

In the Cliff Land of the Dane

By H. Pease

A LETTER TO THE REVEREND LAURENCE STERNE AT COXWOLD FROM
JOHN HELL STEVENSON AT SKELTON CASTLE, AS SET DOWN BY
HIS NEPHEW FREDDY HALL.

The truth is, reverend sir, that being eventually designed for the Bar, I had taken up this quest with an additional vigour, for here was a mystery wherein my Lord Chief-Justice himself would have had a difficulty in seeing the proper clue on't.

For some months previous to my sojourn at Skelton Castle there had been mysterious midnight thefts of sheep, heifers, and suchlike cattle on the hills about here, Redcar, and Danby-way, and even on occasion a murder added, as in the case of poor Jack Moscrop, the shepherd, who was found in the early morning with his head cut in twain, as though by some mighty cleaver, stark dead and cold on the low-lying ground beyond Kirkleatham.

Much disquietude had been caused thereby amongst the farmer folk, and the whole countryside was agape with excitement and conjecture, but nothing had been discovered as to the malefactor, though many tales were told, more especially by the womenfolk, who put down all mishaps to the same unknown agent.

Some said 'twas a black man who had escaped off a foreign ship that had been stranded by Teesmouth, but in that case one would imagine that such an one would have eaten his victim raw, whereas the sheep and heifers that were killed had always been 'gralloched,' as the Scotch term it, that is, had been cut open with a knife and disembowelled, and the carcasses removed.

Some again avowed 'twas an agent of the Prince of Darkness, for there were hoofmarks of an unshod horse discovered on one or two occasions leading up and away from the scene of the slaughter, and blood drops alongside, as though the booty had been slung from the horse's quarters, and there dripped down as he sped along.

Now as you may imagine, I too had battered my brain with various conjectures, but without practical result till one night after hunting all day, and having lamed my mare badly with an overreach, I was returning slowly homeward by a short cut across Eston Nab, so as to strike the Guisboro' Road, and thence straight to Skelton.

'Twas a stormy November night, time about nine o'clock, for I had stayed supper with a friendly yeoman, one Petch, of a noted family hereabout, and was trudging a-foot, so as to ease the mare, along the desolate hill-top, where in a kind of basin there lies a lonely pool of water, set round in the farther side by a few draggled, wind-torn firs.

There was a swamped moon overhead, shining now and again as wreckage shows amongst billows, the gleam but momentary, so that when I caught sight of a kneeling figure across t' other side of the mere I could scarce distinguish anything at all, whether 'twere a boggart, as they say re, or some solitary shepherd seeking his sheep.

However, at that moment there was a break overhead, and the moon, rheumy-eyed, shook her head clear of cloud, whereby I saw plain enough 'twas a tall, burly man kneeling beside some object or other, and a mighty big horse standing a bit to the rearward of him.

I drew nigher without being perceived, and the light still holding, saw that 'twas a young stirk or heifer the man was disembowelling.

'Ha, ha!' shouts I, without a further thought that here was the midnight miscreant and cattle-stealer, and that I had caught him red-handed.

With that he lifts his head and gazes across the pool at me fixedly for an instant of time, then with a whistle to his horse, leaps to his feet, vaults to the saddle, and swings away at a hand gallop round the mere's edge, the moonlight flashing back from some big axe he was carrying in his right hand.

'Tally ho!' shouted I, commencing to run after him, bethinking me he was for escaping, but no sooner had he rounded the edge some hundred and fifty yards away than I saw 'twas he who was chasing me.

Another look at him tearing towards me was sufficient to change my resolution, and hot foot I tore round to t' other end, trusting to win to the wood's edge before he could catch me up.

I heard the hard breathing of the horse close behind me, the crunch of his hoofs coming quicker and quicker; one fleeting glimpse I threw backward, and saw a bright axe gleam above me, then my foot catching in a tussock, I sank headlong, the horse's hoofs striking me as I fell.

I must suppose—for at that moment the moon was swallowed again by a swirl of cloud—that in the changing light he had missed his blow, and finding myself unhurt, I was able to gain my feet, make a double and gain the wall's edge by the plantation before he had caught me up once more. Just as I vaulted over a crash of stones sounded, some loose ones at top grazing my foot as I touched the ground on the far side.

The wood, however, was pitch black, thick with unpruned trees; I bent double and dived deeper per into its gloomy belly.

'Safe now,' thinks I, as utterly outdone I sank on a noiseless bed of pine-needles; and by the Lord Harry 'twas none too soon, for if it hadn't been for the kindly moon dipping I'd have been two pieces by now. 'To Jupiter Optimus Maximus I owe an altar,' says I, in my first recovered breath, and, 'curse that infernal reiver,' says I in my second, 'but I'll be up ends with him yet.'

No sound came from without; all was still, save for the soughing in the pines overhead.

A quarter of an hour passed perhaps, and I determined to creep to the wall and see if my assailant were anywhere visible.

The wind had freshened; the clouds were unravelling to its touch, and I could see clearly enough now across the desolate hill-top. Nothing living showed save my mare, who was cropping the coarse grass tufts just where I had left her.

Surmounting the wall, I approached the spot where I had seen the reiver first. There lay red remnants that dearly told a tale. The carcase, however, had been 'lifted,' and I could trace the direction in which my raider had gone by the drops of blood that lay here and there by the side of the horse's track.

As the ground in places was soft with peat or bog, by a careful examination of the hoof marks of his horse, I was able to ascertain the direction in which he had gone, which seemed to be nearly due north-east, or at least east by north. The marks proved another thing, moreover, and that is, that here was the same miscreant who had killed the shepherd and carried off the cattle elsewhere, for 'twas an unshod horse that had galloped over Eston Nab top that night.

'Twas sore-footed that I gained home at last, but all the way I discussed a many plans for the discovery and punishment of my moss-trooper.

'Tis an unpleasant remembrance to have fled; next time we met I swore to be in a better preparation for the encounter.

Next morning I started to explore, for I knew something of the direction. I knew also that my man was a tall, well-built, burly fellow with a big ruddy beard, and the horse a fine seventeen hands roan that would be known far and wide in the district.

Determining to stay out till I had discovered somewhat, I rode down to the low-lying ground between Boulky and Redcar, as being the likeliest region to get news of horse or man and, sure enough, at the second time of inquiry, I was informed at a farmhouse that some six months ago Farmer Allison, away over by Stokesly, had lost a fine, big, upstanding roan stallion, of which he had been inordinately proud.

Of the man, though, I could glean nothing, till finally, a good housewife, overhearing her man and myself conversing, cried out, 'Eh! but by my surely, there's that Red Tom o' the 'Fisherman's Rest,' nigh to Saltburn, that's new come there, who features him you speak of; he's nowt but a "fondy," oaf-rocked, they say he is; why, Moll who hawks t' fish about says his wife beats him an' maks him wash up t' dishes—the man being a soart o' cholterhead by all accounts.'

However, 'fondy' or no, I was sworn to go and see for myself, though the thought that 'twas perhaps a disguise the reiver had worn gave me discomfort, and made my quest seem foolish enough.

As I drew close to the little tavern above the cliff. I could hear a dispute going on inside; then a crash as of some crockery falling, and shortly a big, burly man with an auburn beard came tumbling forth in an awkward haste, pursued by the high tone of a woman's voice within.

Shaking his sleeve free of some water-drops, he sat down on a low rock near hand, and fell knitting at a stocking he proceeded to draw from his jacket.

"'Tis surely the man," says I to myself, for in height, build, and colour of hair, he seemed the fellow of the midnight raider, but yet it seemed impossible; there might be a brother, however.

I rode up to him, and asked if I could bait my horse and seek refreshment within.

'Ay, sir, surely ye can; if ye'll dismount I'll tak your horse, sir, an' give him a feed o' corn,' and shambling away he touched a greasy lock at me as he led my horse to the stable behind.

I turned to the inn, and encountered mine hostess, fuming within the bar.

'Please draw me a pot of ale, ma'am,' says I, 'while my horse gets a feed. Your good man, I suppose 'tis, who took him away outside?'

'Ay, he's mine, so says t' Church an' t' law, Aah b'lieve, but 'od rabbit him, Aah says, who knows the clumsiness o' the creature. Just fit for nowt else but cuttin' up t' bait for t' harrin' fishin'.'

'Been here long?' says I further, carelessly.

'Six months mair or less,' says she with a snap, eyeing me suspiciously.

'Well, here's for luck and a smarter man at the next time of asking,' and with that I tossed down the ale, paid the reckoning, and strode out to the stable, for nothing further was to be got out of the vinegar lips of Mrs. Boniface.

I looked narrowly round the low-roofed and ill-lit stable, but no sign of a big roan horse anywhere did I see, only a jack-spavined cob, such as a fishwife might hawk her fish about with.

'Ever seen or heard tell of that big roan of Farmer Allison's, strayed, stolen, or lost, about six months since?' so I accosted Boniface anew, on finding him rubbing down my horse's hocks with a bit of straw.

'Noah, sir, not Aah; Aah nevvver seen 'im, sir. Whhat soart o' a mak o' horse was 'e, sir? I looked him full in the face as question and answer passed, and not a shred of intelligence could I detect in his opaque, fish-like eyes.

'Oaf-rocked,' truly enough; he seemed as incapable of dissimulation as a stalled ox, and with a heavy feeling of disappointment I inquired what was to pay, and rode away down the slope.

'Curious,' I mused, 'how imagination plays one tricks at times! Once get the idea of a red beard into your mind, and Barbarossa is as often met with as the robin redbreast.'

Then all in a moment my eye caught in the spongy bottom a thin mark cut clearly crescent-wise upon the turf. There was something strangely familiar about the horseshoe curve. Then I remembered the unshod roan of the night before.

'Twas the same impress, for in neither case was there any trace of the iron rim. 'Where the horse is the rider will not be far away,' thinks I, and hope kindled afresh in my heart, as I rode slowly on, resolving various conjectures.

I determined finally to go call upon the farmer at Kirkleatham, whose heifer it was, as I had learnt, that had been killed and carried off the night before.

He was said to be tightfisted, so probably would be in a mood for revenge, and ready enough to join in any scheme for discovery of the reiver.

As luck had it, Farmer Johnson was within doors, and in a fine taking about the loss of his beast: he was ready to swear an oath that he wouldn't rest till he had caught the malefactor, and agreed upon the instant to watch out every night in the week with me round about 'The Fisherman's Rest' on chance of coming across suspect either going or returning.

'Ay, Aah'll gan mahself, an' Aah'll tak feyther's owd gun wi' me there, for Ah'll stan' none o' his reiver tricks, an' Tom and Jack, they'll come along too, an' 'od burn him, but we'll nab him betweixt us, the impudent scoundrel, if it's a leevin' man he is.'

By eight o'clock we four had ensconced ourselves in hiding-places on all sides of the little inn, having tethered our horses within a small but thick-grown covert above the rise that led to the inn door. Here I stationed myself and for better vision climbed a tree wherefrom I commanded the whole situation. The others hid themselves as they found shelter convenient, one below the cliff's edge some two hundred yards to the east, another amongst broken boulders to the southward, while Farmer Johnson crouched behind the wall that girt the road leading past the ale-house from the north.

'Twas weary work watching, more by token that that night nothing appeared save a thirsty fisherman or two, and a stray, shuffle-footed vagrant or the like.

Next night the same, and I for one was growing somewhat cold, but Farmer Johnson, bull-like in his obstinacy, swore he wouldn't shave his chin till he had 'caught summat,' so off we started on the third night to our rendezvous.

'The third time brings luck,' thought I, as I squatted down in the fork of the same old twisted elm; 'and 'tis something stormy this evening, which might suit our reiver's tastes.'

It would then be about eight of the clock, as I may suppose, the wind from the seaward, the clouds lowering, fringed with a moonlight border like broidery on a cloak, and that raw, cold touch in the air that chills worse than the hardest winter's frost.

The night grew stormier; vapour lifted upward, and assumed strange and threatening shape. The cloud forms might be the giants rising up out of Jotunheim, and advancing to attack Odin and the Aesir—the evil wolf Fenrir in the van—his bristles silvered by the moon.

An hour passed, and I began to wish I had never undertaken the quest, or mentioned the matter to Farmer Johnson, when I heard, as if some way off, not exactly a neigh, but a sort of defiant snorting, such as a stallion breathes forth when he wishes to be free. Then a sound as of a heavy stone falling succeeded, mingled with a scraping and a trampling noise.

Craning my neck forward, I saw under a broadened fringe of moonlight the roan horse with the ruddy-bearded reiver beside him. They had evidently crept through some secret passage that issued into the bottom below me.

I was just upon the point of raising the hue and cry on him when an action of his took me by surprise.

Holding up his battle-axe—for such was his weapon—he raised it aloft, then thrust its handle deep into the soft moss of the hollow. Next, he threw the horse's reins over the head of it, and sinking down upon his knees, appeared to be pouring forth a prayer to Heaven, expressed in old Danish, which I have set down in English as nearly as I can:

'Vafoder, the swiftmess of Sleipnir
Breathe Thou into my roan.
Let him fly like Thy ravens
Black Munin and Hugi.
May my axe be as Thor's,
When he wieldeth Miolnir.
Winged Thor's mighty weapon.
The pride of Valhalla.
This grant me, O Odin,
Grim, Ygg and All Father.'

He then drew forth from his breast a small phial, and having set up a square stone beside him poured forth into the cup or hollow at the top, liquid of a dark colour, which I imagined must be either blood or wine. This done, he seemed to fall to prayer afresh, but in so low a tone that I could not catch the words of his utterance with any distinctness.

Then he leapt to his feet, lifted the axe, tossed it into the air, caught it as it fell, and had vaulted upon the stallion's back before I had even recovered from my first astonishment.

'Tally-ho!' shouts I, 'yonder he goes; forrard Mr. Johnson! forrard Toni and Jack!' and, scrambling down my tree, I made for my horse.

The next thing I heard was a 'pang,' evidently the discharge of Farmer Johnson's musket, and thereat a weird, smothered, savage note of pain and rage broke out upon the night.

Seizing my horse I mounted, and out of the covert across a gap in the wall. Dimly I could see a centaur-like figure plunging and snorting upon the short turf by the cliff's edge, then three figures running from the north, south, and east towards it.

The roan horse plunged and reared like one demented; the rider sitting the while firm and supple as an Indian; then, seizing on a sudden the bit 'twixt his teeth, off set the stallion at a tearing gallop southward.

Away I followed hotly, the others giving chase and halloaing in the background.

Dyke after dyke we flew headlong in the grey-white mist—the space still even betwixt us—then, at a sudden high dry-stone wall, which loomed up as a wave of darkness seaward, my horse jumped short, and down we fell together, on the turf beyond.

As I lay there for a moment or two, I was certain I heard a heavy rumbling of rock or stone by the cliff edge hard by, followed by a deep plunge far below into the sea.

I rose to my feet and looked around me. There was no sign of horse or rider; both had disappeared.

The cliff here made a sudden bend inland, so that I could even catch the come and go of the waves in the far void below, and I felt 'twas lucky for me that I had been riding the nether-most line of the twain of us.

Cautiously approaching the edge, I noticed it had been just broken away under the tramp of a horse, and as I peeped over I caught sight of an indistinct figure lying on a broad slab of rock below that jutted out some way from the cliff.

Feeling carefully around for support of root or stone, I made my way down, and discovered, as I had already conjectured, 'twas the reiver that lay there.

He was lying motionless, spread on his back, and was murmuring to himself as I drew close.

I knelt beside him to lift him up, and could catch, as I tried to raise him, what he was saying.

'Whisht ye, then, whisht, Effie, Aah never meant to break t' dish, Aah tell thee. Leave us aloan, then, lass, doan't plague t' life oot of a man. Ay, Aah'll fetch t' coo in i' guid time, there's no call t' bang us that gait.'

Then he babbled indistinctly; his lips grew whiter and ceased from moving; and when the others had come up I think he was already dead.

As I rode off for the physician in Redcar, I minded me I had once read in a book, Reverend Sir, that this same Cleveland was once 'the Cliff-land of the Danes,' and that the older name of Roseberry Topping—the famous hill of these parts—was Othenesberg, or Odin's Hill, together with much else of an antiquarian interest and varied conjecture, which I must even leave to wiser heads than mine to determine the true issues of, as well as their bearing upon the events just narrated, but this I may say, that here is the same 'crazy tale' my cousin mentioned to you, set down in all true verisimilitude by, reverend sir, your very faithful and humble servant to command,

FREDDY HALL.