

The Robbery of the Astrologer

By W. M. Clarke

The parlour of the "Jonas and Whale" was in a state of cruel commotion and the passage crowded with curious neighbours, when, amidst the general hubbub—"Landlord! clap to the door!" exclaimed a voice, "Turpin has been traced to this house, with a mail containing stolen plate."

"To this house, quotha!" retorted Landlord Thomas Tankard, angrily; "d'ye think I keep a resort for your Turpins, Kings, and such nightriders as they? No, no, here he only the chub of Bucklersbury, all good men and true; and if this should be Richard Turpin, why I'll testify we had no truck with him here."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not, Master Tankard," replied the voice, which was that of Master Jones, the thieftaker, who was with the pursuing party; "but by your leave, gentlemen, we'll just search old Moses's premises adjacent, and see what turns up there."

The officers set off, but they ransacked the Jew's establishment in vain, no trace of the valuable plate could there be found.

Meanwhile wonders on wonders came on the quiet club, like clap after clap of thunder; for while Master Tankard, with honest zeal to clear himself from the imputation of harbouring or comforting the daring reiver who had thus, as he imagined, brought a slur upon the respectability of "Jonas and Whale", and was busying himself in search of the highwaymen, or at least pretending to do so, the members of the club who had remained behind, whispering about robbers with bated breath, were almost petrified by a shrill scream, followed by cries of "fire! murder! rape! and robbery!" proceeding from the room directly over head. The voice was clearly that of Tankard's better half; and as the ear-piercing lamentations struck on the ears of a group of drinkers below, each looked in his neighbour's face as seeking therein some explanation of what this outcry might forebode. "Now, Master Sagetop," remonstrated one Howlett; "thou'rt a man of war, a valiant trainband captain, go first up the stair and we will follow thee." The prudent herbalist looked as though he had rather

Let I dare not, wait upon I would.

"I'll follow, Master —" But they were saved further trouble by the descent of Mistress Tankard herself, who opened the door, vociferating—

"Run, gentlemen, and fetch me Master Liverwort the constable—oh that I should have to see this day—" At length, in reply to twenty clamorous questions, she disburthened her breast of the fact, that while Master Tankard had been running over the neighbourhood seeking the robbers of other people, some one or other of the scoundrels had cleared the shelf in their bedroom of four massive silver tankards, in which vessels it was then the custom to serve spiced ale, mulled wine, &c. to the guests. Poor Tankard shortly after returned—to a sense of his situation as well as his house. So that night the Members of "The United Brethren of Bucklersbury" sat in solemn conclave until an hour beyond twelve, devising means for the capture of the villain who had put this slight upon their citizen sagacity, and cast indignity upon these worthy and brave citizens.

Numerous were the suggestions; in most of which, unfortunately, the propounder was singularly anxious to thrust forward his neighbours into the post of honour and of danger, which they, on the other hand, as resolutely declined. At length, none of their schemes securing a sufficiently unanimous support, it was proposed that a consultation should be had with Ptolemy Horoscope, the Astrologer, anent and concerning the recovery of Tankard's lost plate, and that a subscription should he forthwith made to fee the cunning man for this purpose. This was assented to, as was an acute amendment by Mr Sagetop to the following effect; "that as a reward of £200 was already offered by government for the apprehension of Turpin, that Ptolemy should also be consulted as to the probable success of the enterprise; and should the stars be favourable, the Club should be first reimbursed the amount of their several subscriptions and expenses (out of the said reward of £200), and the remainder be placed to the spending-money of the Club and the replacing of Tankard's silver jugs, should they not (which of course they most probably would) be recovered upon the capture of the robber." This proposition, warmed by the highwayman's punch, which yet "ream'd in their noddles", was received with general applause, and the Club broke up, as well satisfied with the result of their deliberations, as many greater and cleverer assemblages, who have, like them, sold the bear's skin before they caught him.

The subscription of two guineas was duly raised, and it was decided that Master Sagetop, accompanied by Howlett and Tankard, should form a deputation to wait on the mighty seer.

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We will now shift the scene to the astrologer's apartments in Little Britain, where, having made their way up a narrow dark staircase, in the spiral turns of which the goodly corpus of Master Thomas Tankard had more than once nearly jammed, the leader of the band, Master Sagetop, arrived at a strong narrow black door, studded with square bosses, imitating immense screw-nuts or nail-heads, but really consisting of small squared pieces of light wood, cunningly glued on and painted over. At the door of this enchanted castle Sagetop thrice rounded with the head of his "staff tipped with horn". The call was answered by a tall, thin figure in a loose gown of foreign damask, with a belt of parchment curiously painted and gilded; who, signifying by a sign of his finger that one only of the party could be admitted at a time, the two others were fain to await, with beating hearts, the result of their neighbour's conference with the interpreter of celestial secrets. The door was cautiously closed, and the astrologer seated himself behind a table whereon lay Haly's *De Judiciis Astrorum*, the *Trithemius* of Spannheim, Glanville, Regiomontanus, and sundry numbers of *Lilly's Almanack*. He motioned Sagetop to be seated, and fixing his eyes on the folio which lay open before him, became seemingly wrapt in study.

Sagetop looked round the chamber with a creeping, cold, shuddering sensation, as his eye roved from a bleached skull reposing on a Bible, to sundry bottles containing monstrous pickles in the shape of tropical toads, frightful spiders, bats, and centipedes; while, overhead, a hideous shrivelled alligator, a dried serpent or two, and a shark's jaws were suspended, in a group neither picturesque nor pleasing to one ignorant of natural history, and whose only notions were those received through his uneducated senses, to which these all conveyed ideas of satanic ugliness and terror. Poor Sagetop never felt half so uncomfortable when, fifteen years before, on the news of the rising in favour of the Pretender in '15, he was assured by a waggish neighbour that his company of trained hands were ordered for "foreign service", to meet the Popish claimant to the crown. He wriggled and fidgeted, and at length his throat, having filled with phlegm, and his

nose with some pungent dust which flew in the apartment, he unwillingly let go a “hem!” followed by a hearty sneeze.

The astrologer looked up. “A’lI tell’ee whaat a come about; a’lI set’ee up a figure secundos artos, and tell ’ee what to do.” The astrologer here began to scrawl sundry ill-favoured signs on the paper before him, while Sagetop looked on in mute wonder to see what might come next.

Not to keep the reader in suspense, it may be here right to explain that Ptolemy Horoscope, who was really a skilful astronomer and learned man, had retired to rest, having “out-watched the bear” over night in his astral studies from his observatory at the top of his dwelling, and had directed his man Parable to call him in case any client should arrive. This precious assistant, however, had long entertained a vehement desire, which his master would never gratify, of seeing and answering enquirers himself, and this he now determined to try his hand at, for having got together a few astrological phrases, Parable considered himself fully qualified to resolve any cases that might be put to him; besides, he doubted not he could pocket a fee, to him the principal end of the science, as well as his master. Having blotted the paper with many marks, he proceeded, “Thy name’s Master Sagetop, of Bucklersbury (this wouldn’t have surprised anybody, for Parable had many a time and oft dealt at his shop), and thou comest hither concerning the tankards of him who keepeth the ‘Jonas and Whale’—good.”

Had the City of London been engulfed at his feet, poor Sagetop could not have been more petrified than he was, in his then frame of mind, at these announcements of Parable. He never recollected—how should he?—that the persons of the whole club were known, and that Parable had spied “mine host” on the stairs, whose loss had been bruited about the City for two days, with all sorts of exaggeration. His knees positively shook with awe, and he awaited in gaping wonderment what next might be revealed.

“The cusp of Aldebaran is on the hinder leg of the Great Bear,” continued Parable, gravely, “and the fiery triplicitus hath pointed to—but I am wearied from much study,” added the knave, raising his head in imitation of his master’s style; “what dost thou desire to know?”

“Briefly this,” replied Sagetop, “an’ it please your wise mastership; but I fear me to speak in thy reverend presence—may I—”

“The aurum potabile, which signifeth gold to drink,” interrupted Parable, stretching forward his arm, and pushing a small wooden bowl in the direction of Sagetop, still keeping his eye on his book, “is the needful thing to lengthen life and guard this microcosm against hurts of venomous things, the bits of dragons and toads—Albertus Magus, Nostradamus, Regiomontanus, Albumazar, Hazael, with the good, Master Sagetop, good,” continued he, drawing back the bowl with his forefinger, and throwing over it a piece of embroidery. “Thou mayest open the door and let in thy friends.”

Sagetop felt as a man waking after a suffocating nightmare, and availed himself of the permission with alacrity. The other two entered, each bowing lowly.

“Listen to what the stars say,” said Parable, opening an old almanack: “the Asseli denote death by fire, fevers, hanging, disgrace, beheading, and utter ruin—look for thefts, and robberies now about—new moon 16th day, 11h. 18m., at night—something ails the Pope about this time—I wish the Cardinals may sit easy—

When Pisces doth in heaven appear,
And Orion’s stars do brightly shine,
Then draweth to an end the year,
And daylight greatly doth decline.

Now guard from attacks, head, face, throat, neck, arms, shoulders, breast, and stomach—Pleiades, Hyades, Castor, Pollux, Prææpe, Menkar, Procyon,—you see how it is, my brethren.”

“Aye, aye, neighbours, you see how ’tis,” said Sagetop, shaking his head very wisely at the rest. “Mr Ptolemy told me all I knew about it before you came in; he tells us, you hear, that Turpin robs in the new moon, at the short days, at eleven at night”; hereat mine host gave a melancholy grunt of assent; “and that he attacks the head and throat, and all the parts he mentioned, with his crew of rogues, with those hard names, though I’ve heard his gang called quite differently; but to be sure Mr Ptolemy knows best.”

But now, Doctor Horoscope, how may we best know how to secure him?” asked Howlett.

“Why,” continued Parable, “that is another question” and again the bowl was pushed forward, and a crown each chinked in by three of the party, “and ’twill call for much calculation—if Mars be angular with Antares, he shall hardly ’scape death by drowning or assassination—fair and pleasant weather now about June, but expect snow and dark nights about November—Arista giveth honour and riches, and with Rigel good fortune is assured—the bright star Fomahaut, if with the hyleg, doth denote a murderer, who will come to an untimely end—let Poland look to herself; but do you go down, brethren, to the skirts of the forest, and there it shall be revealed to ye—knock him down—a blustering time will come after this—a sly piece of villainy is brought to light—and the knave discovered—Algol, Hydra, Deneb, Ophiaca, Antares—you see how it is, brethren and friends—he weareth a brown coat.”

“Many thanks, many thanks, worshipful Mister Horumscope. A man in a brown coat. Neighbours, we must be well watched and lighted. Good day, Mr Ptolemy. Oh! what a fine thing it be’s truly to reach the Box Spellarem, as the allmyknack says. Skirts of the forest—sly piece of villainy. Neighbours, we’re sure of him—I feel as good as if the reward was in my pouch, and if I gain it, I’ll give—I’ll give—the club a new china punchbowl. Bravo, gallant Master Sagetop”, and with these and the like exclamations, the deputation bowed themselves out of the sham astrologer’s presence, and threaded their way down his corkscrew stairs into the street.

It was now fast growing dark in the narrow, confined street of Little Britain, and the party did not observe, on the opposite side of the way, beneath the shadow of an overhanging shop-window, two men, who evidently had been awaiting their departure, and who scarcely repressed a laugh as the worthy cits picked their way along the cobble-stone pavement, full of the wisdom they had purchased of Peter Parable.

Scarcely had they turned the corner of one of the projecting houses in the crooked street, when the stouter one observed to his companion—“Ha! ha! well, ’pon my soul, Dick, this is, beyond question, one of the drollest affairs it’s ever happened to be my luck to fall in with. But how, in the name of his sooty highness, came you to know that these gulls were coming hither, and to what end are we here?”

“Gently, George, my boy, and you shall know all in good time. The astrologer hath just robbed these muddy-pated knaves, and now we’ll pluck the astrologer. They were late yester-morning for such early-to-bed snorers, settling how to take you and I, and the result of their secret-council was known through all Bucklersbury before noon; nay, Foxy Norris brought me word of every syllabic of their proceedings, past and intended, which he picked up from the Drawer at the ‘Jonas and Whale’, before one of the privy-council of cunning men had opened their gummy eyes. Ha! ha! step up softly, George; this is the door, and there’s no need of violence in this business. I’m going to consult the astrologer, d’ye see; and by way of reversing his professional practice, shall take a fee of him for my trouble in reading his fortune in the stars.”

So saying, the two slowly threaded their way up to the door, by which the worthy deputation of Bucklersbury had just left.

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“What! more customers?” muttered Parable, as he cast a glance at an ancient horologe, which ticked in the inner chamber, to ascertain whether he might venture on earning another crown or two, without risk of detection by old Ptolemy: the knocking was repeated, and Parable, who had lighted a silver cresset-lamp which hung in the room, unfastened the door to his new visitor. The stranger was a stout man, in a brown horseman’s coat, girt about with a leathern belt, and, making a low bow, he seated himself in a chair and looked about him.

“Queer kent this,” muttered he; “and no one to tout at the door.”

“Well, Master Astrologer, I’ve heard down in our parts in Essex, that you can tell simple men like me when to begin a weighty affair, and how to conduct it, like; so, do you see, as I’ve a little venture just now in hand, d’ye see, there’s five as good broad gold pieces as was ever coined, if ye can tell me whether it will come off as I wish it, like-eh?”

The astrologer looked up, with his long sallow face, at the querent; he did not like his brusque manner of address; indeed, being yet so young in trading on his “own hook”, he was rather “taken aback”, as sailors say; he, however, started off, with his eyes fixed on the book—

“Respect and venerate the mighty seer, who, in the cycles and epicycles, the lines, secants, and tangents of the heavens, reads the destinies of weak mortals—Saturn, in the cusp of the fifth house, doth grievously afflict Mercury in quartile—there be leaden thieves abroad, who shall be frustrated in the eastern parts—he comes from Essex—guard well your goods, and look to live-stock—drill beans and sow broadcast—great danger to pigs, poultry, especially calves, about this time—

For Rigel is a star of fame,
And now doth rule with fear;
While Caput, Algol, and the Whale
In conjunct close appear—

ah! I see—the trine configuration is adverse when the regeat or native have a malign promittor—Sagittarius, Taurus, and Leo, be brute signs, and these, with the vernal Aries and Cancer—the Crab, that doth backward go—do signify”—

During this speech Dick had silently opened the door to his comrade Fielder, who, slipping in on hands and knees, had, in the short space of a few seconds, shipped into a bag he had brought under his cloak, the golden pentacle, the lamens of like precious material, with sundry other apparatus of necromancy, and had taken the magic sword in hand, when a loud report from its handle, sharp as a pistol crack, occasioned him to drop it, and startled the terrified Parable to his feet.

“Sit still, my celestial sage,” said Dick, soothingly, putting at the same time a pistol to his ear; “go on with your gibberish—curse me, but you’re a funny fellow! Sit still will ye, or I’ll whistle an ounce of lead through your learned numskull!”

Poor Parable needed no interpreter of the stars to tell him he was in danger of death from lead; his jaw dropped on his breast, and his nether end on his master’s seat.

At this juncture, while Fielder was looking at the mystic symbol as it lay on the floor, the voice of Ptolemy himself was heard above. "Thou whoreson knave! thou scoundrel meddler! Parable, I say, how darest thou to meddle profanely with—"

"What, impious wretch, fearest thou not that the spirit will rend thee? Aldama! Hezail! Cassiul! Oberion! Vanatha! seize me this impious intruder!" exclaimed the Wizard, as he arrived at the foot of the narrow stairs which led from his dormitory, and espied, by the streaming light from the outer chamber, Fielder standing in the centre of the awful circle itself!

"Pray don't flurry yourself about me," was the answer, in a voice that stopped the torrent of Horoscope's objurgations. "You need call for no other spirits but Geneva, old Triangle; and if you'll make that appear, why, I'll pound it, we'll lay it in the Red Sea down Red Lane, as the little boys call it. Take a seat, most learned magus, here, on the carpet, while I pass this curtain-cord round the bottom of your petticoats, old gentleman; there, that will do; and now just tell me, or I'll solve the secret of your nativity for you in a crack, what the devil's the matter with this queer looking stick, that a gentleman cannot lay hold of it?"

The astrologer was deaf to this question, for he merely entreated the robber to leave him the tools of his art.

"Here, Dick," said Fielder, "is the real necromancer; t'other outside is only a sham!"

To this, Parable, on benched knees, confessed.

Dick and his comrade now bound and blindfolded the two prophets, and laying them side by side on the floor of the inner apartment, they fastened the door, then, having previously relieved Parable of his ill-earned cash, they nailed up the outer-door and departed.

Then, making their way towards Aldgate, they found their horses at the accustomed spot, and while they were riding towards King's Oak, burst out with laughter at their adventure, and the detected knavery of Parable.