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The wind is high, the wind is loud,
It bends the blackthorn tree;
The blast has tossed my bones about
This night most wearily.

—Old Ballad.

HIGH on the spur of the Black-down Hills, which break into the East Devon valleys as promontories run into the sea, lies the mighty fortress of Hembury. Its steep sides are trenched house-deep, and its stout bases are untenanted save by the fox and the badger, and other beasts that burrow in the brush-wood slopes, living their lives untroubled any longer by the howl of the wolf or the grunt of the bear. The whole region is haunted by the spirits of men who met their death by the sudden spear or the unseen arrow. Shaggy Damnonians here grappled with the mail-clad legionaries, and the English of King Alfred's service, harassed from two seas, awaited the bands of brown Danes marching from their ships on the pebbles at East Budleigh up the sunny Otter Valley.

If you stand on the highest escarpment when the sun has set between the distant cliffs it will be yours to feel utter loneliness. If you have come from the sweet hill-encircled pastures of Dunkeswell, where the

ruffled waters wash the abbey walls, you will feel still more deeply the solitude that is broken only by the rustling of prowling beasts and of their prey, and by the flapping of the startled stock-doves' wings. All around the view is vast and the spaciousness unrelieved by any homely sight or sound. The very lane you have traversed is moss-grown and invaded by furze and the unchecked bramble. On the open heath behind the ancient camp stand here and there shattered trunks of blasted trees, wisht-looking and forbidden, forsaken even by the faithful lichen.

ONE moonlight night, in the heyday of Napoleon, terror held sway on the heath; not the ghostliness of past memories, but the dire presence of death and its compeer madness. A human voice was added to the nocturnal whisperings and wailings, a voice that rose and fell in unmeasured cadence, but earnest and impassioned.

From a clump of whortleberries and ling bushes in the center of the heath there rose a weird growth, a fantastic tree whose branches were spread out as it were in dumb appeal to the cold night. At the foot of the

tree, leaning against its gray, barkless trunk, could be seen the huddled form of an old woman. And the tree, though dead and barren of leaf and berry, bore a gruesome fruit. For it was a gallows-tree and its heavy fruit was the woman's son.

All was silent for a while, save for the gentle sigh of a rising wind. A nightjar flew past the tree, then squatted down on the short turf in the greenish glamor; from time to time it fluttered to another place and settled almost within reach of the twain, as though it desired companionship. A bushy-tailed stoat stalked up without a sound, and pressed its lithe body to the earth in the shadow of a sedge-cluster, with eyes fixed on the brown bird. From under Orion a billowy cloud moved athwart the moon, and a cold breeze hastened in the track of the sudden darkness that followed. There was a rattle of chains: the nightjar flew off in rapid swerves and the stoat sat up, balancing his swaying body on his fore-paws, and hissing in anger. The old woman pulled herself together as though startled; she shuddered and rubbed her hands together and began to sing:

"A wind came out from No Man's land
And shivered across the corn.
For gossip's sake I'd die to-night
And be in hell to-morn."

"Be 'ee cold, sonny? Sure, I be thinking of 'ee hard, that I be."

She rose and took from her shoulders a coarse holland wrap and reaching up tried to throw it round her dead son's neck. Twice she failed and the third time the end of the wrap swung round the head and came to hand. Then she folded it inside his coat, crooning and mumbling the while. She clasped him in her arms, and felt the cold hands pinned behind his back.

"Wattie, my boy, come home. 'Tis ower lonesome on the heath; and I've

made your bed up nice and cozy. A whole week I've been waiting for you. Will 'ee come? The sheriff's gone and all his men, and Martin Hawk'll never know you in this yere collar and chains."

She let him go and looked up. But the dead man only swung to and fro, round and round, with his ghastly face awry.

"Don't smile so, sonny, else you'm sure to catch the toothache. Lord! but he've got the evil eye on him!" She caught sight of the orbless depth where the raven had fed early that morning. A few flakes of snow settled on her drab homespun cloak, and still the wind rose.

"'Tis the northeaster afoot. I knawed it was a-coming when I seed all they lapwings in Farmer Summerhayes' field."

She walked slowly three times round the tree in the course of the moon. Then she looked up at the fleeting clouds a while and said:

"Bain't 'ee coming to lonely mother? Be 'ee afeard? Nay, but 'tis a bitter shame for you to be a coward heart. Do 'ee mind that night off Straight Point when the Blackamoor pirates found him and Matthew and you a-sleeping in the ketch, an' he fought for his boys till they killed him, but you swam away to Sandy Cove and left young Matthew to go for a slave? Do 'ee mind how I cried and thee said thee'd bide by me and take care of your broken-hearted mother? And then the devil comes into your heart and you goes a-thieving with Martin Hawk. Why did 'ee trust to Martin? Your poor old mother would never ha' sold you for sheriff's gold."

A flaw of wind swung the body, and the gyves clanked again. A terrified hare scudded by blindly.

"But never fear—he shall come to you soon and bear you company, that he shall. Do 'ee wait but a tiny while, sonny, and Martin Hawk shall

swing from t'other bough a-singing so blithe. Fetch him, my boy, call him, hunt him from his lair this very night, and the stars o' heaven shall watch ye both in your sleep."

And the old woman hastened away across the narrow neck of land into the ancient camp, and down the hidden waterway of the old warriors, looking neither to right nor to left.

2

Oh ho, how they march,
Making sounds as they tread;
Ho-ho, how they laugh,
Going down to the dead.

—*The Dead March.*

THREE miles to the southward of the hill camp lies the modern village of Broad Hembury. It consists of a score or so of snugly thatched farmhouses and cottages, approached by deep Devon lanes on three sides, and on the fourth by an avenue of the tallest elms, a manorial drive leading to the old hall. Here the stranger moves in a feudal atmosphere: the high walls and the lofty rook-thronged park trees produce a sense of insignificance in one who is less than an honored guest; and the villagers themselves are medieval, not only in their dependence, but in their very speech and movements.

On this night the village lay sheltered from the cold winds that blew on the heights above, and lights were burning dimly behind the small lattice windows. Indoors the frugal evening meal was still on the tables of one and another of the houses, and the laboring folk were settling down for the night. In one cottage only, no light burned, for the widow Gregory had been out since early afternoon, and her log fire had long since died out. No sound was to be heard but the moaning of the wind in the far tops of the trees, and the occasional murmur of the warmly stalled cattle.

On a sudden this stillness was broken by the sound of a gun. Now it happened that Frank Janes, the stable-boy at Squire Coleridge's, was out in the linhay at that moment, and his sharp ears caught the unusual sound. A gunshot in the park at that hour meant something wrong, so he ran in to tell the master. The young guardsman seized a fowling-piece and gave a bludgeon to the boy, and they started off for the park. They had not crossed the flower beds in front of the hall before they heard another shot, followed by a sharp cry.

"'Tis Bob Gamlin, of a surety, sir, and him in trouble."

They raced along under the grove of walnut and chestnut trees until they reached the edge of the wildfowl pond, and there in a momentary burst of moonlight they found the keeper lying doubled up with his piece beside him.

"God! Bob, whatever's up wi' 'ce? I knawed your voice right enough."

The man looked up but could not speak: he opened his mouth, but something seemed to be choking him.

"Run back at once and fetch Horniball and Furze and Eno and bring a stretcher, quick," said the young officer.

When the boy had gone he bent down over the keeper and spoke kindly to him. The man opened his eyes again and said in a whisper:

"'Tis Martin Hawk, sir, a-poaching: I did nearly have him, though." Then came a gush of blood and he fell back in a stupor.

The young squire raised him gently in his arms and held him upright until the farmhands came, a ghostly procession with horn lanterns, tramping heavily through the lush leaf-strown grass. The dying man was borne carefully into the stable room, and by that time all the village was gathered. Awestruck women and muttering men stood respectfully aside as

the old squire came out bareheaded and gave his orders. Jan Searle was to speed to Honiton for a doctor and the constable, and the men of the village were to meet at daylight to hunt the outlaw.

The keeper never spoke again, and long before Jan Searle had covered the six miles to Honiton was beyond need of earthly help. He lay in one of the stable rooms, and two motherly village dames had led his swooning wife Eunice home and were trying in vain to comfort her. The knot of men moved out of the manor gates and gathered anew on the green, where snow-white geese stirred uneasily in their sleep by slowly moving water. Anger and threats came from their midst, but all their speech was in subdued tones, for death, that was but a rare visitor in their community, had shown his face twice in a week. In their excitement they did not notice, until she was close to them, a woman who walked as though in a dream. Her cloak was thrown back from her head and her silvery hair was all disheveled and lying on her shoulders; her hands were torn by the brambles and the gorse, and her homespun skirt was heavy with dew and the drip from the trees. All voices were suddenly hushed, and it was Robin Furze who broke the silence.

"'Tis Widow Gregory, for certain," he said. "Poor saul, us must mind her trouble too, boys. Tomorrow must be his last day."

The old woman stopped in their midst: though she turned to them there was a far-away look in her eyes and no man felt that she was speaking to him.

"There be a lost hound that shall lose his life this very night. See you this mark on my forehead? That is the blow he gave me when I met him and cursed him on the hill-road but an hour ago. This night, I told him, he shall pay back the debt of life he

owes my son; he cannot escape, my boy shall draw him yonder. By the cruel eye of the hawk, by the sharp teeth of the fitchet, by the foul blood of the vampire I curse him: by the bones of his father, by his mother's breast, by his children's lips I curse him. For his wicked life, for the men he has falsely betrayed, for the women he has fordene, to his soul's everlasting doom I curse him, and may the Lord forgive me!"

She stayed her speech and her arms fell exhausted by her side. She bowed her head and walked away toward the gloom of the park wall. All at once she turned sharply and said:

"This night, men, you will find him by the cross-tree on the heath: I have sent my Wattie for him, and there's no power can hold him back. Hark, I hear my lad a-calling: 'Martin, Martin!' He is a-cold and lonesome, but he shall have gay company this night."

And on their startled ears fell the mournful cry of some night bird, perchance in its death agony.

MEANTIME the guilty man was hastening up the long slope of the lane which ran eastward and gave the shortest cut to Honiton. It was a miry track, sunk deep between green banks, and on such a night as this was little less than a sky-roofed tunnel. Why he was climbing this road he did not know: it was as though some force outside his own will were directing him. His clothes were blood-stained and he knew he must avoid the busier haunts of men. One way he dare not take, and that was over the heath where his comrade Gregory, the victim of his treachery, was swinging in the storm. How he longed to be out of the close valley! And yet not for the world would he turn that fatal way.

After half an hour's rough going the lane opened into a small square

with three other ways leading out of it. Here he would rest for a few minutes; he stood at a broken field-gate and let the breeze he had longed for fan his brow. A blackbird rustled in the bare hedge branches; up in the hills the wind moaned through the gullies, and every now and then came whirls of wet snow that melted as soon as it reached earth. He was just thinking of moving when the dull tramp of a galloping horse struck his ears. He was over the gate in a twinkling and had wriggled himself into a hiding place behind the hedge. As a precaution he hastily put a fresh cap on his musket and held it ready. The sound grew louder and louder, then the gallop slackened and changed into a heavy walk; the slope of the road was too much for the horse.

A sudden idea came into Hawk's mind. Why should not that horse be his for a time, whoever the owner might be now? With a good horse and his knowledge of the west country paths, he might, by traveling o' nights, reach the Black Mountains of Wales in a week's time, hiding his tracks as he went, and then he would be safe. After all, Devon was too hot for him any longer, and what was life to a man who dare not face the daylight? The idea became a hope and a determination: that horse he would have, even at the cost of another life.

He recognized the animal and its rider as soon as they came forth into the cross-ways. Just as they passed the gate he pointed his musket at Searle and fired pointblank. There was a snap, a curse from the murderer, a plunge by the startled horse, and a laugh of contempt as man and beast dashed into the Honiton turning, soon to be out of range. The wonderful thing had happened that for the first time in his life Martin Hawk had forgotten to load his piece.

He raved as though out of his senses, dashed his gun to the ground,

and felt his sense of self-control and security leaving him. Again there came the sure feeling that a power outside himself had him in leash. He must get away with all speed. But whither could he fly? The road back to the village and that forward to Honiton he dare not try: that leading down the Otter Valley to the sea was no good; daylight would show him up on the downs and a price was on his head in the ports. So it came about that he turned with dread into the very road he shunned the most, that leading up to the hill-fort and the heath, where was a sight it would mean madness to face. The air grew colder and a storm passed over the land as he mounted against his will. A beacon light flared into sight on a hill away beyond Exeter, and a vision of dragoons and the prison yard flashed into his mind. He must plunge into the darkness of the hills and shut out all light from far and near.

ALL at once he bethought him of an old hut under the eastern slope of the hill, which had formerly been a haunt of his when benighted or in hiding. He swung to the right through the thick growth of brushwood, and with difficulty made his way along the base of the mountain mass of the fort. It was painful work, even for an experienced woodsman, to force his way through the overgrown tangle, and he felt the briars tearing his clothes and his flesh as he struggled pantingly through. With old instinct he replaced the parted twigs and so covered his track as far as possible. The night was dark now, and the moon no longer showed its face, but there was a dull glare overhead, marking the sky against looming masses of earth and forest around him. He was on familiar ground now, and his course became less arduous.

As he approached his old den he looked carefully for signs of any recent visitants, man or beast, but the earth was untrampled and the overgrowth undisturbed. The hut was at the end of a tiny dingle filled with tall stems of figwort and sedges. It was a tumble-down structure, partly built of banked turf and partly scooped out of the hillside. A rotting beam crossed the entrance and a strong shutter served as door.

Martin Hawk came into the dingle in sorry state. The sweat ran down his haggard face, and he trembled with a fright he had never known before. He pushed back the shutter and entered the narrow portal. After several attempts he struck a light on his tinder box and placed the stump of a dip in a hollow in the wall where its reflection would serve to light the interior dimly without betraying him. A huge toad was squatting in a corner, and he scraped the ugly thing out with his foot without hurting it. A smell of cold ferns filled the hut, but he had a shelter against wind and rain. He went out and pulled a big armful of sedge, which he laid on the damp bank of turf that served him for a couch. It was of no avail his trying to light a fire from the moldy embers and wet kindling, so he pressed the bar into place across the shutter, lighted his pipe, and sat down to clean his gun. After a while, overcome with weariness, he lay down to sleep. He had watched the night before and had not been under a roof for three days. His sleep was deep and heavy as though he lay in a dungeon far underground; he heard neither the sound of creeping things nor the careering gusts of wind.

3

For an outlaws, this is the laws, that men
hyme take and binde
Wythout pytee, hanged for to bee, and
waver with the wynde.

—*The Nut-Brown Maid.*

A HEAVY thundering at the door broke through the depths of the stillness.

The sleeper's heart suddenly stopped beating and as suddenly raced on with double force. He dared not speak or move and his limbs were as ice.

Again a loud banging on the shutter, which shook but stood its ground.

A shudder passed over the outlaw, and with a superhuman effort a pitiful groan was forced from his lips.

Then a voice he knew too well froze his blood:

"'Tis I, Martin: open the door and let your comrade in."

Martin uttered a smothered oath.

"Let me bide," he shouted, "or I'll blow ye to hell!" and he reached for his gun.

"Don't 'ee know me, Martin? 'Tis Wat Gregory."

"'Tis a devil's trick: I knowed his voice better'n that: be off, I tell 'ee."

"Nay, but 'tis I sure enough, Martin: the gibbet rope be a-choking me, else would 'ee hear me plain."

Martin groaned.

"I be turble cold, Martin; for a seven-night the hail and rain have fallen on my hair, and they shackles hurt painful. Let me in and I'll be quiet along of 'ee."

There was a dead silence.

"Sure I've not troubled 'ee before, Martin; and you made a good fire and a warm bed the night I got the gold for 'ee."

No answer.

"Why should I swing in they cruel chains all night, Martin, when you and I be rich men? I seed 'ee hide the gold; 'tis mine too. Do 'ee hear, Martin Hawk?"

There was no sound but the breathing of the sleeping woods.

A LOUD crash, and the bar and the shutter fell in. At that moment Martin fired his gun into the doorway, and by the flash in the pan saw his death approaching.

The dead man muttered evil words as he strode through the broken door. He stepped across to the untended hearth in his clanking shackles, and all this the murderer saw in an unearthly light. He drew back into a nook in the sodden earth wall, and could not pull his eyes from that awful blue-white face with the rusty iron band across its brow.

"What be 'ee shrinking for, Martin? Be 'ee feared of my face, boy? 'Tis wisht-looking, may be: but 'tis the rope done it. Look 'ee, 'tis very tight, and I bain't a free man to loose the damned thing."

The lank body turned round and showed the manacled hands and swollen fingers.

"Do 'ee know they ropes, Martin? They be the gift of a traitor." And the dead man turned a ghastly face with one lack-luster eye upon the trembling robber.

"But I bain't a-gwine to be hard on 'ee, friend, now you and me's going to stick to each other for always."

Martin struggled violently to find words.

"Let me go!" he screamed. If he could only pass that specter and reach the open air he would gladly flee to justice himself—even to Honiton or Ottery, where they were ready to tear him in pieces. The most revengeful of living foes would be less hateful to him than his ghostly victim.

But the trance had stupefied his will and he could not stir from his couch.

The dead man spoke again.

"Come with me, Martin. I'll not remember that ye shut the door in my face this night. Nay, I'll be kind to 'ee, and the raven that keeps watch over me shall welcome 'ee as my guest."

The dead man made a loop of his left arm and leaned over his comrade.

"Do 'ee take my arm, Martin: 'tis a stiff climb for a weary man."

And all against his will Martin arose and passed his arm through the dead man's, a cold shudder running over his fevered wrist.

Together they passed out into the night. They threaded the tangled undergrowth as easily as though it were a sunny meadow. The dead man's head swung from side to side and his shackles rattled monotonously step after step. They breasted the rampart of the fort and descended into the first deep dike, and marched along in silence where the sleepy Parthian sentinels had long ago watched. Wall after wall they scaled, and ditch after ditch they crossed until they stood on the grass-grown outlook tower at the highest point. The wind blew strongly, but the dead man only quickened his pace. They crossed the broad camping place, the abode of countless moldwarps, and at last came out on to the ling-clad heath. How the time flew! In five minutes it seemed to Martin they were at the fatal spot. He looked with wild eyes upon the blasted tree stumps, and the dread blackthorn gallows took sudden shape against the lurid sky, with its two arms a-calling.

The dead man gave a lurch and shook himself free. He turned his sunken face and said:

"Now us'll rest, Martin; all alone here. Us that was brothers in foul life shall be brothers in sweet death. 'Tis a friendly tree to the hawk and the shrike and such as us be. Look, man; here be a rope for 'ee."

And he seized the noose with his teeth and dropped it over his companion's head. Martin's agony reached its climax as he felt the hideous touch of the dead man's head against his cheek! But he could not utter a word.

"What be 'ee trembling for, man? 'Tis but a short struggle, then 'tis

over. Come, be brotherly, and I'll help 'ee up on my shoulders."

Then for the first time the murderer tried to pray: prayed for help for his own soul. The death-sweat was on his brow.

AND suddenly he woke from the awful trance which, come from within or from without, had held him powerless to resist the tug of the vision that was ever in his brain. He little knew what he had undergone when he awoke.

"Ah," thought he, "'twas a dream of hell!" He shivered in the night air.

But what was that so tight around his throat after all? And what was that that dangled at his side?

Ah, horror! The dead thing was there still, leering down at him with drawn face.

A light blazed up before his startled eyes. It was a pine torch, and by its fitful smoky light he saw a ring of men standing at ten paces around the crosstree. He heard a voice—how welcome it was to hear a living voice!

"That's for my brother Jake."

A shot rang out, and with a sharp sting his arm fell to his side. He was now wide awake and the physical pain came even as a relief after his torture of mind.

"And that's for Kate, my sister;" it was Robin Furze's voice. This time the sting was in his left shoulder. Another voice rang clear: "That'll do, man. Us baint butchers." And the figures approached him in the glare, but they did not touch him.

"Be ye ready, chaps?"

"Aye, aye."

"Then heave, oh, heave!"

Martin Hawk felt the grip on his throat tighten horribly, and the last thing he saw was the yellow face of his dead comrade coming nearer, nearer, nearer.

THE group of villagers mounted their horses and rode off in silence. As they turned into the steep waterway leading to the valley Jan Searle whispered to Farmer Summerhayes:

"Did 'ee hear a woman laughing just now?"

"No, boy, 'twas a heron in the mere."