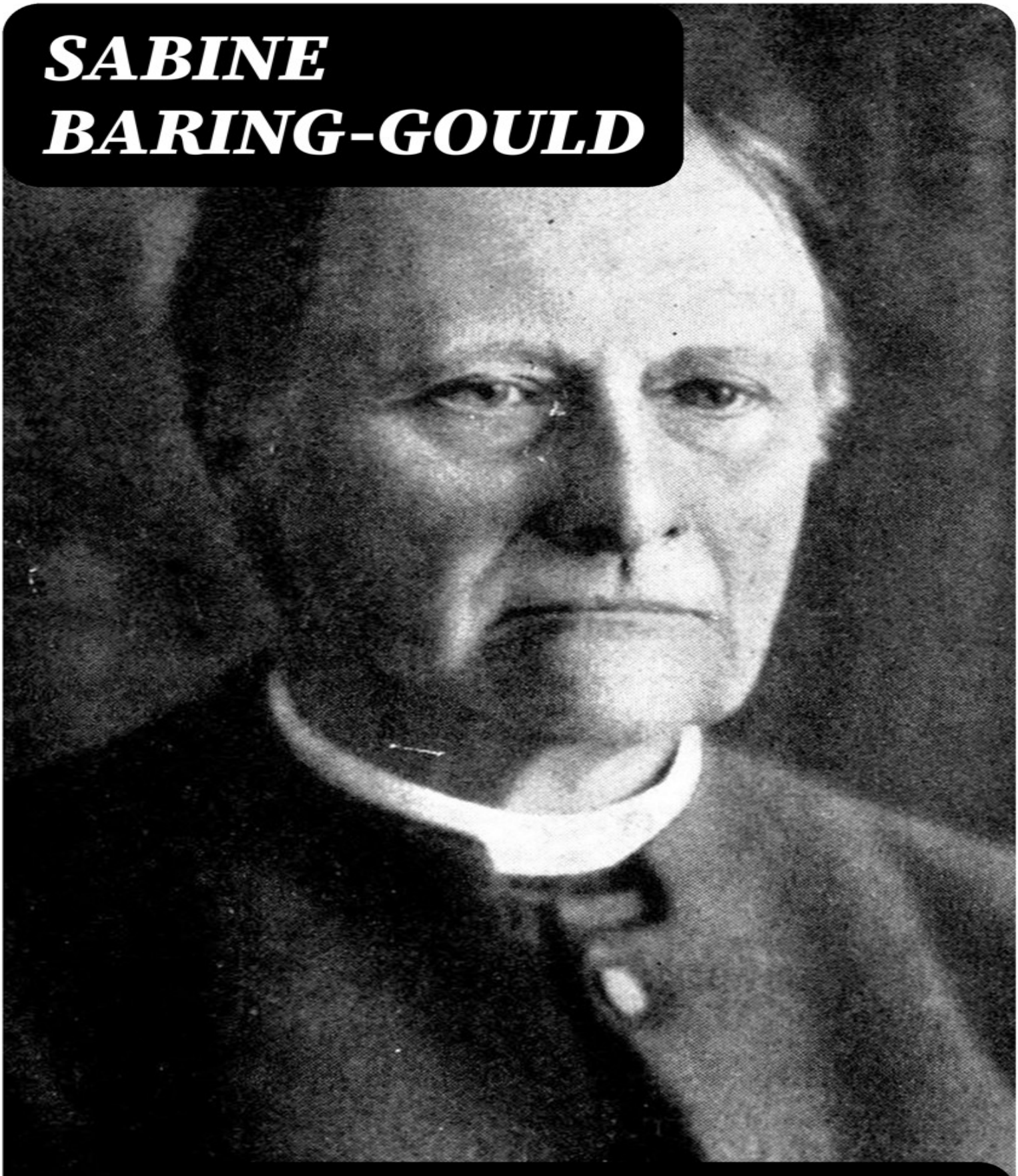
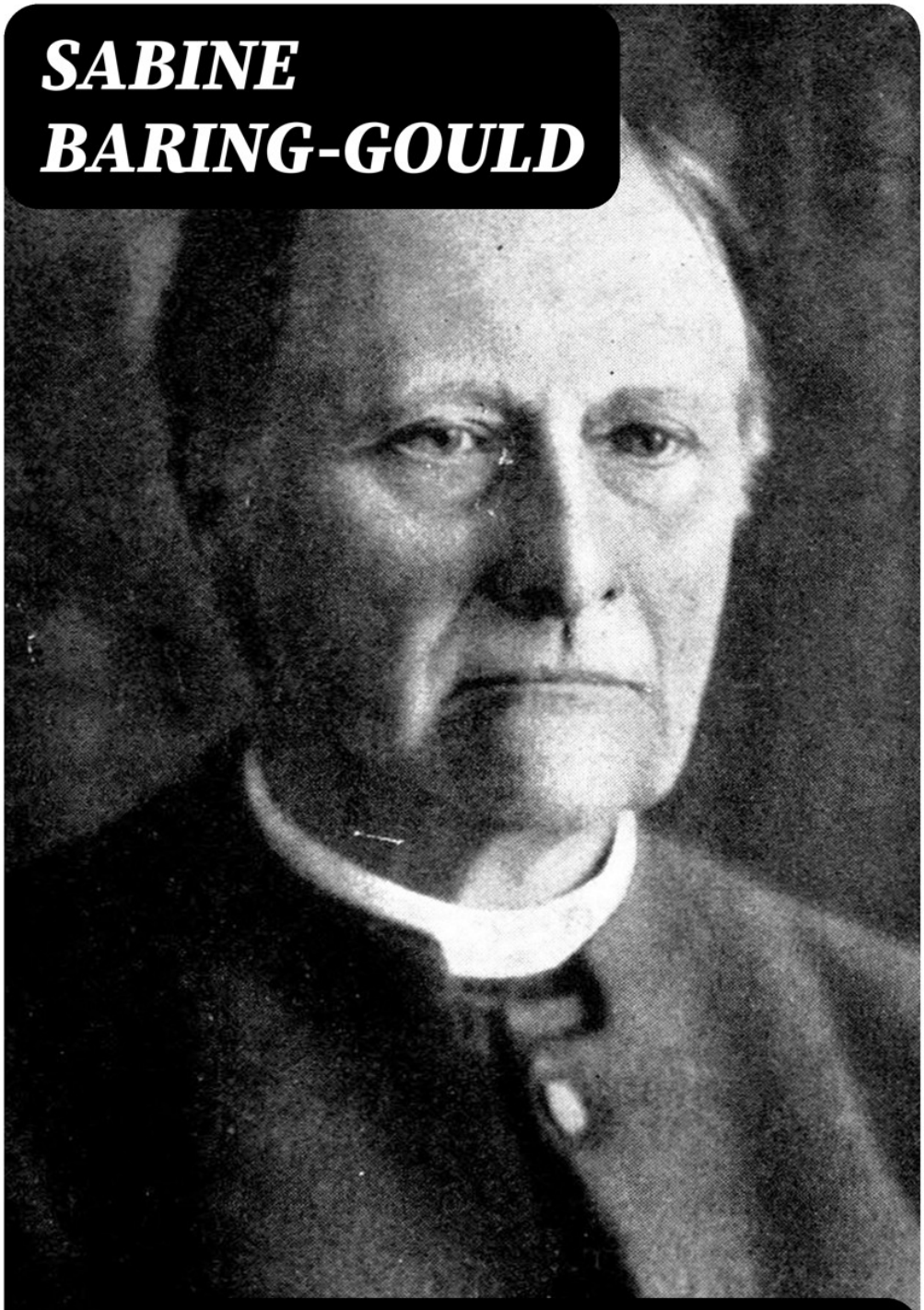
SABINE BARING-GOULD



BLADYS OF THE STEWPONEY

SABINE BARING-GOULD



BLADYS OF THE STEWPONEY

Sabine Baring-Gould

Bladys of the Stewponey

EAN 8596547087250

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

Appendix

Chapter 1

Table of Contents

OYEZ!

In a faded and patched blue coat, turned up with red, the bellman of Kinver appeared in the one long street of that small place—if we call it a town we flatter it, if we speak of it as a village we insult it—and began to ring outside the New Inn.

A crowd rapidly assembled and before the crier had unfolded the paper from which he proposed reading, an ape of a boy threw himself before him, swinging a turnip by the stalk, assumed an air of pomposity and ingenious caricature of the bellman, and shouted:

"O yes! O yes! O yes! Ladies and gents all, I gives notice that you, none of you, ain't to believe a word Gaffer Edmed says. O no! O no! O no!"

"Get along, you dratted jackanapes!" exclaimed the crier testily, and, striking the youth in the small of his back with the bell handle, sent him sprawling. Then, striding forward, he took position with a foot on each side of the prostrate urchin, rang again, and called:

"O yes! O yes! O yes! This is to give notice that this 'ere evening, at six o'clock, at Stewponey, there will be a grand champion match at bowls on the green. The prize to be Bladys Rea, commonly called Stewponey Bla. Admittance one shilling. 'Arf-a-crown inner ring, and ticket admits to the 'oly function, by kind permission of the proprietor, in the Chapel of Stourton Castle. At six o'clock per-cise. No 'arf-price. Children and dogs not admitted."

From the door of the New Inn issued Thomas Hoole, the landlord, in his shirt sleeves.

Thomas Hoole was a bit of a wag and a crumb of a poet. On the board outside his tavern he had inscribed the following verses of his own composition:—

"Customers came, and I did trust 'em,
So I lost money, and also custom.
To lose them both did vex me sore,
So I resolved to trust no more.
Chalk may be used to any amount,
But chalk won't pay the malt account.
I'm determined to keep a first-rate tap
For ready money, but no strap.
Good-will to all is here intended
Thus, hoping none will be offended,
I remain, yours respectfully
One who's no fool,
i.e. Thomas Hoole."

"What's the meaning of this, Crier Edmed?" asked the landlord.

"Well," answered the bellman, rubbing his nose with the handle of the bell and holding the same by the clapper, "I can't say exactly. My instructions don't go so far. But I fancy the gentlefolk want a spree, and Cornelius Rea at the inn is going to marry again, and wants be rid of his daughter first. It's an ockard affair altogether, and not altogether what it ort to be; and so it has been settled as a mutual accommodation that there shall be a bowling match on the green—and she's to go to the winner. That 's about it. O yes! O yes! O yes!"

Then the crier went forward clanging his bell, and as he progressed more faces appeared at windows and figures at doors, and children swarmed thicker in the street.

Phalanxes of boys formed before and behind, yelling,

"O yes! O yes! O yes! Stewponey Bla is for sale to the highest bidder. Who'll stand another 'apenny and have her? Going, going for tuppence three farthings."

Every now and again the crier made a rush at the boys in front, or backed on those behind, and dispersed them momentarily with the handle of his bell, or with a kick of his foot, and shouted,

"You vagabonds, you! I gave notice of no such thing. How can folk attend to I and learn the truth when you're a hollerin' and a scritchin' them lies! I said she was to be bowled for, and not put up to auction."

"Wot's the difference?" asked an impudent boy.

"One's respectable, 'tother ain't," retorted the crier, who then vigorously swung the bell, and shouted, "O yes! O yes! O yes!" whereat the boys mockingly shouted, "O no! O no! O no!"

A woman who had been kneading bread, with her sleeves turned up and her arms white with flour, crossed the street, came up to the landlord of the New Inn, and accosted him:

"Wot's the meaning of this, I'd like to know?"

"The meaning is before your nose," answered Hoole.

"Where?" inquired the woman, applying her hand at once to the organ, and leaving on it a patch of white.

"I mean," explained the landlord, "that anyone as knows Cornelius Rea knows just about what this signifies."

"I know Cornelius for the matter of that," said the woman from the kneading trough. "Drat my nose, there's sum'ut on it."

"'Tis pollen on your stamen, fair flower," said Hoole. "And if you'll not take it amiss I'll just wipe your nose wi' my apron, and have it off in a jiffy, and an honour it will be to the apron."

"Oh, Mister Hoole, you 're such a flatterer!" said the woman, fresh, stout, matronly; then, "But for all—I don't understand."

"But I do," said the host. "Cornelius is going to be married to that woman—you know whom I mean," with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulder and a curl of the lip.

"I don't know as it's wuss than the goings-on as has been."

"But she's not been in the house; and he can't bring her in till he has got Bladys out."

"But to put her up to be bowled for!"

"That's the doings of the gentlemen—a parcel of bucks and good-for-noughts that frequent the tavern. He's not the man to say them nay. He dussn't go contrary to them—they spend a lot o' money there."

"But who will go in for her?"

"Nay, that's more than I can say. She's a wonderful handsome girl."

"Can't see it," answered the woman.

"No—I always say that for good-looking faces you might go through the three counties and not see one like your own. But, Mrs Fiddian, you're spoiled by looking at your own

charms in the glass—it incapacitates you for seeing moderate beauty in another."

"Go along, Mr Hoole."

"How can I go along, when I am opposite you?"

"Come, ha' done with this nonsense. Who are they that have taken a fancy to this white-faced mawken?"

"For one, there is Crispin Ravenhill."

"He can't take her—hasn't enough money."

"He has his barge."

"Wot's that? His uncle would have a word to say about that, I calculate. Who else?"

"There is a stranger staying at the Stewponey that they call Luke Francis."

"What is his trade?"

"Don't know."

"Any others."

"There's Captain Stracey."

"He can't marry her—he's a gentleman; and what about Nan—has he broke with her? What others?"

"Nibblers, only."

"Well, Mr Hoole, I must back to my bakery."

"And I sink back to darkness out of light"

Kinver village occupies a basin in the side of the great rocky ridge that runs for many miles through the country and ends abruptly at the edge, a bluff of sandstone crowned by earthworks, where, as tradition says, King Wulfhere of Mercia had his camp. So far is sure, that the church of Kinver is dedicated to his murdered sons, Wulfhad and Ruffinus. The place of their martyrdom was at Stone, in

Staffordshire; but it is possible that their bodies were removed to Kinver.

As already said, the hamlet of Kinver consists mainly of one long street, composed largely of inns, for a highway passes through it; but also of habitations on the slope of the basin.

When the crier had reached the end of the street, he proceeded to ascend a shoulder of hill till he reached a strip of deep red in the sandstone, the colour of clotted blood. Here, according to tradition, a woman was murdered by the Danes, who had ascended the Stour and ravaged Shropshire. From the day of the crime the rock has been dyed blood-red.

At this point the town crier paused and looked about him. The impudent and aggravating boys fell back and pursued him no farther. A sudden awe and dread of consequences came on them, and they desisted from further annoyance. The reason for this will presently transpire.

Kinver parish occupies a peculiar position—it adjoins Shropshire and Worcestershire, and is, in fact, wedged in between the main bulk of Shropshire and an outlying islet in which is Halesowen. It is as though the three counties had clashed at this point, and had resolved their edges into broken fragments, tossed about with little regard to their position.

Kinver takes its name from the Great Ridge, Cefn vawr, of sandstone rock, 542 feet high, that rises as a ness above the plain of the Stour. In that remote period, when the Severn straits divided Wales from England, and the salt deposits were laid that supply brine at Droitwich and in the

Weaver Valley, then Kinver Edge stood up as a fine bluff above the ruffling sea. At that time also, a singular insulated sandstone rock that projects upwards as an immense tooth near the roots of the headland stood detached in the water, amidst a wreath of foam, and was haunted by seagulls, and its head whitened with their deposits, whilst its crannies served as nesting-places.

This isolated rock of red sandstone, on and about which Scotch firs have rooted themselves by the name of Holy Austin Rock; but whether at any time it harboured an anchorite of the name of Augustine is a point on which history and tradition are alike silent.

Towards this rock the bellman made his way.

Why so?

Was it for the purpose of summoning jackdaws to the bowling match?

Was it that he desired to hear the echoes answer him from the crag?

We shall see presently.

Although the local tradition is silent relative to a saintly denizen of the rock, it is vocal relative to a tenancy of a different kind. Once it was occupied by a giant and his wife, who with their nails had scooped for themselves caves in the sandstone. The giantess was comely. So thought another giant who lived at Enville.

Now in this sandstone district water is scarce, and the giant of Austin Rock was wont daily to cross a shoulder of hill to a spring some two hundred and fifty yards south of the Rock to fetch the water required for his kitchen. The water oozed forth in a dribble, and the amount required was

considerable, for a giant's sup is a drunkard's draught. Consequently he was some time absent. The Enville giant took advantage of this absence to visit his wife. One, two, three. He strode across country, popped his head in, kissed the lady, and retired before her husband returned with the pitchers.

But one day he tarried a moment too long, and the Austin giant saw him. Filled with jealous rage, he set down the pitchers, rushed to the summit of the rock, and hurled a large block at the retreating neighbour. The stone missed its aim; it fell and planted itself upright, and for many generations bore the name of the Bolt Stone. In 1848 the farmer in whose field it stood blew it to pieces with gunpowder.

Mr Edmed, the crier, having reached the foot of Holy Austin Rock, rang a peal and looked up. Instantly the rock was alive. As from a Stilton cheese that is over-ripe the maggots tumble out, so from numerous holes in the cliff emerged women and children. But on the ledge nearest the summit they clustered the thickest.

When the crier saw that he had collected an audience, and that it was attentive, he rang a second peal, and called, —

"O yes! O yes! This is to give notice that this 'ere evening at six o'clock at the Stewponey, there is to be a grand champion match at bowls on the bowling-green. An the prize is to be Bladys Rea, commonly known as Stewponey Bla. Admittance one shilling. 'Arf-a-crown reserved seats, and them tickets admit the bearer to the 'oly function, by

kind permission of the proprietor, in the Chapel of Stourton Castle. No 'arf-price. Children and dogs not admitted."

There were three stages of habitations on the rock. From out of the topmost, behind the children, emerged a singular figure—that of an old man in a long snuff-coloured coat, with drab breeches and blue worsted stockings. A white cravat encircled his neck. In his hand he carried a stick. This old man now began to descend the rock with agility such as might not have been anticipated in one of his age.

"Here comes Holy Austin," whispered some boys who had followed the crier at a distance. "Oh my! must we not be good, or we shall get whacks."

The man who approached was not called Austin at his baptism, nor was Austin his surname; nor was the rock called after him, but rather he after the rock; for, having come to inhabit one of the dwellings excavated out of it, in which he kept a day school, the name that had attached to the prong of sandstone adhered to him.

He was more than schoolmaster. He was knobbler at the Church of Kinver—that is to say, it was his office to walk about during divine service, and tap on the head any man or boy overtaken with sleep. The wand of office was painted white, and had a blue knob at the end.

It may now be understood why the boys who had mimicked and surrounded the bellman in the streets of Kinver kept distance and maintained a sober demeanour. Before them was a man who was a schoolmaster, and gave whacks during the week, and who was a knobbler, and could crack their heads on the Sunday. In his double capacity he was a man greatly to be respected and avoided by boys.

To a boy a soldier or a sailor is a joy; a policeman is an object of derision; a ghost is viewed with scepticism; a devil is hardly considered at all; but a schoolmaster is looked on, preferentially from afar, as a concentration of all horrors, and when accentuated with investiture with knobbledom, as something the quintessence of awfulness.

"Repeat again. I didn't hear exactly," said Holy Austin.

The crier obeyed.

The old man lifted up his hands.

"We live in evil days, and I sore fear in an evil place, and the salt that should have seasoned us has lost its savour. There have been no banns called. There can have been no license obtained, seeing none knows who will have the maiden."

"They say the chapel at Stourton is a peculiar," observed the bellman.

The old man shook his head. "This is the beginning of a bad story," said he, and sighed. "Whither will it lead? How and where will it end?"

Chapter 2

Table of Contents

IN THE CELLAR

The highways from Stafford and Wolverhampton to Kidderminster and the South, and that from Halesowen to Bridgenorth, cross each other at Kinver, and a bridge traverses the Stour, near Stourton Castle, once a royal residence, and one that was a favourite with King John. The great Irish Road from Bath and Bristol to Chester passed through Kinver, to the great emolument of the town and neighbourhood. At that time, Chester and its port, Park Gate, received the packets from Ireland.

An old soldier in the wars of Queen Anne, a native of the place, settled there when her wars were over, and, as was customary with old soldiers, set up an inn near the bridge, at the cross roads. He had been quartered at Estepona, in the south of Spain, and thence he had brought a Spanish wife. Partly in honour of her, chiefly in reminiscence of his old military days, he entitled his inn, "The Estepona Tavern." The Spanish name in English mouths became rapidly transformed into Stewponey. The spot was happily selected, and as the landlord had a managing wife, and provided excellent Spanish wine, which he imported himself, and with which he could supply the cellars of the gentry round, the inn grew in favour, and established its reputation as one of the best inns in Staffordshire.

The present landlord, Cornelius Rea, was a direct descendant of the founder of the house.

The Stewponey was resorted to by the gentry of the south of Staffordshire, Worcestershire, and Shropshire, on the approach of an election, to decide on the candidates to be proposed and elected.

It was also frequented by travellers on their way north, south, east, or west, who arrived at Kinver at ebb of day, and were disinclined to risk their persons and their purses by proceeding at night over the heaths of Kinver, through the forest of Stourton, and among the broken ground that was held to be a lurking-place for footpads and highway robbers.

Indeed, the neighbourhood for a century bore an evil name, and not without cause. Several and special facilities were here afforded to such as found profit and pleasure in preying on their fellow-men. As already intimated, at this point on the map of England, the territories appertaining to the counties that meet have gone through extraordinary dislocations. There are no natural boundaries, and those which are artificial are capricious. Nothing was more easy for one who desired to throw out his pursuers, armed with a warrant signed by the magistrate of one county, than to pass into the next, and if further pursued by legal process there, to step into a third.

A highwayman, at the beginning of the century in which we live, who honoured Kinver with residing in it, planted his habitation at the extreme verge of the county, divided from the next by a hollow way, and when the officers came to take him, he leaped the dyke, and mocked them with impunity from the farther side.

But this was not all. The geological structure of the country favoured them. Wherever a cliff, great or small, presented its escarpment, there the soft sandstone was scooped out into labyrinths of chambers, in which families dwelt, who in not a few instances were in league with the land pirates. The plunder could anywhere be safely and easily concealed, and the plunderers could pass through subterranean passages out of one county into another, and so elude pursuit.

The highwaymen belonged by no means to the lowest class. The gentlemen of the road comprised, for the most part, wastrels and gamesters of good blood, who thought it no dishonour to recover on the high-road what they had lost on the green table. Occasionally, but only occasionally, one was captured and hung, but the gang was not broken up, the gap was at once refilled. Of applicants there no lack, and the roads remained as insecure before. The facilities for escape at the confines of three counties, and in a country honeycombed with places of refuge, were too many, and the business was too profitable, to enable the sheriffs, during an entire century, to put an end to a condition of affairs which was at once a scandal and a nuisance.

The great canal planned and carried out by Telford runs from the Stour at Stewponey, and passes under a low bluff that is dug out into houses still in occupation. This canal follows the river Stour and connects the Severn, where navigable, with the Grand Trunk Canal, that links the Mersey with the Trent, and connects the St George's Channel with the German Ocean. At the Stewponey, it is joined by the Stourbridge canal. This point is accordingly a centre about

which much water traffic gathers, and did gather to a far larger extent before the railroads carried away the bulk of the trade from the canals.

Cornelius Rea, landlord of the Stewponey Inn, was in his cellar, tapping a cask of ale.

He was a stout man, coarse in feature, yet handsome, with one of those vast paunches which caricaturists represent as not uncommon a century ago, but which we never encounter at present. We might suppose that these caricatures were extravagant had we not here and there preserved, as bequests from the past, mahogany dining-tables, with semi-circles cut out of them for the accommodation of the stomachs of stout diners.

The face of Cornelius was red and puffed. It looked peculiarly so, as he stooped at the spigot, by the light of a lamp held by his daughter Bladys. He was in his shirt sleeves, and wore a white nightcap on his head, a yellow, long-flapped waistcoat, and black, shabby knee-breeches.

Bladys was tall and slender—an unusual feature in the district, where women are thickset and short; she had inherited from her Spanish great-grandmother a pale face and dark hair and eyes. She held the light with a trembling hand, not above her head, lest she should set fire to the drapery of cobwebs that hung from the vault. What little daylight penetrated to the cellar fell from the entrance door, and lay pale on the steps that led down into it, in gradually reduced brilliancy, and left the rest of the cellar wholly unillumined.

"It's well up—prime!" said the host. "Fine October brew, this. One cask will never suffice 'em. I'll e'en tap another.

Bush-sh-sh! It spits out like an angry cat. It smells good."

He heaved up his clumsy person.

"This stooping don't suit me at my time o' life, girl. What! has the ale spurted into and washed your face?"

"No, father."

"I say it has. Don't contradict me. Your cheeks are wet. I see them glitter. Why dost say 'No, father,' when I say Yes?"

Then all at once a sob broke from her heart.

The heavy man turned his red face and looked at his child. Instinctively she lowered the light.

"Hold up the lamp that I may see!"

She obeyed, but let her head sink on her bosom.

With an oath—he seasoned his every sentence with one—he thrust his hand under her chin, and forced her to raise her face.

"Turn your cheek, wench! What's the sense of this, eh?"

"O father! you put me to shame."

"I—by Ginger! How so?"

"By this bowling match, that is hateful to me—a dishonour; I am ashamed to be seen—and then to send round the crier!"

"Pshaw! Some wenches don't know when they are well off."

"Father! you disgrace me in all men's eyes,—on all lips."

"I! never a bit. It's an honour to any woman to be bowled for. 'Taint every wench can boast she's been an object of contest. My grandmother used to say that in Spain swords were often crossed before a woman could be wed, and that a lady never deemed herself properly married till blood had flowed on her account. Now folk will pay their shillings and

half-crowns to see which is the best man. Bless you! There came round a caravan with a giraffe and a laughing hyena, and a roaring lion. Hundreds of people paid sixpence to see these beasts all the way from Africa. Just you think of that. A roaring lion, the king of beasts, only sixpence, let alone the giraffe and the hyena: and shilling and half-a-crown to see you. There's honour and glory, if you like it. I didn't think I'd have lived to see the day and feel such a father's pride, but I do—and I bless you for it. I bet you a spade guinea we shall take the money up in shovels."

"I do not wish it, father."

"I don't care a hanged highwayman whether you wish or not. It is as I choose. Who is the proper person to care and provide for his child but the father? I'm not going to be put off for any foolish girl's whimsies. All the take—every stiver—shall go to you as your portion. I have none other to make."

"I do not desire at all to be married."

"Here you cannot stay. You understand well that you and she as is to be your stepmother can't agree. As soon as you have cleared out, then in comes she; and as I powerfully want her in the house, the sooner you go the better. If you'd taken to her in a friendly and daughterly way, that would have been another matter; but as you have fixed your mind so dead against her there's no help for it. Go you must, and that to-night. And what is more, as a virtuous and respectable man, and a man with a conscience in my stomach, you shall go out respectably, and not be cut off with a shilling. None shall say that of me. I'm a man as does

his duty in that station of life and situation as I finds myself in."

"I don't consider it respectable to be bowled for."

"Then I do. I am nigh on forty years older than you, and know the world. Which is most like to be right, you or I? If you leave my house, you leave it respectable."

"If you would suffer me to be alone, I would do nothing that is not respectable."

"Whither would you go? Who would take charge of you? In good sooth, until I put you into the arms of a husband I have no freedom, and unless I do that I am responsible."

Bladys set the lamp on the floor, sank on an empty barrel-horse, covered her face with her hands, and sobbed. The host uttered an oath.

"This angers me. Folly always doth that," said he. "I leave you to yourself whilst I go fetch another spigot, and if you're not in a proper frame of mind when I come back I'll wash your face with stale beer."

The taverner staggered away.

His daughter looked after him as he stumbled up the stair. Then she was left alone in the cellar. The lamp on the floor flickered uneasily in the descending current of air, and the folds of cobwebs waved, catching the light, then disappearing again. The air was impregnated with a savour of mildew and wine and ale. The floor was moist. Spilt liquor had been trodden over the tiles and left them wet and slimy.

Bladys had not been long an orphan. Her mother had died but a few months ago, after a lengthy and painful illness. She had been a shrewd, firm woman, an excellent manageress, who had kept order in the house and

controlled her husband. Cornelius was a weak, vain man, and he allowed himself to be swayed by his customers, especially by those of the best class.

During the protracted illness of his wife he had shown attention to a woman of indifferent character, showy in dress, whom he had introduced into the inn to relieve his wife of her duties. This had caused painful scenes, much recrimination, and the sick woman had with difficulty persuaded her husband to send the woman away. Her last hours had been embittered by the thought that her child might have this worthless creature as her stepmother, and by the vexation of knowing that the fruits of her care, saving, and labour would go to enrich this person, whom she despised, yet hated.

Hardly was his wife dead before Cornelius showed plainly what were his intentions. It became a matter of jest at his table, of scandal in the village.

In talking with some of the gentle bucks and topers who frequented his house, Cornelius had had the indiscretion to comment on the difficulty he felt in disposing of his daughter before introducing his new wife to Stewponey; and the suggestion had been made in jest that he should have her bowled for, and give as her dower the money made on the occasion. He accepted the suggestion gravely, and then several chimed in to press him to carry it into execution.

Associating as Cornelius did with men coarse-minded and, whatever their social position, of no natural refinement, casting aside, when at his table, or about his fire, whatever polish they had, Rea was in no way superior to his companions. He was incapable of understanding what

belonged to his duty as a father, and of treating with the delicacy due to her sex and situation the solitary girl who was dependent on him.

Bladys loved her father, without respecting him.

He would not allow his guests to address her in an unseemly manner, but his protection extended no further.

The girl was fully aware that she could not remain in the Stewponey after her father was married again. To do so, she must forfeit her self-respect and do a wrong to the memory of her mother.

The girl's pale and stately beauty of foreign cast had brought many admirers about her. Amongst others she had been subjected to the addresses of a certain Captain George Stracey, who occupied a small house in the parish, was in good society, and seemed possessed of means. But both she and her father were well aware that his addresses were not honourable. She had repelled him with icy frigidity, that was but an intensification of her ordinary demeanour to the guests.

Another who had been forward in his endeavours to win her regard was a man then lodging at the inn, who had been there a fortnight, and gave Luke Francis as his name. His home, he intimated, was at Shrewsbury, his profession something connected with the law. He was a fine man, with broad shoulders, a firm mouth, and high cheek-bones.

There was a third admirer, Crispin Ravenhill, a bargeman, owning his own boat on the canal. But although his admiration might be gathered from his deep earnest eyes, he never addressed a word to the girl to intimate it. He was a reserved man of nearly thirty, who associated with few of

his fellows. It was held that the influence of his uncle, Holy Austin, who had reared him from boyhood, still surrounded him and restrained him from those vices which were lightly esteemed in that age and by the class of men to which he pertained.

There was yet another, Lewis Falcon, a young man of private means sufficient to free him from the obligation of working for his livelihood, and who spent his substance in drink, gambling, and dog-fighting.

Bladys looked at the cobwebs. Never had she seen a fly in the cellar, yet here they hung, dense, long, ghostly. And she—was not she enveloped in cobwebs? Whither could she escape? In what direction look? Where see light? She remained with her head between her hands till hope, expectation of release, died in her heart; her tears dried up; her agitation ceased. She had become as stone in her despair.