

The Haunted Dragoon

By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

Beside the Plymouth road, as it plunges downhill past Ruau Lanihale church toward Ruan Cove, and ten paces beyond the lych-gate—where the graves lie level with the coping, and the horseman can decipher their inscriptions in passing, at the risk of a twisted neck—the base of the churchyard wall is pierced with a low archway, festooned with toad-flax and fringed with the hart's-tongue fern. Within the archway bubbles a well, the water of which was once used for all baptisms in the parish, for no child sprinkled with it could ever be hanged with hemp. But this belief is discredited now, and the well neglected; and the events which led to this are still a winter's tale in the neighborhood. I set them down as they were told me, across the blue glow of a wreck-wood fire, by Sam Tregear, the parish bedman. Sam himself had borne an inconspicuous share in them; and because of them Sam's father had carried a white face to his grave.

My father and mother (said Sam) married late in life, for his trade was what mine is, and 'twasn't till her fortieth year that my mother could bring herself to kiss a gravedigger. That accounts, maybe, for my being born rickety and with other drawbacks that only made father the fonder. Weather permitting, he'd carry me off to churchyard, set me upon a flat stone, with his coat folded under, and talk to me while he delved. I can mind, now, the way he'd settle lower and lower, till his head played hidey-peep with me over the grave's edge, and at last he'd be clean swallowed up, but still discoursing or calling up how he'd come upon wonderful towns and kingdoms down underground, and how all the kings and queens there, in dyed garments, was offering him meat for his dinner every day of the week if he'd only stop and hobbynob with them—and all such gammut. He prettily doted on me—the poor old ancient!

But there came a day—a dry afternoon in the late wheat harvest—when we were up in the churchyard together, and, though father had his tools beside him, not a tint did he work, but kept travishing back and forth, one time shading his eyes and gazing out to sea, and then looking far along the Plymouth road for minutes at a time. Out by Bradden Point there stood a little dandy-rigged craft, tacking lazily to and fro, with her mains'l all shiny-yellow in the sunset. Though I didn't know it then, she was the Preventive boat, and her business was to watch the hauen; for there had been a brush between her and the *Unity* lugger, a fortnight back, and a Preventive man shot through the breast bone, and my mother's brother Philip was hiding down in the town. I minded, later, how that the men across the vale, in Farmer Tresidder's wheat field, paused every now and then, as they pitched the sheaves, to give a look up toward the churchyard, and the gleaners moved about in small knots, causeying and glancing over their shoulders at the cutter out in the bay; and how, when all the field was carried, they waited round the last load, no man offering to cry the *Neck*, as the fashion was, but lingering till sun was near down behind the slope, and the long shadows stretching across the stubble.

“Sha'n't thee go underground to-day, father?” says I, at last.

He turned slowly round, and says he, “No, sonny. Reckon us 'll climb skywards for a change.”

And with that he took my hand, and pushing abroad the belfry door began to climb the stairway. Up and up, round and round we went, in a sort of blind-man's-holiday full of little glints of light and whiffs of wind where the open windows came; and at last stepped out upon the leads of the tower and drew breath.

“There’s two-an’-twenty parishes to be witnessed from where we’re standin,’ sonny—if ye’ve got eyes,” says my father.

Well, first I looked down toward the harvesters and laughed to see them so small: and then I fell to counting the church-towers dotted across the high-lands, and seeing if I could make out two-and-twenty. ’Twas the prettiest sight—all the country round looking as if ’twas dusted with gold, and the Plymouth road winding away over the hills like a long white tape. I had counted thirteen churches, when my father pointed his hand out along this road and called to me:

“Look ’ee out yonder, honey, an’ say what ye see!”

“I see dust,” says I.

“Nothin’ else? Sonny, boy, use your eyes, for mine be dint’

“I see dust,” says I again, “an’ suthin’ twinklin’ in it, like a tin can—”

“Dragooners!” shouts my father; and then, running to the side of the tower facing the harvest-field, he put both hands to his mouth and called:

“*What have ’ee? What have ’ee?*”—very loud and long.

“*A neck—a neck!*” came back from the field, like as if all shouted at once—dear, the sweet sound! And then a gun was fired, and craning forward over the coping I saw a dozen men running across the stubble and out into the road toward the hauen; and they called as they ran, “*A neck—a neck!*”

“Iss,” says my father, “’tis a neck, sure ‘nuff, Pray God they save en! Come, sonny—”

But we dallied up there till the horsemen were plain to see, and their scarlet coats and armor blazing in the dust as they came. And when they drew near within a mile, and our limbs ached with crouching—for fear they should spy us against the sky—father took me by the hand and pulled hot-foot down the stairs. Before they rode by he had picked up his shovel and was shoveling out a grave for his life.

Forty valiant horsemen they were, riding two-and-two (by reason of the narrowness of the road) and a captain beside them—men broad and long, with hairy top-lips, and all clad in scarlet jackets and white breeches that showed bravely against their black war-horses, and jet-black holsters, thick as they were wi’ dust. Each man bad a golden helmet, and a scabbard flapping by his side, and a piece of metal, like a half-moon, jingling from his horse’s cheek-strap; 12 D was the number on every saddle, meaning the Twelfth Dragoons.

Tramp, tramp! they rode by, talking and joking, and taking no more heed of me—that sat upon the wall, with my heels dangling above them—than if I’d been a spring of stonecrop. But the captain, who carried a drawn sword and mopped face with a handkerchief, so that the dust ran across it in streaks, drew rein, and looked over my shoulder to where father was digging.

“Sergeant!” he calls back, turning with a hand upon his crupper; “didn’t we see a figger like this a-top o’ the tower, some way back?”

The sergeant pricked his horse forward, and saluted. He was the tallest, straightest man in troop, and the muscles on his arm filled out is sleeve with the three stripes upon it—a handsome, red-faced fellow, with curly black hair.

Says he, “That we did, sir—a man with sloping shoulders, and a boy with a goose neck.” Saying this, he looked up at us with a grin.

“I’ll bear it in mind,” answered the officer, and the troop rode on in a cloud of dust, the sergeant looking back and smiling, as if ’twas a joke that he shared with us. Well, to be short, they rode down into the town as night fell. . . . But ’twas too late, Uncle Philip having had fair warning, and plenty of time, to flee up toward the little secret hold under Mabel Down, where none but two families knew how to find him. All the town, though, knew he was safe, and

lashins of women and children turned out to see the comely soldiers hunt in vain till ten o'clock at night.

The next thing was to billet the warriors. The captain of the troop, by this, was pesky cross-tempered, and flounced off to the "Jolly Pilchards" in a huff. "Sergeant," says he, "here' san inn, though a damned bad 'un, an' here I means to stop. Somewheres about there's a farm called Constantine, where, I am told, the men can be accommodated. Find out the place, if you can, an' do your best: an' don't let me see yer face till to-morra," says he.

So Sergeant Basket—that was his name—gave the salute, and rode his troop up the street, where—for his manners were mighty winning, notwithstanding the dirty nature of his errand—he soon found plenty to direct him to Farmer Noy's of Constantine; and up the coombe they rode into the darkness, a dozen or more going along with them to show the way, being won by their martial bearing as well as the sergeant's very friendly way of speech.

Farmer Noy was in bed—a pock-marked, lantern-jawed old gaffer of sixty-five; and the most remarkable point about him was the wife he had married two years before—a young slip of a girl but just husband-high. Money did it, I reckon; but if so, 'twas a bad bargain for her. He was noted for stinginess to such a degree that they said his wife wore a brass wedding-ring, weekdays, to save the genuine article from wearing out. She was a Ruan woman, too, and therefore ought to have known all about him. But woman's ways be past finding out.

Hearing the hoofs in his yard and the sergeant's *stram-a-ram* upon the door, down comes the old curmudgeon with a candle held high above his head.

"What the devil's here?" he calls out.

Sergeant Basket looks over the old man's shoulder; and there, halfway up the stairs, stood Madam Noy in her night rail—a high-colored, ripe girl, languishing for love, her red lips parted and neck all lily-white against a loosened pile of dark brown hair.

"Be cussed if I turn back!" said the sergeant to himself; and added out loud:

"Forty souldjers, in the King's name!"

"Forty devils!" says Old Noy.

"They've devils to eat," answered the sergeant, in the most friendly manner; "an,' begad, ye must feed an' bed 'em this night—or else I'll search your cellars. Ye are a loyal man—eh, farmer? An' your stables are big, I'm told."

"Sarah," calls out the old man, following the sergeant's bold glance, "go back an' dress yersel' dacently this instant! These here honest souldjers—forty damned honest gormandisin' souldjers—be come in his majesty's name, forty strong, to protect honest folks' rights in the intervals of eatin' 'em out o' house an' home. Sergeant, ye be very welcome i' the King's name. Cheese an' cider ye shall have, an' I pray the mixture may turn your forty stomachs."

In a dozen minutes he had fetched out his stable-boys and farm hands, and, lantern in hand, was helping the sergeant to picket the horses and stow the men about on clean straw in the outhouses. They were turning back to the house and the old man was turning over in his mind that the sergeant hadn't yet said a word about where he was to sleep, when by the door they found Madam Noy waiting, in her wedding gown, and with her hair freshly braided.

Now, the farmer was mortally afraid of the sergeant, knowing he had thirty ankers and more of contraband liquor in his cellars, and minding the sergeant's threat. None the less his jealousy got the upper hand.

"Woman," be cries out, "to thy bed!"

"I was waiting," said she, "to say the Caps'n's bed—"

"Sergeant's," says the dragoon, correcting her.

“Was laid i’ the spare room.”

“Madam,” replies Sergeant Basket, looking into her eyes and bowing, “a soldier with my responsibility sleeps but little. In the first place, I must see that my men sup.”

“The maids be now cuttin’ the bread au’ cheese and drawin’ the cider.”

“Then, Madam, leave me but possession of the parlor, and let me have a chair to sleep in.”

By this they were in the passage together, and her gaze devouring his regimentals. The old man stood a pace off, looking sourly. The sergeant fed his eyes upon her, and Satan got hold of him.

“Now if only,” said he, “one of you could play cards!”

“But I must go to bed,” she answered; “though I can play cribbage, if only you stay another night.”

For she saw the glint in the farmer’s eye; and so Sergeant Basket slept bolt upright that night in an armchair by the parlor fender. Next day the dragoons searched the town again, and were billeted all about among the cottages. But the sergeant returned to Constantine, and before going to bed—this time in the spare room—played a game of cribbage with Madam Noy, the farmer smoking sulkily in his armchair.

“Two for his heels!” said the rosy woman suddenly, half-way through the game. “Sergeant, you’re clieatin’ yoursel’ an’ forgettin’ to mark. Gi’e me the board; I’ll mark for both.”

She put out her hand upon the board, and Sergeant Basket closed upon it. ’Tis true he had forgot to murk; and feeling the hot pulse in her wrist, and beholding the hunger in her eyes, ’tis to be supposed he’d have forgot his own soul.

He rode away next day with his troop; but my uncle Philip not being caught yet, and the Government set on making an example of him, we hadn’t seen the last of these dragoons. ’Twas a time of fear down in the town. At the dead of night or at noonday they came on us—six times in all: and for two months the crew of the *Unity* couldn’t call their souls their own, but lived from day to day in secret closets and wandered the county by night, hiding in hedges and straw-houses. All that time the revenue men watched the hauen, night and day, like dogs before a rat-hole.

But one November morning ’twas whispered abroad that Uncle Philip had made his way to Falmouth, and slipped across to Guernsey. Time passed on, and the dragoons were seen no more, nor the handsome devil-may-care face of Sergeant Basket. Up at Constantine, where he had always contrived to billet himself, ’tis to be thought pretty Madam Noy pined to see him again, kicking his spurs in the porch and smiling out of his gay brown eyes: for her face fell away from its plump condition, and the hunger in her eyes grew and grew. But a more remarkable fact was that her old husband—who wouldn’t have yearned after the dragoon ye’d have thought—began to dwindle and fall away too. By the New Year he was a dying man, and carried his doom on his face. And on New Year’s Day he straddled his mare for the last time, and rode over to Looe, to Doctor Gale’s.

“Goody-losh!” cried the doctor, taken aback by his appearance—“What’s come to ye, Noy?”

“Death!” says Noy. “Doctor, I baint come for advice, for before this day week I’ll be a clay-cold corpse. I come to ax a favor. When they summon ye, before lookin’ at my body—that’ll be past help—go you to the little left-top corner drawer o’ my wife’s bureau, an’ there ye’ll find a packet. You’re my executor,” says he, “and I leaves ye to deal wi’ that packet as ye thinks fit.”

With that, the farmer rode away home-along, and the very day week he went dead.

The doctor, when called over, minded what the old chap had said, and sending Madam Noy on some pretense to the kitchen, went over and unlocked the little drawer with a duplicate key, that the farmer had unhitched from his watch-chain and given him. There was no parcel of letters, as

he looked to find, but only a small packet crumpled away in the corner. He pulled it out and gave a look, and a sniff, and another look; then shut the drawer, locked it, strode straight downstairs to his horse and galloped away.

In three hours' time pretty Madam Noy was in the constables' hands upon the charge of murdering her husband by poison.

They tried her, next Spring Assize, at Bodmin, before the Lord Chief Justice. There wasn't evidence enough to put Sergeant Basket in the dock alongside of her—though 'twas freely guessed he knew more than anyone (saving the prisoner herself) about the arsenic that was found in the little drawer and inside the old man's body. He was subpoena'd from Plymouth, and cross examined by a great hulking King's Counsel for three-quarters of an hour. But they got nothing out of him. All through the examination the prisoner looked at him and nodded her white face, every now and then, at his answers, as much as to say, "That's right—that's right: they shan't harm thee, my dear." And the love-light shone in her eyes for all the court to see. But the sergeant never let his look meet it. When he stepped down at last she gave a sob of joy, and fainted bang-off.

They roused her up, after this, to hear the verdict of *Guilty* and her doom spoken by the judge. "Pris'ner at the bar," said the Clerk of Arraignment, "have ye anything to say why this court should not pass sentence o' death?"

She held tight of the rail before her, and spoke out loud and clear:

"My Lord and gentleman all, I be a guilty woman; an' I be ready to die at once for my sin. But if ye kill me now, ye kill the child in my body—an' he is innocent."

Well, 'twas found she spoke the truth; and the hanging was put off till after the time of her delivery. She was led back to prison, and there, about the end of June, her child was born, and died before he was six hours old. But the mother recovered, and quietly abode the time of her hanging.

I can mind her execution very well; for father and mother had determined it would be an excellent thing for my rickets to take me into Bodmin that day, and get a touch of the dead woman's hand, which in those times was considered an unfailing remedy. So we borrowed the parson's manure-cart, and cleaned it thoroughly, and drove in together.

The place of the hangings, then, was a little door in the prison wall, looking over the bank where the railway now goes, and a dismal piece of water called Jail-pool, where the townsfolk drowned most of the dogs and cats they'd no furdur use for. All the bank under the gallows was that thick with people you could almost walk upon their heads; and my ribs were squeezed by the crowd so that I couldn't breathe freely for a month after. Back across the pool, the fields along the side of the valley were lined with booths and sweet-stalls and standings—a perfect Whitsun-fair; and a din going up that cracked your ears.

But there was the stillness of death when the woman came forth, with the sheriff and the chaplain reading in his book, and the unnamed man behind—all from the little door. She wore a straight black gown, and a white kerchief about her neck—a lovely woman, young and white and tearless.

She ran her eye over the crowd and stepped forward a pace, as if to speak; but lifted a finger and beckoned instead: and out of the people a man fought his way to the foot of the scaffold. 'Twas the dashing sergeant, that was here upon sick-leave. Sick he was, I believe. His face above his shining regimentals was gray as a slate; for he had committed perjury to save his skin, and on the face of the perjured no sun will ever shine.

“Have you got it?” the doomed woman said, many hearing the words.

He tried to reach, but the scaffold was too high, so he tossed up what was in his hand, and the woman caught it—a little screw of tissue-paper.

“I must see that, please!” said the sheriff, laying a hand upon her arm.

“’Tis but a weddin’ -ring, sir,”—and she slipped it over her finger. Then she kissed it once, under the beam, and, lookin’ into the dragoon’s eyes, spoke very slow

“Husband, our child shall go wi’ you; an’ when I want you he shall fetch you.”

And with that turned to the sheriff, saying:

“I be ready, sir.”

The sheriff wouldn’t give father and mother leave for me to touch the dead woman’s hand; so they drove back that evening grumbling a good bit. ’Tis a sixteen-mile drive, and the ostler in at Bodmin had swindled the poor old horse out of his feed, I believe; for he crawled like a slug. But they were so taken up with discussing the day’s doings, and what a mort of people had been present, and how the sheriff might have used milder language in refusing my father, that they forgot to use the whip. The moon was up before we got half-way home, and a star to be seen here and there; and still we never mended our pace.

’Twas in the middle of the lane leading down to Hendra Bottom, where for more than a mile two carts can’t pass each other, that my father pricks up his ears and looks back.

“Hullo!” says he; “there’s somebody gallopin’ behind us.”

Far back in the night we heard the noise of a horse’s hoofs, pounding furiously on the road and drawing nearer and nearer.

“Save us!” cries father; “whoever ’tis, he’s comin’ down th’ lane!” And in a minute’s time the clatter was close on us and someone shouting behind.

“Hurry that crawlin’ worm o’ yourn—or draw aside in God’s name, an’ let me by!” the rider yelled.

“What’s up?” asked my father, quartering as well as he could; “Why! Hub! Farmer Hugo, be that you?”

“There’s a mad devil o’ a man behind, ridin’ down all he comes across. A’s blazin’ drunk, I reckon—but ’tisn’ *that*—’tis the horrible voice that goes wi’ en. Hark! Lord protect us, he’s turn’d into the lane!”

Sure enough, the chatter of a second horse was coming down upon us, out of the night—and with it the most ghastly sounds that ever creamed a man’s flesh. Farmer Hugo pushed past us and sent a shower of mud in our faces as his horse leapt off again, and ’way-to-go down the hill. My father stood up and lashed our old gray with the reins, and down we went too, bumpity-bump for our lives, the poor beast being taken suddenly like one possessed. For the screaming behind was like nothing on earth but the wailing and sobbing of a little child—only tenfold louder. ’Twas just as you’d fancy a baby might wail if his little limbs was being twisted to death.

At the hill’s foot, as you know, a stream crosses the lane—that widens out there a bit, and narrows again as it goes up t’other side of the valley. Knowing we must be overtaken further on—for the screams and clatter seemed at our very backs by this—father jumped out here into the stream and backed the cart well to one side; and not a second too soon.

The next moment, like a wind, this thing went by us in the moonlight—a man upon a black horse that splashed the stream all over us as he dashed through it and up the hill. ’Twas the scarlet dragoon with his ashen face; and behind him, holding to his cross-belt, rode a little shape, that tugged, and wailed, and raved. As I stand here, sir, ’twas the shape of a naked babe!

Well, I won't go on to tell how my father dropped upon his knees in the water, or how my mother fainted off. The thing was gone, and, from that moment, for eight years, nothing was seen or heard of Sergeant Basket. The fright killed my mother. Before next spring she fell into a decline, and early next fall the old man—for he was an old man now—had to delve her grave. After this he went feebly about his work, but held on, being wishful for me to step into his shoon, which I began to do as soon as I was fourteen, having outgrown the rickets by that time.

But one cool evening in September month, father was up digging in the yard alone; for 'twas a small child's grave, and in the loosest soil, and I was off on a day's work, thatching Farmer Tresidder's stacks. He was digging away slowly, when he heard a rattle at the lych-gate, and, looking over the edge of the grave, saw, in the dusk, a man hitching his horse there by the bridle.

'Twas a coal-black horse, and the man wore a scarlet coat, all powdered with pilm, and, as he opened the gate, and came over the graves, father saw that 'twas the dashing dragoon. His face was still a slaty gray, and clammy with sweat, and, when he spoke, his voice was all of a whisper, with a shiver therein.

"Bedman," says he, "go to the hedge, and look down the road, and tell me what you see."

My father went, with his knees shaking, and came back again.

"I see a woman," says he, "not fifty yards down the road. She is dressed in black, an' has a veil over her face, an' she's comin' this way."

"Bedman," answers the dragoon, "go to the gate, an' look back along the Plymouth road, an' tell me what you see."

"I see," says my father, coming back with his teeth chattering, "I see, twenty yards back, a naked child comin'. He looks to be callin', but he makes no sound."

"Because his voice is wearied out," says the dragoon. And with that he faced about, and walked to the gate slowly.

"Bedman, come wi' me an' see the rest," he says over his shoulder.

He opened the gate, unhitched the bridle, and swung himself heavily up in the saddle.

Now from the gate the bank goes down pretty steep into the road, and at the foot of the bank my father saw two figures waiting. 'Twas the woman and the child, hand in hand, and their eyes burned up like coals; and the woman's veil was lifted, and her throat bare.

As the horse went down the bank toward these two, they reached out and took each a stirrup and climbed upon his back, the child before the dragoon and the woman behind. The man's face was set like a stone. Not a word did either speak, and in this fashion they rode down the hill toward Ruan sands. All that my father could mind, beyond, was that the woman's hands were passed round the man's neck, where the rope had passed round her own.

No more could he tell, being a stricken man from that hour. But Aunt Polgrain, the house-keeper up to Constantine, saw them, an hour later, go along the road below the town-place; and Jacobs, the smith, saw them pass his forge toward Bodmin about midnight. So the tale's true enough. But since that night no man has set eyes on horse or riders.