for it adds to their joy in their property. Now, are you quite convinced, good sir, that these people (if there were any) stole, or took, or even borrowed anything at all from you?"

"My lord, do you think that I was drunk?"

"Not for a moment, Master Huckaback. Although excuse might be made for you at this time of the year. But how did you know that your visitors were of this particular family?"

"Because it could be nobody else. Because, in spite of the fog——"

"Fog!" cried Colonel Harding, sharply.

"Fog!" said the Baron, with emphasis. "Ah, that explains the whole affair. To be sure, now I remember, the weather has been too thick for a man to see the head of his own horse. The Doones (if still there be any Doones) could never have come abroad; that is as sure as simony. Master Huckaback, for your good sake, I am heartily glad that this charge has miscarried. I thoroughly understand it now. The fog explains the whole of it."

"Go back, my good fellow," said Colonel Harding; "and if the day is clear enough, you will find all your things where you left them. I know, from my own experience, what it is to be caught in an Exmoor fog."

Uncle Reuben, by this time was so put out that he hardly knew what he was saying.

"My lord, Sir Colonel, is this your justice! If I go to London myself for it the King shall know how his commission—how a man may be robbed, and the justices prove that he ought to be hanged at the back of it; that in his good shire of Somerset——"

"Your pardon a moment, good sir," De Whichehalse interrupted him; "but I was about (having heard your case) to mention what need be an obstacle, and, I fear, would prove a fatal one, even if satisfactory proof were afforded of a felony. The malfeasance (if any) was laid in Somerset; but we, two humble servants of his majesty, are in commission of his peace for the county of Devon only, and therefore could never deal with it."

"And why, in the name of God," cried Uncle Reuben, now carried at last fairly beyond himself, "why could you not say as much at first, and save me all this waste of time and worry of my temper? Gentlemen, you are all in league; all of you stick together. You think it fair sport for an honest trader who makes no shams as you do, to be robbed and well-nigh murdered, so long as they who did it own the high birthright of felony. If a poor sheep stealer, to save his children from dying of starvation, had dared to look at a two-month lamb, he would swing on the Manor gallows, and all of you cry 'good riddance!' But now, because good birth and bad manners——" Here poor Uncle Ben, not being so strong as before the Doones had played with him, began to foam at the mouth a little, and his tongue went into the hollow where his short gray whiskers were.

I forget how we came out of it, only I was greatly shocked at boarding of the gentry so, and mother scarce could see her way when I told her all about it. "Depend upon it you were wrong, John," was all I could get out of her; though what had I done but listen, and touch my forelock, when called upon? "John, you may take my word for it, you have not done as you should have done. Your father would have been shocked to think of going to Baron de Whichehalse, and in his own house insulting him! And yet it was very brave of you, John. Just like you, all over. And (as none of the men are here, dear John) I am proud of you for doing it."

All throughout the homeward road Uncle Ben had been very silent, feeling much displeased with himself, and still more so with other people. But before he went to bed that night, he just said to me, "Nephew Jack, you have not behaved so badly as the rest to me. And because you have no gift of talking, I think that I may trust you. Now, mark my words, this villain job shall not have ending here. I have another card to play."

"You mean, sir, I suppose, that you will go to the justices of this shire, Squire Maunder, or Sir Richard Blewitt, or——"

"Oaf, I mean nothing of the sort; they would only make a laughing-stock, as those Devonshire people did, of me. No, I will go to the King himself, or a man who is bigger than the King, and to whom I have already access. I will not tell thee his name at present, only if thou art brought before him, never wilt thou forget it." That was true enough, by-the-by, as I discovered afterward for the man he meant was Judge Jeffreys.

"And when are you likely to see him, sir?"

"Maybe in the spring, maybe not until summer, for I cannot go to London on purpose, but when my business takes me there. Only remember my words, Jack, and when you see the man I mean, look straight at him, and tell no lie. He will make some of your zany squires shake in their shoes, I reckon. Now I have been in this lonely hole far longer than I intended, by reason of this outrage; yet I will stay here one day more upon a certain condition."

"Upon what condition, Uncle Ben? I grieve that you find it so lonely. We have Farmer Nicholas up again, and the singers, and——"

"The fashionable milkmaids! I thank you, let me be. The wenches are too loud for me. Your Nanny is enough. Nanny is a good child, and she shall come and visit me." Uncle Reuben would always call her "Nanny;" he said that "Annie" was too fine and Frenchified for us. "But my condition is this, Jack, that you shall guide me to-morrow, without a word to any one, to a place where I may well descry the dwelling of these scoundrel Doones, and learn the best way to get at them, when the time shall come. Can you do this for me? I will pay you well, boy."

I promised very readily to do my best to serve him, but, of course, would take no money for it, not being so poor as that came to. Accordingly, on the day following I managed to set the men at work on the other side of the farm, especially that inquisitive and busybody John Fry, who would pry out almost anything for the pleasure of telling his wife; and then, with Uncle Reuben mounted on my ancient Peggy, I made foot for the westward, directly after breakfast. Uncle Ben refused to go unless I would take a loaded gun, and indeed it was always wise to do so in those days of turbulence; and none the less because of late more than usual of our sheep had left their skins behind them. This, as I need hardly say, was not to be charged to the appetite of the Doones, for they always said that they were not butchers (although upon that subject might well be two opinions); and their practice was to make the shepherds kill and skin, and quarter for them, and sometimes carry to the Doonegate the prime among the fatlings, for fear of any bruising, which spoils the look at table. But the worst of it was that ignorant folk, unaware of their fastidiousness, scored to them, the sheep they lost by low-born marauders, and so were afraid to speak of it; and the issue of this error was that a farmer with five or six hundred sheep could never command, on his wedding-day, a prime saddle of mutton for dinner.

To return now to my Uncle Ben—and indeed he would not let me go more than three land-yards from him—there was very little said between us along the lane and across the hill, although the day was pleasant. I could see that he was half amiss with his mind about the business, and not so full of security as an elderly man should keep himself. Therefore, out I spake, and said:

"Uncle Reuben, have no fear. I know every inch of the ground, sir, and there is no danger nigh us."

"Fear, boy! Who ever thought of fear? 'Tis the last thing would come across me. Pretty things those primroses."

At once I thought of Lorna Doone, the little maid of six years back, and how my fancy went with her. Could Lorna ever think of me? Was I not a lout gone by, only fit for loach sticking? Had I ever seen a face fit to think of near her? The sudden flash, the quickness, the bright desire to know one's heart, and withhold her own from it, the soft withdrawal of rich eyes, the longing to love somebody, anybody, anything, not imbued with wickedness.

My uncle interrupted me, misliking so much silence now, with the naked woods falling over us. For we were come to Bagworthy forest, the blackest and the loneliest place of all that keep the sun out. Even now in winter-time, with most of the wood unriddled, and the rest of it pinched brown, it hung around us like a cloak, containing little comfort. I kept quite close to Peggy's head, and Peggy kept quite close to me, and pricked her ears at everything. However, we saw nothing there except a few old owls and hawks, and a magpie, sitting all alone, until we came to the bank of the hill, where the pony could not climb it. Uncle Ben was very loath to get off, because the pony seemed company, and he thought he could gallop away on her, if the worst came to the worst; but I persuaded him that now he must go to the end of it. Therefore we made Peggy fast, in a place where we could find her, and speaking cheerfully as if there was nothing to be afraid of, he took his staff, and I my gun, to climb the thick ascent.

There was now no path of any kind; which added to our courage all it lessened of our comfort, because it proved that the robbers were not in the habit of passing there. And we knew that we could not go astray so long as we breasted the hill before us, inasmuch as it formed the rampart or side-fence of Glen Doone. But in truth I used the right word there for the manner of our ascent, for the ground came forth so steep against us, and withal so woody, that to make any way we must throw ourselves forward and labor as at a breast-plow. Rough and loamy rungs of oak-root bulged here and there above their heads; briers needs must speak with us, using more of tooth than tongue; and sometimes bulks of rugged stone, like great sheep, stood across us. At last, though very loath to do it, I was forced to leave my gun behind, because I required one hand to drag myself up the difficulty, and one to help Uncle Reuben. And so at last we gained the top, and looked forth the edge of the forest, where the ground was very stony and like the crest of a quarry; and no more trees between us and the brink of cliff below, three hundred yards below it might be, all strong slope and gliddery. And now for the first time I was amazed at the appearance of the Doone's stronghold, and understood its nature. For when I had been even in the valley, and climbed the cliffs to escape from it, about seven years agone, I was no more than a stripling boy, noting little, as boys do, except for their present purpose, and even that soon done with. But now, with the fame of the Doones, and my own recollections, and Uncle Ben's insistence, all my attention was called forth, and the end was simple astonishment.

The chime of highland whereon we stood curved to the right and left of us, keeping about the same elevation, and crowned with trees and brush-wood. At about half a mile in front of us, but looking as if we could throw a stone to strike any man upon it, another crest just like our own bowed around to meet it; but failed by reason of two narrow clefts, of which we could only see the brink. One of these clefts was the Doone-gate, with a portcullis of rock above it, and the other was the chasm by which I had once made entrance. Betwixt them, where the hills fell back as in a perfect oval, traversed by the winding water, lay a bright green valley, rimmed with sheer black rock, and seeming to have sunken bodily from the bleak, rough heights above. It looked as if no frost could enter, neither winds go ruffling; only spring, and hope, and comfort breathe to one another. Even now the rays of sunshine dwelt and fell back on one another, whenever the clouds lifted; and the pale blue glimpse of the growing day seemed to find young encouragement.

But for all that, Uncle Reuben was none the worse nor better. He looked down into Glen Doone first and sniffed as if he were smelling it, like a sample of goods from a wholesale house; and then he looked at the hills over yonder, and then he stared at me.

"See what a pack of fools they be?"

"Of course I do, Uncle Ben. 'All rogues are fools,' was my first copy, beginning of the alphabet."

"Pack of stuff, lad; though true enough, and very good for young people. But see you not how this great Doone valley may be taken in half an hour?"

"Yes, to be sure I do, uncle; if they like to give it up, I mean."

"Three culverins on yonder hill, and three on the top of this one, and we have them under a pestle. Ah, I have seen the wars, my lad, from Keinton up to Naseby; and I might have been a general now, if they had taken my advice——" But I was not attending to him, being drawn away on a sudden by a sight which never struck the sharp eyes of our general. For I had long ago descried that little opening in the cliff through which I made my exit, as before related, on the other side of the valley. No bigger than a rabbit-hole it seemed from where we stood; and yet of all the scene before me, that (from my rememberance, perhaps) had the most attraction. Now gazing at it with full thought of all that it had cost me, I saw a little figure come, and pause, and pass into it. Something very light and white, nimble, smooth, and elegant, gone almost before I knew that anyone had been there; and yet my heart came to my ribs, and all my blood was in my face, and pride within me fought with shame, and vanity with self-contempt; for though seven years were gone, and I from my boyhood come to manhood, and all must have forgotten me, and I had half forgotten; at that moment, once for all, I felt that I was face to face with fate (however poor it may be), weal or woe, in Lorna Doone.

CHAPTER XVI

LORNA GROWING FORMIDABLE

Having reconnoitered thus the position of the enemy, Master Huckaback, on the homeward road, cross-examined me in a manner not at all desirable; for he had noted my confusion and eager gaze at something unseen by him in the valley, and thereupon he made up his mind to know everything about it. In this, however, he partly failed; for though I was no hand at fence, and would not tell him a falsehood, I managed so to hold my peace that he put himself upon the wrong track, and continued thereupon with many vaults of his shrewdness and experience, and some chuckles at my simplicity. Thus much, however, he learned aright, that I had been in the Doone valley several years before, and might be brought, upon strong inducement, to venture there again. But as to the mode of my getting in, the things I saw, and my thoughts upon them, he not only failed to learn the truth, but certified himself into an obstinacy of error from which no after-knowledge was able to deliver him. And this he did not only because I happened to say very little, but forasmuch as he disbelieved half of the truth I told him, through his own too great sagacity.

Upon one point, however, he succeeded more easily than he expected, viz., in making me promise to visit the place again, as soon as occasion offered, and to hold my own counsel about it. But I could not help smiling at one thing, that, according to his point of view, my own counsel meant my own and Master Reuben Huckaback's.

Now he being gone, as he went next day to his favorite town of Dulverton, and leaving behind him shadowy promise of the mountains he would do for me, my spirit began to burn and pant for something to go on with; and nothing showed a braver hope of movement and adventure than a lonely visit to Glen Doone, by way of the perilous passage discovered in my boyhood. Therefore I waited for nothing more than the slow arrival of new small-clothes made by a good tailor at Porlock, for I was wishful to look my best; and when they were come and approved, I started, regardless of the expense, and forgetting (like a fool) how badly they would take the water.

What with urging of the tailor, and my own misgivings, the time was now come round again to the high-day of St. Valentine, when all our maids were full of lovers, and all the lads looked foolish. And none of them more sheepish or innocent than myself, albeit twenty-one years old, and not afraid of men much, but terrified of women, at least if they were comely. And what of all things scared me most was the thought of my own size, and knowledge of my strength, which came, like knots, upon me daily. In honest truth I tell this thing (which often since hath puzzled me, when I came to mix with men more), I was to that degree ashamed of my thickness and my stature, in the presence of a woman, that I would not put a trunk of wood on the fire in the kitchen, but let Annie scold me well, with a smile to follow, and with her own plump hands lift up a little log and fuel it. Many a time I longed to be no bigger than John Fry was; whom now (when insolent) I took with my left hand by the waist-stuff and set him on my hat, and gave him little chance to tread it until he spoke of his family, and requested to come down again.

Now, taking for good omen this, that I was a seven-year Valentine, though much too big for a Cupidon, I chose a seven-foot staff of ash, and fixed a loach-fork in it, to look as I had looked before; and leaving word upon matters of business, out of the back-door I went, and so through the little orchard, and down the brawling Lynn-brook. Not being now so afraid, I struck across the thicket land between the meeting waters, and came upon the Bagworthy stream near the great black whirlpool. Nothing amazed me so much as to find how shallow the stream now looked to me, although the pool was still as black and greedy as it used to be. And still the great rocks slide was dark and difficult to climb; though the water, which once had taken my knees, was satisfied now with my ankles. After some labor, I reached the top; and halted to look about me well, before trusting to broad daylight.

The winter (as I said before) had been a very mild one; and now the spring was toward so that the bank and bush were touched with it. The valley into which I gazed was fair with early promise, having shelter from the wind, and taking all the sunshine. The willow-bushes over the stream hung as if they were angling with tasseled floats of gold and silver, bursting like a bean-pod. Between them came the water laughing, like a maid at her own dancing, and spread with that young blue which never lives beyond the April. And on either bank the meadow ruffled as the breeze came by, opening (through new tufts of green) daisy-bud or celandine, or a shy glimpse now and then of the love-lorn primrose.

Though I am so blank to wit, or perhaps for that same reason, these little things come and dwell with me, and I am happy about them, and long for nothing better. I feel with every blade of grass, as if it had a history; and make a child of every bud, as though it knew and loved me. And being so, they seem to tell me of my own delusions, how I am no more than they, except in self-importance.

While I was forgetting much of many things that harm one, and letting of my thoughts go wild to sounds and sights of nature, a sweeter note than thrush or ouzel ever woed a mate in floated on the valley breeze at the quiet turn of sundown. The words were of an ancient song, fit to cry or laugh at:

"Love, and if there be one,
Come my love to be,
My love is for the one
Loving unto me.

"Not for me the show, love,
Of a gilded bliss;
Only thou must know, love,
What my value is.

"If in all the earth, love,
Thou hast none but me,
This shall be my worth, love,
To be cheap to thee.

"But if so thou ever
Strivest to be free,
'Twill be my endeavor
To be dear to thee.

"Hence may I ensue, love
All a woman's due;
Comforting my true-love
With a love as true."

All this I took in with great eagerness, not for the sake of the meaning (which is no doubt an allegory,) but for the power, the softness, and richness, of the singing, which seemed to me better than we ever had even in Oare church. But all the time I kept myself in a black niche of the rock, where the fall of the water began, lest the sweet singer (espying me) should be alarmed, and flee away. But presently, I ventured to look forth where a bush was, and then I beheld the loveliest sight—one glimpse of which was enough to make me kneel in the coldest water.

By the side of the stream she was coming to me, even among the primroses, as if she loved them all; and every flower looked the brighter, as her eyes were on them. I could not see what her face was, my heart so awoke and trembled; only that her hair was flowing from a wreath of white violets, and the grace of her coming was like the appearance of the first wind-flower. The pale gleam over the western cliffs threw a shadow of light behind her, as if the sun were lingering. Never do I see that light from the closing of the west, even in these my aged days, without thinking of her. Ah me, if it comes to that, what do I see of earth or heaven without thinking of her?

The tremulous thrill of her song was hanging on her open lips; and she glanced around as if the birds were accustomed to make answer. To me it was a thing of terror to behold such beauty, and feel myself the while to be so very low and common. But scarcely knowing what I did, as if a rope were drawing me, I came from the dark mouth of the chasm, and stood, afraid to look at her.

She was turning to fly, not knowing me, and frightened, perhaps at my stature, when I fell on the grass (as I fell before her seven years agone that day,) and I just said, "Lorna Doone!"

She knew me at once, from my manner and ways, and a smile broke through her trembling, as sunshine comes through aspen-leaves; and being so clever, she saw of course that she needed not to fear me.

"Oh, indeed!" she cried, with a feint of anger (because she had shown her cowardice, and yet in heart she was laughing;) "oh, if you please, who are you, sir, and how do you know my name?"

"I am John Ridd," I answered: "the boy who gave you those beautiful fish, when you were only a little thing, seven years ago to-day."

"Yes, the poor boy who was frightened so, and obliged to hide here in the water."

"And do you remember how kind you were, and saved my life by your quickness, and went away riding upon a great man's shoulder, as if you had never seen me, and yet looked back through the willow trees?"

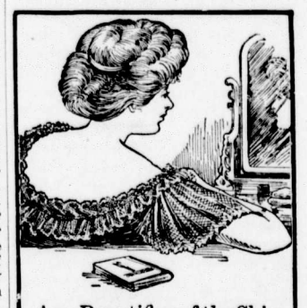
"Oh yes, I remember every thing; because it was so rare to see any except—I mean because I happen to remember but you seem not to remember, sir, how perilous this place is."

For she had kept her eyes upon me; large eyes of a softness, a brightness, and a dignity which made me feel as if I must forever love and yet forever know myself unworthy—unless themselves should fill with love, which is the spring of all things. And so I could not answer her, but was overcome with thinking and feeling and confusion. Neither could I look again; only waited for the melody which made every word like a poem to me—the melody of her voice. But she had not the least idea of what was going on with me, any more than I myself had.

"I think, Master Ridd, you can not know," she said, with her eyes taken from me, "what the dangers of this place are, and the nature of the people."

"Yes, I know enough of that; and I am frightened greatly, all the time, when I do not look at you."

She was too young to answer me in the style some maidens would have used; the manner, I mean, which now we call from a foreign word "coquettish." And more than that, she was trembling from real fear of violence, lest strong hands might be laid on me, and a miserable end of it. And, to tell the truth, I grew afraid—perhaps



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