

THE EXCISE OFFICER

Story of Love which did not run Smooth

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

LEUTENANT GEORGE BURTON, Excise Officer in His Majesty's service, paced restlessly up and down the brow of the cliff. Far beneath him he could hear the roar of the breakers as they rolled unceasingly in, their white crests reared proudly in the air, then dashed in a smother of foam upon the great granite rocks that for years had withstood their force. Even where he stood an occasional extra boisterous gust of wind drove flying particles of salt spray into his ruddy, weather-beaten countenance.

The night was cold and cheerless, with a wind that chilled one to the marrow; and his very manner betrayed the fact that the young officer's mood was correspondingly unpleasant. Truth to tell his was a most unenviable frame of mind.

For several nights successively cargoes had been run "right under his very nose," to borrow the phrase that he made use of with considerable vehemence, and not a little disgust. He had been censured by the authorities for lack of vigilance, and a great, all-consuming bitterness filled his soul—a bitterness against the exceptionally bold and clever gang of smugglers with whom he had to deal, and whom he not unnaturally held directly responsible for his troubles; a bitterness, most of all, against the authorities for censuring where no blame was due. Never had a man striven harder to discharge his duty in a manner that would commend itself to his superiors; never had an official displayed greater zeal; or made more enemies—for in the days of George the Third public sympathy was not always on the side of the law—in the fulfilment of the duties his position entailed, than he. And this was his reward.

"Just the kind of night to run a cargo," he muttered, with lowered brow, and lips tightly compressed. "I'll wager one will be run, too; and what can a man do on an inky night like this, when one can scarce see a yard in front of him."

"Gad! if I could only lay my hands on the rascals and vindicate myself."

Lieutenant Burton buttoned up his coat more tightly, as a protection against the cold autumnal wind, and the wet, drizzling rain. Surely the world never saw a blacker night! a night conducive, indeed, to smuggling, provided, of course, the enterprise were in the hands of men familiar with the dangerous intricacies of the bleak, rocky coast.

But what was that?

The lieutenant caught his breath sharply. For the fraction of a second a light had flashed out not fifty yards to the left—then vanished suddenly. With bated breath the young excise-man stood, and watched intently.

Twice more in quick succession it shone out—then all was darkness again, but the eager watcher on the cliff fancied that far out at sea an answering point of fire flickered, and disappeared.

Possessed with a sudden grim determination not to allow this unexpected and doubly-welcome opportunity of proving his mettle to slip by, the lieutenant wasted no time in getting into action. With utmost caution he made his way along the cliff in the direction whence the signal light had so fleetingly, yet distinctly, broken the darkness. It was at best a perilous proceeding, and to a man not knowing every inch of the ground, as Burton did, would have meant almost certain death. A single false step and—but the consequences were too dire to dwell upon with equanimity. It was no time to hesitate, however, and the lieutenant did not falter. His only fear was that some unkind trick of Fate might dash from his lips the cup of triumph he believed he was about to drink; might wrest from him those sweets of ultimate victory, for a taste of which his very soul craved.



Yet it seemed for once that good luck was his companion. After what, in his impatient ardor, seemed an interminable age, but which in reality was but a few moments, of tripping over rocks and tufts of coarse grass, of tumbling into miniature crevasses, and of sliding awkwardly on the bare, slippery rock, the young man heard a faint rustle close at hand. An instant later a dark, cloaked figure brushed past him.

Trembling with excitement and jubilation at what he considered his miraculous good fortune, and with his heart beating like a trip-hammer at the suddenness of the encounter, the exciseman squared his shoulders. Then he sprang forward.

"Surrender, in the King's name!" In the stress of the moment his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural to his ears.

A smothered shriek was the response. Lieutenant Burton sprang back in sheer amazement, and released his hold. It was some moments ere he could control his voice sufficiently to articulate the words that trembled on his lips.

"Jean!" he cried, dumbfounded, brain awl with the suddenness of the shock; vaguely fearful, with a premonition of impending evil. "Jean! Is it you?"

The girl made no reply, but finding herself free, sought refuge in flight. Springing hastily forward, he laid a detaining hand on her arm. A strange pallor overspread his features; into his face there came the hard, set expression of the man who sees trouble looming up ahead, and steels himself against its coming.

"Let me go, George. Let me go, please," the girl pleaded in stifled, frightened tones.

The other paid no heed.

"Jean," he questioned, tremulously, "was it you who signalled just now?"

"Signalled?" repeated the girl, her pitiful attempt at an af-

fection of composure and wonderment in itself betraying her. "Signalled?" Why, George, what do you mean?"

"How can you deceive me so?" he exclaimed sorrowfully, a world of reproach in his tone; taking hold, as he spoke, of the now extinguished lantern she was endeavoring to conceal.

She burst into tears, and every sob gave to the sorely tried young man a torturing twinge of anguish.

"Give me the lantern, George, and let me go. Oh, please, please do!"

For a moment he did not answer. When finally he spoke it was in even tones, grave, yet gentle; decisive, yet kindly.

"No, Jean, I cannot. To do so would be to thwart myself in the carrying out of my plain duty. You must not, shall not, warn—your friends."

"If—if you love me; of you care for me at all, let me go," she pleaded again, wringing her hands, piteously.

"You know that I love you, Jean. If your eyes were not blinded just now by other considerations you would know that my heart is going out to you with the deepest affection, the greatest, truest love of which I am capable. But you have asked me one thing, Jean, that, even for you, dear, I cannot grant. The matter is not in my hands. I cannot choose my path."

Her tone changed with her mood.

"You do not love me," she accused, passionately, a strange quiver in her voice. She strove to break away from his grasp; gently, but firmly, he restrained her.

"You do not love me!" the girl cried again. "If you did you would not treat me thus. Choose now between me and—your ambitions!"

The moaning of the wind, the ponderous voice of the surging ocean, combined to produce a strange, weird harmony, and it sounded to the young officer like the wailing of his dying hopes. Like a condemned man awaiting sentence he stood, hopeless, disconsolate, yet inflexible in his decision.

"In that case, Lieutenant Burton, I am at your disposal to do with as you see fit." Her tears were gone now, and the words fell from her lips distinctly, icily; there had come to her a degree of composure which even she could scarce have understood.

The young man flinched under her cutting, uncompromising tones. If anything, his face was a shade more ashy than hers; but, compressing his lips tightly, he struggled manfully to subdue his emotions. There was work for him to do—and that without delay.

"Come," he said tersely to the girl, and led her unresistingly away.



The strained situation precluded the possibility of conversation, and in preoccupied silence, their senses dulled by the suddenness of the estrangement, the ten minutes' walk to the coast-guard station was taken.

"Jim," said the lieutenant sharply to a stalwart, uniformed coastguardsman, "see that this young lady is well treated, but keep her in custody until I order otherwise. I want the rest of you," to a number of men making an effort not to appear too interested in the speaker's companion, "to come with me—and look to it, lads, that you are well armed."

Five minutes later, with the tramp of heavy boots and the clash of metal against metal, the little party of men filed out into the darkness and the storm.

It was well on past midnight when the lieutenant and his men returned. Heavy-eyed but sleepless, Jean Meredith was lying on a couch.

"Jean," said the young officer quietly, going over to her and regarding her with tender compassion, "I am glad to say that we have captured practically the whole gang of smugglers, red-handed, but am sorry, very sorry, Jean, to have to inform you that we were obliged to arrest your uncle and your two cousins on a charge of aiding and abetting the King's enemies by receiving the goods."

The girl received the news with no outward sign of emotion save a slight blanching of the cheek.

"Lieutenant Burton," she replied frigidly, and with formal politeness, "if you will be good enough to permit one of your men to accompany me, with your permission, I shall return home."

The lieutenant hesitated for a fraction of a minute, then plunged.

"That is a duty and a pleasure I could not think of entrusting to a subordinate," he said hastily, buttoning up his heavy coat, and preparing to accompany her.

A flush of anger mantled her brow.

"Then, sir," she flared, "I shall not leave this place."

In the midst of his embarrassment and the poignancy of his grief at the ever-widening gulf between them, his admiration gained the ascendancy over his other emotions, as she stood before him, eyes flashing, bosom heaving, red lips trembling in wrathful defiance, and injured pride. For a moment they stood thus face to face; one, unconsciously in an attitude of mute appeal, motionless under the spell of her intoxicating beauty; the other flushed, outraged, defiant. Then the lieutenant turned sharply on his heel.

"Jim, see this young lady home," came the curt command.

"Right, sir!" The coastguardsman saluted stiffly.

A few moments later Lieutenant Burton was left alone with his moody reflections.

Followed long days and weeks of bleak autumn weather; followed the dreary winter months; and through it all Jean Meredith was to the young man but as a dream of a bright hal-

