

BY PROXY Episode in the Life of Richard Ryder: Otherwise Galloping Dick of the Road

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

Though I have ever had an eye for beauty and the sex that it adorns, I have always kept a head as steady as my fist when it holds a pistol or a bodkin. There is no woman born that is like to make a fool of me by making me a husband, and that is flat truth. Yet I will confess that once I came close to falling into that fate, by accident, and by a certain indulgence I felt toward the girl, but certainly not of affection or any intoxicated folly of eyes and arms and wrists and such things.

It happened on the Portsmouth road and in the tail of a wondrous spring day. I was come up from Petersfield, and a hue and cry was raised in my rear by reason of rump-packing a bottle-nosed old cock that was some person of distinction in those parts, and officer of a sort of his Majesty. I passed Rake at a sharp canter, and thought that I was rid of the traps; so, being mighty thirsty, I entered the Anchor at Liphook, and drew down a deep draft of wine. Then, falling into a little muse, and exchanging words with mine host, a cheerful fellow, I was pulled straight up by the sight of horsemen at the bend of the street. I had, as it chanced, reckoned them too lightly; for here was part of the posse, as eager and as sharp as you will, bent on lodging poor Galloping Dick in the jug.

There was nothing to spare between the instant of that recognition and my departure. I frankly avow that I was all but nicked on the threshold of the inn; but I was just in time, and made off presently with my gentleman hard on my heels. Now the mare, as it chanced, was blown, having made a rough course over a rude track, and not only so, but the devil's luck had it that she fell lame through striking of a stone soon after I had left the Anchor. So there was I in a sorry plight, with the traps upon me, and no chance of refuge that I knew of. For I had turned aside from the main road, and was upon an ill-conditioned track that led somewhere, as I guessed, toward Alton. And there was small hope to turn into some safe hostelry there, for 'twas not a part that was familiar to me; but I had turned thither in the trust to throw off the dogs behind me.

Conceiving me, then, with Calypso limping and spiritless for all her great heart; and then in the noon's eye that gleamed on me four stalwart fellows, each with the thought to clap Dick Ryder in the jug. The chase was hot, as you may think, and at last it came to me quickly that some ruse was necessary, for that I could not win out by mere twinkling legs. Just as I came to this thought I spied before me a man on horseback, jogging along comfortably enough. Says I to myself that here is the occasion and the remedy. I was along by him in two minutes and had clapped a pistol to his head.

"Dismount and discard, said I. "I have no room or time for manners, or I would engage ye in gentle parley. But now in a trice, doff your dress!"

Well, I will make no more ado about that; no more than he did when he saw my face and the bark-er, and recognized what it signified.

"I will have the law on you, Rogue!" he said, stripping.

"Al the law you will," said I, prodding him with my iron to quicken him.

"I would know you again anywhere," said he, and suddenly stopped in his undressing and stared agape at me.

I prodded him again, being anx-

ious lest the traps should emerge from the dusk, and he finished his job.

"To our m'erry meeting!" says I when I was inside his finery, which was pretty enough for a gentleman of fortune, and I laughed as I rode off on his horse, with poor Calypso at my side mightily relieved to be rid of my incubus. But the cully sat on the wayside with a leg in my breeches and perplexity on his face.

Yet, after all, my trick was not destined to help me out as I had hoped; though if I had had the heart to abandon the mare it would have done so. But she followed, whinnying in a way that challenged me to the midrift, and, though I was on a beast in good wind, I set my pace according to her. And so it fell that a mile further the posse was upon me with a rush. I had just time to get sense of this onset and turn off into a lone on the left, escaping by the skin of my teeth, as you might say.

But as the night was full of light I was not to slip off that way, and indeed their beasts were vastly better in wind than mine, and I was like to be nicked in that bylane, like any common cutpurse or footpad. The moon shone on the whiteness of a horse nearby, that was inclosed in a park, and at that, being pressed so devilish hard, I suddenly checked the horse, swung to the ground ere he stopped, and with a whistle to Calypso was through an open gateway in a twinkling. The mare followed; but 't'other horse went galloping with his empty saddle along the lane. I sent Calypso adrift with a word among the shrubberies of the park, and myself racing lightly, made for the house. But the traps were none so foolish as I thought. There was wit in one of them, anyway. For, looking back, I perceived a horseman ride through the same gateway into the meadow, and I knew he was still hot upon my scent.

I crossed a lawn, made by some flowerbeds, and found myself against the house itself, with lights shining in many windows. It was a pleasant night in spring, and a long lattice was open to the fresh breeze and the fragrance of the garden. I stood for a moment meditating; for I will confess that I was in close straits, and there was need of some desperate cure for my hazard. Behind me I heard sounds, and guessed that the man with the wit had rallied his posse, and that the hunt was drawn close upon me. There was no time to be lost; so I pushed aside the lattice and stepped over the window sill, pulling as I did so the jealousies more securely over it. Then I turned, and there was a woman facing me.

Jack, Jack!" she cried out as in excitement. "You have come in time, then. Thank God for that!"

The room was lit but dimly, and I was not able to make out her face in particulars. Nor was she mine, as this outbreak witnessed; but she discovered her error soon enough, and fell back a step.

"Who are you?" she asked in some fear.

"One that means no ill," said I quickly; for I knew how time pressed, "and one," says I, "that is in need of help."

Her eyes commanded me; for she seemed to have lost her fear of a sudden. I observed her, how bright and hard her face, young too, and handsome, but of a mighty coldness. She surveyed me in a swift and reckoning manner, frowned a little and seemed to draw in a deep gulp of breath.

"You are flying from justice!" says she.

Now here was a sharp enough

guess and there was that in the intonation of her words that irked me; for it was as if she had more to follow.

"Maybe from injustice!" said I indifferently.

She turned her head and listened; for there was a noise and knocking in the distance. "There is someone come for you" she said.

"Maybe," said I. "Your Ladyship knows who there be who come for me and knock?"

"It matters not," she said. "But whoever you be, and for what you are, you are doomed with these inquisitors at Sir Edward Curwen's door."

I loosened my bodkin, and took the belt of my pistol into one palm. "Would those avail you?" she asked almost as if in contempt.

"They will do as well in these hands as aforesaid," I answered.

It was a wonder to me all this time that she had not sounded an alarm. She puzzled me, and she bewildered me; but, rip me! I could not but admire her spirit.

She took a step to me. "Look you, Sir!" she said. "The officers of the law are now doubtless within the house. Their hands are all but upon you. There is nothing can save you, nothing," says she, "but one thing. Come, I will make a bargain with you, and save that naughty neck."

She laughed rather harshly to my ears. "If you will do what I bid, you shall escape."

"Egad!" said I. "Tis a long story, Madam, with the traps at the door."

"They are admitted," she said, listening. "Give me your pistol. Come, I pledge you. You shall be free of them if so be you will play a part tonight."

"I will play the whole of Mr. Shakespeare's scenes," said I, "if you will but give me the cue."

She moved still nearer. "You shall for the space of three hours from now be one John Curwen," she said, speaking very slowly and very clearly.

I doffed my hat. "Madam, here is John Curwen, alias Jack, alias what you will, at your good service, and a Jack that could do with a full glass of red wine after long service ahorse."

"That is well," she said. "You shall be refreshed, What's o'clock? Ah!" she breathed a sigh. "Come with me, Jack Curwen," she said. "Sir Edward expects you," and she flung open the door beyond.

Now this let a flood of light upon the scene; for here was an old gentleman, very pompous and ceremonious, as I could see at a glance, together with three of the traps advancing toward the open door.

"Lydia," says the old cock very pettishly, "is it you? Here is some nuisance of the law that I am pestered with. It is declared that highwayman hath taken refuge in the house. 'Shoddy! tis a taint upon the house. What is this? What is this? Discharge 'em, my dear. D'ye hear?' And then he seemed to perceive me; for I had seen that the old fellow was purlined of sight. "Who the devil—" says he, and stopped puzzled.

Now, no sooner had they clapped eyes on me than there was a stir among the traps, and the chief of them made a movement.

"This is our man, Sir," said he, pointing at me. "Dick Ryder, known as Galloping Dick, and as great a tobyman as on all the King's roads."

The girl that was next me and had been addressed as Lydia here gave a start, and then began to laugh. She put a soft and very determined arm under mine, where I was feeling of my bodkin.

"This is a jest for Twelfth Night," says she. "Uncle, who is this that is arrived but now in pursuance of your orders? Guess you," she says, "or shall I put my hands across your eyes, dear heart?"

At that the old man stared, and suddenly put out a hand. "God bless me! Jack, I did not know you at first," said he. "What's o'clock?" and he fumbled with his watch. "Gad! you're in the nick of time. Give me your hand, Boy, I would have kept my oath, by my faith and salvation, that I would!" he said, and shook me heartily by the hand.

Now it was plain that this conduct mightily disturbed the officers, who stood by in indecision and in perplexity. At that I snatched at the reins for myself; for it seemed the old man had forgot his visitors.

"And these gentlemen, Sir," said I, indicating them with an interrogation in my finger.

"Oh!" says he. "Well, you're mistook, my men. There is none in this house. It would be strange indeed if Curwen Hall spelled sanctuary for

any rascal. He is probably gone on his way, and I recommend you to lose no more time in pursuit."

The chief of the traps was evidently discomfited, and was black of brow. Yet what was he to do? He stared me in the face; but I had never clapped eye on him before, and it was plain, though he thought he was sure of me, that he was taken aback. As for Sir Edward, he took no more heed, being taken up with his mighty pleasant fancy for me. Lord love me! he would be talking like a garrulous old prating hen. 'Twas Jack this and Jack that, and the very devil of remembrances that I did not remember; until at last when we were coming to a grand chamber with very sign of luxury about it he said:

"Well, my dear nephew, and now for the wedding!"

"Wedding!" says I in a wonder. He dug his fingers into my ribs. "Ay, wedding," says he. "Your wedding," says he, and laughed like a jackanapes.

At that I started, and half rose in my chair; but the girl opposite raised her fingers in a warning.

"Uncle, there is something Jack and I would say together, by your leave."

"Ay, by your leave, Sir," says I heartily, being glad of the opportunity to rede this riddle.

At which with a wink, and a jest the old forked parsnip toddled from the room, saying that he would go see that the chaplain was prepared. When he was gone your madam turned to me.

"You have sworn," she said, "to be John Curwen this night for three hours."

I rubbed my nose, "Egad!" said I, "I begin to have misgivings."

"Sir," says she in a blaze, "look on me. Have I not beauty?"

"By the Lord and the altar, yes!" said I, humoring her; for she was not to my taste, though of an undoubted handsomeness. "You're ravishing, rip me! in that gown, and—"

She smiled, and put up a hand. "Tis necessary you should know something; for you are sworn to me for three hours," she says. "I am ward to Sir Edward, having some little property, and this Jack that is you is his nephew. This two years since he was here, and his uncle and he parted in a quarrel. 'Twas over me," Her face hardened. "Sir Edward was bent upon a match and his nephew denied him. There was some wench—"

"Sdeath!" said I. "He had infamous bad taste."

She bit her lip. "'Twas of no matter to me; but my guardian's wishes deserved respect. It came to a rupture. I was indifferent, but would do as Sir Edward wished. At last it broke out,—he must either marry or lose his fortune and come to a barren title. He had two years in which to think it over, and the two ended tonight at eight of the clock."

I whistled. "Why," said I, "then I am to play Jack's part for Jack, am I, and save the comedy?"

She looked at me through lowered eyelids. "You have guessed very well, Sir," she said.

I sat still with my hands in my pockets for a moment thinking. I was come to a pretty pass, as you may believe; for I saw what this mixx designed, and I cannot deny that I admired her for it. She would take the game in her hands, and make a gross bid for victory. Moreover, it was plain she desired to be my lady, and to own wide acres and gold guineas. When I looked up she was regarding me closely.

"I am sworn to you," said I, laughing. "I am your man, and, rip me! I'll be a better man than Master Jack and his doldrums."

"Yes," she said, and then quickly again. "Yes, I will trust you. You shall go through with it. You dare not refuse!" and she gazed at me fiercely.

"I will go through all that is involved behind those fine eyes," said I. "I will go through all as a knife through butter—rip me if I prove false!"

Before she could answer to that

She started, and got from her chair. "You are only proxy," she said sharply, "proxy by convenience."

"Well," said I, prepared to carry the joke through to its end, "but what if Master Jack made no appearance?"

"You shall go away. We are wed, as you say, and you shall leave this night!" Her voice came to me muffled, and she looked elsewhere than at me.

"What if I should not go?" I asked.

She turned suddenly, her eyes flaming, changed in a twinkling from that cold statue that she had been all along. "You shall go or perish!" she said.

"Come, madam!" said I, admiring to see her thus transformed, and as handsome again. "You do not gage or pity my predicament. Here am I wed and not wed. Here am I turned loose for a mockery, and

used and trampled upon to feed a fine lady with gewgaws and jewels and silks and broad acres. Think upon my bad case."

"I have saved you from the law, which I doubt not you have outraged," she said in a quieter voice. "You should thank Heaven for that. We can cry quits. 'Tis in the bargain."

"And you would weigh poor souls and hearts in a rough bargain?" I asked. "Lord! is there no pity to be wrung from your steel heart when one that is your husband and craves you is despatched out of doors, exiled, alone, expatriated from his own affections?" I said.

She was silent for a moment, and then looked me steadily in the face. "I know not who you are, nor what your account is in life," she said. "We are just two mortals met that have chanced to serve each other and be served in turn. I have known many men, and I know how men cheat." She threw out a hand about the rich room. "This—this abides—these things remain and endure; but not man's honor or virtue or love."

Here, in good sooth, was a serious vein that I had not looked for, and as clear as lightning it was flashed upon me that she married for what the mating would bring her in things of the world and not at all for love.

"Well," said I, with a sigh, "I will keep my pact. You shall get rid of me when you will, Mistress."

At that she looked at me more kindly, and came closer to me, so that she rested a delicate hand on my arm. "I have trusted you, and will trust," she said earnestly, "and whatever offense you stand charged with, I am assured that you are a better man than most—better," she says bitterly, "than he you stand for."

That was handsome enough and good hearing, and it melted any reluctance in me to let her go, and along with her, if you will consider this precious inheritance. Not but what awkward turns might have disturbed me had I chosen to take my place as bridegroom; but I shirk no difficulties in life, and have ever found myself equal to them. But the lady should have her way, and that so soon as I had eaten supper, for the which my stomach was crying piteously. So I bowed and left her, resolved that in any case I would drink a pint of wine against my drought, even if it were with the butler.

I came upon a lackey presently, and made my demand. He was mighty civil and humble to so chief a person as myself, and fetched me a bottle, the which I cracked with satisfaction. Then after a little I made my way back, having a glimpse into the supper room on my way where the feast was spread. Lord! thinks I, how I will prevail that mighty pleasant board, when it comes to it!

I opened the door of the bridal chamber, so to say, and it opened without noise. There was a good light of candles in sconces in this antechamber to the nuptial rooms, and no sooner was I entered than voices reached me, and thereupon I had sight of the speakers clearly. One was Mistress Lydia, and 't'other a man of about my own height and stature that was talking with violence and anger as it seemed to

me. Who the devil was this interfering with my bride. I went forward sharply.

"By your leave," said I, "what do you in this chamber?"

He turned swiftly and confronted me that he was in my clothes, and me, and of a sudden it came upon at that a recollection of him and who he must be struck me; but ere I could say more he broke out on his part.

"The devil take me!" he cried. "'Tis the highwayman that stole my horse and stripped me!"

Out of the tall of my eye I could perceive Mistress Lydia stir and move a step; but I was looking at the man, who seemed, now that I saw him more clearly to bear a faint resemblance to me. And then it flashed incontinently upon me what this all signified. Here was the real Jack himself arrived, he that I had so unceremoniously tipped off his clothes!

"Sir," said I, eyeing him fiercely, "I perceive your impudence to be equal to your villainy. But I am thankful to say that His Majesty's officers of the law are hereabouts and prepared for you. I recognize you now. You are one Ryder, a notorious highwayman, for whom a hue and cry is out on the Portsmouth Road." And then I turned to Mistress Lydia, "My dear," said I, "this is no place for you at such a time, and with so infamous a rascal. Will you do me the favor to summon the steward and see that notice is given to the officers?"

At that he opened his mouth. "Sblood! Lydia!" he cried. "What is all this? A m I on my heels or head? This rogue—"

"My man," I said, interrupting, "you shall be head over heels in an instant if you dare insult this lady again. My dear—"

Now, I will not deny, as those that know my mind and temper will understand, that I was enjoying this pretty little play, and the more particularly that I saw a smile rise behind the mask of Mistress Lydia's face.

"Lydia, why stand you dumb?" demanded the man. "You know that this hocus pocus is mere insolent acting. Who is this man, and what does he here?"

It was then that I could have taken her to me, and clasped her girde for the first time that evening; for, says she solemnly, "I do not know by what right you address me, sir, nor who you be. This is my husband, John Curwen, nephew and heir to Sir Edward Curwen, my husband that I have wed this night. Go, get you gone, as he counsels, and ere the officers are called down on you!"

There was never a cully so discomfited, if you will believe me, nor one more chagrined. He gaped and gaped, and then says he, "This is some gross jest, Lydia!"

"If you are in any doubt," says she, "you will find the registration of this marriage but newly set in the chaplain's book."

"Egad!" says he helplessly. "I am mad! But there are some here that will identify me," he said. "There is my uncle."

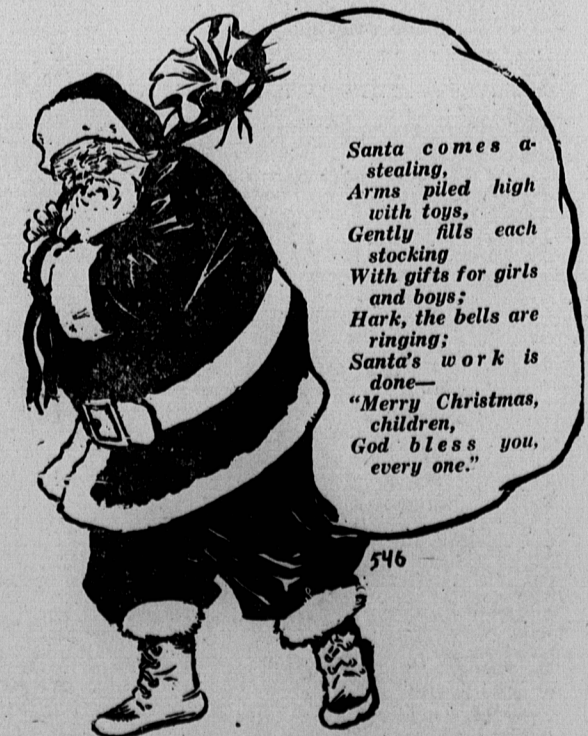
"My uncle," said I, "has already given me his blessing with his ward."

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SEASON'S GREETINGS

Christmas carols are songs of joy or praise which are sung only during the festive season. Many parts of England are celebrated for their ancient carols, and especially is this so in Cornwall. English people have sung carols at Christmas for over one thousand years; and On Christmas Day in the Morning, The Cherry Tree Carol, and others are to be found in nearly all European languages.



Santa comes a-stealing, Arms piled high with toys, Gently fills each stocking With gifts for girls and boys; Hark, the bells are ringing; Santa's work is done— "Merry Christmas, children, God bless you, every one."