

Dark Dignum

By Bernard Capes

“I’d not go nigher, sir,” said my landlady’s father.

I made out his warning through the shrill piping of the wind; and stopped and took in the plunging seascape from where I stood. The boom of the waves came up from a vast distance beneath; sky and the horizon of running water seemed hurrying upon us over the lip of the rearing cliff.

“It crumbles!” he cried. “It crumbles near the edge like as frosted mortar. I’ve seen a noble sheep, sir, eighty pound of mutton, browsing here one moment, and seen it go down the next in a puff of white dust. Hank to that! Do you hear it?”

Through the tumult of the wind in that high place came a liquid vibrant sound, like the muffled stroke of iron on an anvil. I thought it the gobble of water in clanging caves deep down below.

“It might be a bell,” I said.

The old man chuckled joyously. He was my cicerone for the nonce; had come out of his chair by the ingle-nook to taste a little the salt of life.

The north-easter flashed in the white cataracts of his eyes and woke a feeble activity in his scrannel limbs. When the wind blew loud, his daughter had told me, he was always restless, like an imprisoned sea-gull. He would be up and out. He would rise and flap his old draggled pinions, as if the great air fanned an expiring spark into flame.

“It *is* a bell!” he cried—“the bell of old St. Dunstan’s, that was swallowed by the waters in the dark times.”

“Ah,” I said. “That is the legend hereabouts.”

“No legend, sir—no legend. Where be the tombstones of drowned mariners to prove it such? Not one to forty that they has in other sea-board parishes. For why? Dunstan bell sounds its warning, and not a craft will put out.”

“There is the storm cone,” I suggested.

He did not hear me. He was punching with his staff at one of a number of little green mounds that lay about us.

“I could tell you a story of these,” he said. “Do you know where we stand?”

“On the site of the old churchyard?”

“Ay, sir; though it still bore the name of the *new* yard in my first memory of it.”

“Is that so? And what is the story?”

He dwelt a minute, dense with introspection. Suddenly he sat himself down upon a mossy bulge in the turf, and waved me imperiously to a place beside him.

“The old order changeth,” he said. “The only lasting foundations of men’s works shall be godliness and law-biding. Long ago they builded a new church—here, high up on the cliffs, where the waters could not reach; and, lo! the waters wrought beneath and sapped the foundations, and the church fell into the sea.”

“So I understand,” I said.

“The godless are fools,” he chattered knowingly. “Look here at these bents—thirty of ’em, may be. Tombstones, sir; perished like man his works, and the decayed stumps of them coated with salt grass.”

He pointed to the ragged edge of the cliff a score paces away.

“They raised it out there,” he said, “and further— a temple of bonded stone. They thought to bribe the Lord to a partnership in their corruption, and lie answered by casting down the fair mansion into the waves.”

I said, “Who—who, my friend?”

“They that builded the church,” he answered.

“Well,” I said. “It seems a certain foolishness to set the edifice so close to the margin.”

Again he chuckled.

“It was close, close, as you say; yet none so close as you might think nowadays. Time hath gnawed here like a rat on a cheese. But the foolishness appeared in setting the brave mansion between the winds and its own graveyard. Let the dead lie sea-wards, one had thought, and the church inland where we stand. So had the bell rung to this day; and only the charnel bones flaked piecemeal into the sea.”

“Certainly, to have done so would show the better providence.”

“Sir, I said the foolishness *appeared*. But, I tell you, there was foresight in the disposition—in neighbouring the building to the cliff path. *For so they could the easier enter unobserved, and store their kegs of Nantes brandy in the belly of the organ.*”

“They? Who were they?”

“Why, who—but two-thirds of all Dunburgh?”

“Smugglers?”

“It was a nest of ’em—traffickers in the eternal fire o’ weekdays, and on the Sabbath, who so sanctimonious? But honesty comes not from the washing, like a clean shirt, nor can the piety of one day purge the evil of six. They built their church anigh the margin, forasmuch as it was handy, and that they thought, ‘Surely the Lord will not undermine His own?’ A rare community o’ blasphemers, fro’ the parson that took his regular toll of the organ-loft, to him that sounded the keys and pulled out the joyous stops as if they was so many spigots to what lay behind.”

“Of when do you speak?”

“I speak of nigh a century and a half ago. I speak of the time o’ the Seven Years’ War and of Exciseman Jones, that, twenty year after he were buried, took his revenge on the cliff side of the man that done him to death.”

“And who was that?”

“They called him Dark Dignum, sir—a great feat smuggler, and as wicked as he was bold.”

“Is your story about him?”

“Ay, it is; and of my grandfather, that were a boy when they laid, and was glad to lay, the exciseman deep as they could dig; for the sight of his sooty face in his coffin was worse than a bad dream.”

“Why was that?”

The old man edged closer to me, and spoke in a sibilant voice.

“He were murdered, sir, foully and horribly, for all they could never bring it home to the culprit.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

He was nothing loth. The wind, the place of perished tombs, the very wild-blown locks of this ‘withered apple-john’, were eerie accompaniments to the tale he piped in my ear:—

“When my grandfather were a boy,” he said, “there lighted in Dunburgh Exciseman Jones. P’r’aps the village had gained an ill reputation. P’r’aps Exciseman Jones’s predecessor had failed to secure the confidence o’ the exekitive. At any rate, the new man was little to the fancy of the village. He was a grim, sour-looking, brass-bound galloot; and incorruptible—which was the

worst. The keg o' brandy left on his doorstep o' New Year's Eve had been better unspiled and run into the gutter; for it led him somehow to the identification of the innocent that done it, and he had him by the heels in a twinkling. The squire snorted at the man, and the parson looked askance; but Dark Dignum, he swore he'd be even with him, if he swung for it. They was hurt and surprised, that was the truth, over the scrupulosity of certain people; and feelin' ran high against Exciseman Jones.

"At that time Dark Dignum was a young man with a reputation above his years for profaneness and audacity. Ugly things there were said about him; and amongst many wicked he was feared for his wickedness. Exciseman Jones had his eye on him; and that was bad for Exciseman Jones.

"Now one murk December night Exciseman Jones staggered home with a bloody long slice down his scalp, and the red drip from it spotting the cobble-stones.

" 'Summut fell on him from a winder,' said Dark Dignum, a little later, as he were drinkin' hisself hoarse in the Black Boy. 'Summut fell on him retributive, as you might call it. For, would you believe it, the man had at the moment been threatenin' me? He did. He said, 'I know damn well about you, Dignum and for all your damn ingenuity, I'll bring you with a crack to the ground yet.' "

"What had happened? Nobody knew, sir. But Exciseman Jones was in his bed for a fortnight; and when he got on his legs again, it was pretty evident there was a hate between the two men that only blood-spillin' could satisfy.

"So far as is known, they never spoke to one another again. They played their game of death in silence—the lawful, cold and unfathomable; the unlawful, swaggerin' and crool—and twenty year separated the first move and the last.

"This were the first, sir—as Dark Dignum leaked it out long after in his cups. This were the first; and it brought Exciseman Jones to his grave on the cliff here.

"It were a deep soft summer night; and the young smuggler sat by hisself in the long room of the Black Boy. Now, I tell you he were a fox-ship intriguer—grand, I should call him, in the aloneness of his villainy. He would play his dark games out of his own hand; and sure, of all his wickedness, this game must have seemed the sum.

"I say he sat by hisself; and I hear the listening ghost of him call me a liar. For there were another body present, though invisible to mortal eye; and that second party were Exciseman Jones, who was hidden up the chimney.

"How had he inveigled him there? Ah, they've met and worried that point out since. No other will ever know the truth this side the grave. But reports come to be whispered; and reports said as how Dignum had made an appointment with a bodiless master of a smack as never floated, to meet him in the Black Boy and arrange for to run a cargo as would never be shipped; and that somehow he managed to acquaint Exciseman Jones o' this dissembling appointment, and to secure his presence in hidin' to witness it.

"That's conjecture; for Dignum never let on so far. But what *is* known for certain is that Excise-man Jones, who were as daring and determined as his enemy—p'r'aps more so—for some reason was in the chimney, on to a grating in which he had managed to lower hisself from the roof; and that he could, if given time, have scrambled up again with difficulty, but was debarred from going lower. And, further, this is known—that, as Dignum sat on, pretendin' to yawn and huggin' his black intent, a little sut plopped down the chimney and scattered on the coals of the laid fire beneath.

"At that—'Curse this waitin'!' said he. 'The room's as chill as a belfry'; and he got to his feet, with a secret grin, and strolled to the hearthstone.

“ ‘I wonder,’ said he, ‘will the landlord object if I ventur’ upon a glint of fire for comfort’s sake?’ and he pulled out his flint and steel, struck a spark, and with no more feelin’ than he’d express in lighting a pipe, set the flame to the sticks.

“The trapt rat above never stirred or give tongue. My God! what a man! Sich a nature could afford to bide and bide—ay, for twenty year, if need be.

“Dignum would have enjoyed the sound of a cry; but he never got it. He listened with the grin fixed on his face; and of a sudden he heard a scrambling struggle, like as a dog with the colic jumping at a wall; and presently, as the sticks blazed and the smoke rose denser, a thick coughin’, as of a consumptive man under bed-clothes. Still no cry, nor any appeal for mercy; no, not from the time he lit the fire till a horrible rattle come down, which was the last twitches of somethin’ that choked and died on the sooty gratin’ above.

“When all was quiet, Dignum he knocks with his foot on the floor and sits hissself down before the hearth, with a face like a pillow for innocence.

“ ‘I were chilled and lit it,’ says he to the landlord. ‘You don’t mind?’

“Mind? Who would have ventur’d to cross Dark Dignum’s fancies?

“He give a boisterous laugh, and ordered in a double noggin of humming stuff.

“ ‘Here,’ he says, when it comes, ‘is to the health of Exciseman Jones, that swore to bring me to the ground.’

“ ‘To the ground,’ mutters a thick voice from the chimney.

“ ‘My God!’ says the landlord—‘there’s something up there!’

“Something there was; and terrible to look upon when they brought it to light. The creature’s struggles had ground the sut into its face, and its nails were black below the quick.

“Were those words the last of its death-throe, or an echo from beyond? Ah! we may question; but they were heard by two men.

“Dignum went free. What could they prove agen him? Not that he knew there was aught in the chimney when he lit the fire. The other would scarcely have acquent him of his plans. And Exciseman Jones was hurried into his grave alongside the church up here.

“And therein he lay for twenty year, despite that, not a twelvemonth after his coming, the sacrilegious house itself sunk roaring into the waters. For the Lord would have none of it, and, biding His time, struck through a fortnight of deluge, and hurled church and cliff into ruin. But the yard remained, and, nighest the seaward edge of it, Exciseman Jones slept in his fearful winding sheet and bided *his* time.

“It came when my grandfather were a young man of thirty, and mighty close and confidential with Dark Dignum. God forgive him! Doubtless he were led away by the older smuggler, that had a grace of villainy about him, ’tis said, and used Lord Chesterfield’s printed letters for wadding to his bullets.

“By then he was a ramping, roaring devil; but, for all his bold hands were stained with crime, the memory of Exciseman Jones and of his promise dwelled with him and darkened him ever more and more, and never left him. So those that knew him said.

“Now all these years the cliff edge agen the graveyard, where it was broke off, was scabbing into the sea below. But still they used this way of ascent for their ungodly traffic; and over the ruin of the cliff they had drove a new path for to carry up their kegs.

“It was a cloudy night in March, with scud and a fitful moon, and there was a sloop in the offing, and under the shore a loaded boat that had just pulled in with muffled rowlocks. Out of this Dark Dignum was the first to sling hissself a brace of rundlets; and my grandfather followed with two more. They made softly for the cliff path—began the ascent—was half-way up.

“Whiz!—a stone of chalk went by them with a skirl, and slapped into the rubble below.

“ ‘Some more of St. Dunstan’s gravel!’ cried Dignum, pantin’ out a reckless laugh under his load; and on they went again.

“Hwish!—a bigger lump came like a thunderbolt, and the wind of it took the bloody smuggler’s hat and sent it swooping into the darkness like a bird.

“ ‘Thunder!’ said Dignum; ‘the cliff’s breaking away!’

“The words was hardly out of his mouth, when there flew such a volley of chalk stones as made my grandfather, though none had touched him, fall upon the path where he stood, and begin to gabble out what he could call to mind of the prayers for the dying. He was in the midst of it, when he heard a scream come from his companion as froze the very marrow in his bones. He looked up, thinkin’ his hour had come.

“My God! What a sight he saw! The moon had shone out of a sudden, and the light of it struck down on Dignum’s face, and that was the colour of dirty parchment. And he looked higher, and give a sort of sob.

“For there, stickin’ out of the cliff side, was half the body of Exciseman Jones, with its arms stretched abroad, *and it was clawin’ out lumps of chalk and hurling them down at Dignum!*

“And even as he took this in through his terror, a great ball of white came hurtling, and went full on to the man’s face with a splash—and he were spun down into the deep night below, a nameless thing.”

The old creature came to a stop, his eyes glinting with a febrile excitement.

“And so,” I said, “Exciseman Jones was true to his word?”

The tension of memory was giving—the spring slowly uncoiling itself.

“Ay,” he said doubtfully. “The cliff had flaked away by degrees to his very grave. They found his skelington stickin’ out of the chalk.”

“His *skeleton?*” said I, with the emphasis of disappointment.

“The first, sir, the first. Ay, his was the first. There’ve been a many exposed since. The work of decay goes on, and the bones they fall into the sea. Sometimes, sailing off shore, you may see a shank or an arm protrudin’ like a pigeon’s leg from a pie. But the wind or the weather takes it and it goes. There’s more to follow yet. Look at ’em! look at these bents! Every one a grave, with a skelington in it. The wear and tear from the edge will reach each one in turn, and then the last of the ungodly will have ceased from the earth.”

“And what became of your grandfather?”

“My grandfather? There were something happened made him renounce the devil. He died one of the elect. His youth were heedless and unregenerate; but, ’tis said, after he were turned thirty he never smiled agen. There was a reason. Did I ever tell you the story of Dark Dignum and Exciseman Jones?”