

LORNA DOONE

B. R. D. BLACKBURN, CHAPTER LIV

"You find my son," said Jeremy Stickle, with a good pull at his pipe, because he was going to talk so much, and putting his leg well along in the settle; "it has been my duty for a wearier time than I care to think of (and which would have been unbearable except for your great kindness) to search this neighborhood narrowly, and learn everything about everybody. Now the neighborhood itself is queer, and people have different ways of thinking from what we use in London. For instance now, among your folk, when any piece of news is told, or any man's conduct spoken of, the very first question that arises in your minds is this: 'Was this action kind and good?' Long after that, you say to yourselves, 'Does the law enjoin or forbid this thing?' Now here is your fundamental error; for among all truly civilized people the foremost question is: 'How stands the law herein?' And if the law approve, no need for any further questioning. That this is so, you may take my word; for I know the law pretty thoroughly.

"Very well; I need not say any more about that, for I have shown that you are all quite wrong. I only speak of this savage tendency, because it is plain to so many things which have puzzled me among you, and most of all your kindness to men whom you never saw before: which is an utterly illegal thing. It also explains your tolerance of these outlaw Doones so long. If your views of law had been correct, and law an element of your lives, these robbers could never have been indulged for so many years among you, but you must have abated the nuisance.

"Now, Stickle, I cried, "this is too badly," he was delivering himself so grandly, "Why you yourself have been among us, as the balance, for seven, or eight, or nine, or ten, or eleven, or twelve months, and have you abated the nuisance, or even cared to do it, until they began to shoot at you?"

"My son," he replied, "your account is to be proved more clearly than which I have said of you. However, if you wish to hear my story, no more interruptions. I may not have a change of tale, but once those fellows and reds arrive, and be blessed to them, the lubbards! Well, it may be six months ago, or it may be seven, or eight, or nine, or ten, or eleven, or twelve months, the mere name of which sends a shiver down every bone of my body, when I was riding one afternoon from Dulverton to Watchett."

"Dulverton to Watchett?" I cried. "Now what does that remind me of? I am sure, I remember something."

"Remember this, John, if anything—that another way from there, and that has not more of mine. Well, I was a little weary perhaps, having been plagued at Dulverton with the grossness of the people. For this reason, I had nothing at all about their fellow-townsman, your worthy uncle Huckleback, except that he was a God-fearing man, and they only wished I was like him. I blessed myself for a stupid fool, in thinking to have pumped them; for by this time I might have known that, through your Western homeliness, every man in his own country is something more than a plain doer of the forest, and that I had done more harm than good by questioning; inasmuch as every soul in the place would run straight-way and inform him that the king's man from the other side of the forest had been sitting out his ways and works."

"Ah!" I cried, "I could not help it; you begin to understand at last that we are not quite such a set of oafs as you first believed us."

"I was riding on from Dulverton," he resumed with great severity, "yet threatening me no more, which checked me more than fifty throats," and it was late in the afternoon, and I was weary. The road from there, and which I called, turned suddenly down from the higher land to the very brink of the sea; and rounding a little jut of cliff, I met the coast of a north-east gale, was scoured, and leaping aside; for a northerly wind was piping and driving hunk-falls, as children seaters know of them. But he only sunk his fetlocks in the dry sand, piled with seaweed; and I tried to make him face the waves, and then I looked about me.

"Watchett town was not to be seen, on account of a little foreland, a mile or more upon my course, and extending to the right of the cliff. There was room enough below the cliffs (which were nothing there to yours, John) for horse and man to get along, although the tide was running high, and the waves were to back it. But close at hand and in the corner, drawn above the yellow sands and long eyebrows of wrack-wood, as snug a little house blinked on me as ever I saw, or wished to see.

"You know that I am not luxurious, neither in any way given to the common lusts of the flesh, John. My father never allowed his hair to grow a fourth part of an inch in length, and he was thoroughly glibly man; and I try to follow in his footsteps, whenever I think about it. Nevertheless, I do assure you that my view of that little house, and the way the lights were twinkling, so different from the cold and darkness of the rolling sea, moved the ancient Adam in me, if he could be found to move. I love not a house with too many windows, being out of house and doors some three quarters of my time, when I get inside a house I like to feel the difference. Air and light are good for people who have any lack of them; and if a man once talks about them, 'tis enough to prove his need of them. But as you well know, John Ridd, the horse who has been at work all day, with the sunshine on his eyes, sleeps better in dark stable, and needs no moon to help him."

"Seeing, therefore, that this same inn had four windows, and no more, I thought to myself how snug it was, and how beautifully I could sleep, and that I had made the old horse draw hand, which he was only too glad to do, and we clomb above the springtide mark, and over a little piece of turf, and struck the door of the hostelry. Some

one came and peeped at me through the lattice overhead, which was full of the bull's eyes; and then the bolt was drawn back, and a woman met me very courteously. A dark and foreign-looking woman, very hot of blood, I doubt, but not altogether a bad one. And she waited for me to be first to speak, which an Englishwoman would not have done.

"Can I rest here for the night?" I asked, with a lift of my hat to her; for she was no provincial dame, who would stare at me for the courtesy; and she waited for me to be first to speak, which an Englishwoman would not have done.

"Yes, sir, you can rest and welcome. But of food, I fear, there is but little, unless of the common order. Our fishers would have drawn the nets, but the waves were violent. However, we have what you call it? I never can remember, it is so hard to say—the flesh of the hog salted."

"Bacon!" I said; "what can be better? And half a dozen eggs with it, and a quart of fresh-drawn ale. You are not of the men who eat bread, are you?"

"Ah, good!" she replied, with a merry smile, full of Southern sunshine; "you are not of the men who eat bread, are you?"

"And most of all, I can eat, good madam. In that way I shall astonish you, even more than by my intellect," he laughed aloud, and swung her shoulders, as your natives cannot do; and then she called a little maid to lead her horse to stable. However, I preferred to see that matter done myself, and told her to send the little maid for the trying-pipe and the egg-box.

"Whether it were my natural wit and elegance of manner, or whether it were my London freedom and knowledge of the world, or (which is perhaps the most probable) because the least pleasing supposition) my ready and permanent appetite, and appreciation of garlic—I leave you to decide, John; but perhaps all three combined to recommend me to the graces of your charming hostess. When I say 'charming,' I mean of course by manners and by intelligence, and most of all by cooking; for as regards external charms (most pleasing to the eyes, and which had ceased to cause distress for I cannot say how many years. She said that it was the climate—yet even upon that subject she requested my opinion—and I answered, 'If there be a change, let madam blame the seasons.'

"However, not to dwell too much upon our little pleasantries (for I always get on well with these foreign women), I became, not inquisitive, but reasonably desirous to know by what strange hap or hazard a clever and a handsome woman, as she must have been, and a woman, moreover, with great contempt for the rustic minds around her, could have settled here in this lonely inn, with only the waves for company, and a doerish husband for a neighbor. I was, however, not very long to get to the bottom of the matter. And what was the meaning of the emblem set above her door-way—a very unattractive cat sitting in a ruined tree? However, I had not very long to strain my curiosity; for when she found out who I was, and how I held the King's commission, and might be called an officer, her desire to tell me all was more than equal to mine in hearing it. Many a woman, I have heard of, who had longed for some one both skillful and trustworthy, most of all for some one bearing warrant from a court of justice. But the magistrates of the neighborhood would have nothing to say to her, declaring that she was a crack-brained woman, and a wicked, and even a foreign one.

"With many grimaces she assured me that never by her own consent would she have lived so many years in that hateful country, where the sky for half the year was fog, and rain for nearly the other half. It was so the very night when first her evil fortune brought her to the inn, and so, no doubt, it would be long after it had killed her. But if I wished to know the reason of her being there, she would tell me in few words, which I will repeat as briefly as I can.

"By birth she was an Italian, from the mountains of Apulia, who had gone to Rome to seek her fortunes, after being badly treated in some other affair. Her Christian name was Benita; and she had a wano here, but could make no difference to any one. Being a quick and active girl, and resolved to work down her troubles, she found employment in a large hotel; and in rising, gradually, she had made money to her parents. And here she might have thriven well, and married well under sunny skies, and been a happy woman, but that some black day she was with her own hands, as for her family eager to behold the Pope. It was not, however, their fervent longing for the Holy Father which had brought them to St. Peter's roof, but rather their own bad luck in making a bad bargain, and their own folly. For although in the main good Catholics, and pleasant receivers of anything, one of their number had given offense by the folly of trying to think for himself, there a bitter feud had been among them, Benita knew not how it was; and the sister of the nobleman, who had died quite lately, was married to the rival claimant, whom they all detested. It was something about dividing land; Benita knew not what it was.

"But this Benita did know, that they were all great people, and rich, and very liberal; so that when they offered to speak the language for them, and to comfort the lady, she was only too glad to go, little foreseeing the end of it. Moreover, she loved the children, and their pretty ways and that, and the things they gave her, and the style of their dresses, that it would have broken her heart almost never to see the dears again.

"And so, in a very evil hour, she accepted the service of the noble Englishman, and sent her father an old shoe filled to the tongue with money, and trusted herself to fortune. But even before she was well on her way, it could not turn out well; for the laurel leaf which she threw on the fire would not crackle even once, and the horn of the goat came wrong in the stable, and the box which she was riding in, was broken. This made her high at the starting time; and after that what could you hope for?"

"However, at first all things went well. My lord was as gay as a yearling, and never would come inside the car-

riage when a decent horse could be got to ride. He would gallop in front at a reckless pace, without a weapon of any kind, delighted with the pure blue air, and throwing his heart around him. Benita had never seen any man so admirable, and so childish. As innocent as an infant; and not only contented, but noisily happy with anything. Only other people must share his joy; and the shadow of sorrow scattered it, though it were but the shade of poverty.

"Here Benita wept a little; and I liked her none the less, and believed her ten times more, in virtue of a tear or two.

"And so they traveled through Northern Italy, and throughout the south of France, making their way anyhow; sometimes in coaches, sometimes in carts, sometimes upon mule-back, sometimes on foot, but always as happy as could be. The children laughed and grew, and thrived (especially the young lady, the elder of the two), and Benita began to think that, once she had got to the Pyrenees hills, she must be led upon. But suddenly her faith in omens was confirmed forever.

"My lord who was quite a young man still, and laughed at English arrogance, rode on in front of his wife and friends, to catch the first of a famous view on the French side of the Pyrenees hills. He kissed his hand to his wife, and said that he would save her the trouble of coming to the Pyrenees hills, and that he would make each other know whatever he or she had felt. And so my lord went round the corner, with a fine young horse leaping at the steps, and my lady following him, and she had never come again; and within a week his mangled body lay in a little chapel-yard; and if the priests only said a quarter of the prayers they took the coming of the young man, he had no throats left, only a relaxation.

"My lady dwelt for six months more—it is a melancholy tale (what true tale is not so)—scarcely able to believe that all her bright and shining husband had never been a piece of shape of any mourning clothes; she would not have a person cry, or any sorrow among us. She simply disbelieved the thing, and would not believe it, until she had seen the body, and she had no faith, cannot understand this feeling. Enough that so it was; and so my lady went to heaven.

"For when the snow came down in autumn, my lord's body was found in the chapel-yard was white with it, many people told the lady that it was time for her to go. And the strongest plea of all was this, that she bore another child, and that she was a virtuous. So at the end of October, when wolves came down to the farmlands, the little English family went home toward their England.

"On the landed somewhere on the Devonshire coast, ten or eleven years ago, and stayed some days at Exeter, and set out thence in a hired coach, without any proper attendance, for she had no money, and she was a woman, and why did the woman stay there?"

"Well!" cried Jeremy Stickle, only too glad to be cheerful again, "talk of a woman after that. As we used to say at my time, 'it was not very long to get to the bottom of the matter, and she had no faith, cannot understand this feeling. Enough that so it was; and so my lady went to heaven.'"

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