

The Two Householders

Extracts from the Memoirs of Gabriel Foot, Highwayman.

By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

I will say this—speaking as accurately as a man may, so long afterward—that when first I spied the house it put no desire in me but just to give thanks.

For conceive my case. It was near midnight, and ever since dusk I had been tramping the naked moors, in the teeth of as vicious a nor'wester as ever drenched a man to the skin, and then blew the cold home to his marrow. My clothes were sodden; my coattails flapped with a noise like pistol-shots; my boots squeaked as I went. Overhead, the October moon was in her last quarter, and might have been a slice of finger-nail for all the light she afforded. Two-thirds of the time the wrack blotted her out altogether; and I, with my stick clipped tight under my armpit, eyes puckered up, and head bent aslant, had to keep my wits alive to distinguish the road from the black heath to right and left. For three hours I had met neither man nor man's dwelling, and (for all I knew) was desperately lost. Indeed, at the cross-roads, two miles back, there had been nothing for me but to choose the way that kept the wind on my face, and it gnawed me like a dog.

Mainly to allay the stinging of my eyes, I pulled up at last, turned right-about-face, leant back against the blast with a hand on my hat, and surveyed the blackness behind. It was at this instant that, far away to the left, a point of light caught my notice, faint but steady; and at once I felt sure it burnt in the window of a house. "The house," thought I, "is a good mile off, beside the other road, and the light must have been an inch over my hat-brim for the last half hour." This reflection—that on so wide a moor I had come near missing the information I wanted (and perhaps a supper) by one inch—sent a strong thrill down my back.

I cut straight across the heather toward the light, risking quags and pitfalls. Nay, so heartening was the chance to hear a fellow creature's voice, that I broke into a run, skipping over the stunted gorse that cropped up here and there, and dreading every moment to see the light quenched. "Suppose it burns in an upper window, and the family is going to bed, as would be likely at this hour." The apprehension kept my eyes fixed on the bright spot, to the frequent scandal of my legs, that within five minutes were stuck full of gorse prickles.

But the light did not go out, and soon a flicker of moonlight gave me a glimpse of the house's outline. It proved to be a deal more imposing than I looked for—the outline, in fact, of a tall, square barrack, with a cluster of chimneys at either end, like ears, and a high wall, topped by the roofs of some outbuildings, concealing the lower windows. There was no gate in this wall, and presently I guessed the reason. I was approaching the place from behind, and the light came from a back window on the first floor.

The faintness of the light also was explained by this time. It shone behind a drab-colored blind, and in shape resembled the stem of a wine-glass, broadening out at the foot; an effect produced by the half-drawn curtains within. I came to a halt, waiting for the next ray of moonlight. At the same moment a rush of wind swept over the chimney-stacks, and on the wind there seemed to ride a human sigh.

On this last point I may err. The gust had passed some seconds before I caught myself detecting this peculiar note, and trying to disengage it from the natural chords of the storm. From the next gust it was absent; and then, to my dismay, the light faded from the window.

I was half-minded to call out when it appeared again, this time in two windows—those next on the right to that where it had shone before. Almost at once it increased in brilliance, as if the person who carried it from the smaller room to the larger were lighting more candles; and now the illumination was strong enough to make fine gold threads of the rain that fell within its radiance, and fling two shafts of warm yellow over the coping of the back wall. During the minute or more that I stood watching, no shadow fell on either blind.

Between me and the wall ran a ditch, into which the ground at my feet broke sharply away. Setting my back to the storm again, I followed the lip of this ditch around the wall's angle. Here it shallowed, and here, too, was shelter; but not wishing to mistake a bed of nettles or any such pitfall for solid earth, I kept pretty wide as I went on. The house was dark on this side, and the wall, as before, had no opening. Close beside the next angle there grew a mass of thick gorse bushes, and pushing through these I found myself suddenly on a sound highroad, with the wind tearing at me as furiously as ever.

But here was the front; and I now perceived that the surrounding wall advanced some way before the house, so as to form a narrow courtlage. So much of it, too, as faced the road had been whitewashed, which made it an easy matter to find the gate. But as I laid hand on its latch I had a surprise.

A line of paving-stones led from the gate to a heavy porch; and along the wet surface of these there fell a streak of light from the front door, which stood ajar.

That a door should remain six inches open on such a night was astonishing enough, until I entered the court and found it as still as a room, owing to the high wall. But looking up and assuring myself that all the rest of the *façade* was black as ink, I wondered at the carelessness of the inmates.

It was here that my professional instinct received the first jog. Abating the sound of my feet on the paving-stones, I went up to the door and pushed it softly. It opened without noise.

I stepped into a fair-sized hall of modern build, paved with red tiles and lit with a small hanging-lamp. To right and left were doors leading to the ground-floor rooms. Along the wall by my shoulder ran a line of pegs, on which hung half-a-dozen hats and great-coats, every one of clerical shape; and full in front of me a broad staircase ran up, with a staring Brussels carpet, the colors and pattern of which I can recall as well as I can to-day's breakfast. Under this staircase was set a stand full of walking-sticks, and a table littered with gloves, brushes, a hand-bell, a riding-crop, one or two dog-whistles, and a bedroom candle, with tinderbox beside it. This, with one notable exception, was all the furniture.

The exception—which turned me cold—was the form of a yellow mastiff dog, curled on a mat beneath the table. The arch of his back was toward me, and one forepaw lay over his nose in a natural posture of sleep. I leant back on the wainscoting with my eyes tightly fixed on him, and my thoughts sneaking back, with something of regret, to the storm I had come through.

But a man's habits are not easily denied. At the end of three minutes the dog had not moved, and I was down on the door-mat unlacing my soaked boots. Slipping them off, and taking them in my left hand, I stood up, and tried a step toward the stairs, with eyes alert for any movement of the mastiff; but he never stirred. I was glad enough, however, on reaching the stairs, to find them newly built, and the carpet thick. Up I went, with a glance at every step for the table which now hid the brute's form from me, and never a creak did I wake out of that staircase till I was almost at the first landing, when my toe caught a loose stair-rod, and rattled it in a way that stopped my heart for a moment, and then set it going in double-quick time.

I stood still with a hand on the rail. My eyes were now on a level with the floor of the landing, out of which branched two passages—one turning sharply to my right, the other straight in front, so that I was gazing down the length of it. Almost at the end, a parallelogram of light fell across it from an open door.

A man who has once felt it knows there is only one kind of silence that can fitly be called “dead.” This is only to be found in a great house at midnight. I declare that for a few seconds after I rattled the stair-rod you might have cut the silence with a knife. If the house held a clock, it ticked inaudibly.

Upon this silence, at the end of a minute, broke a light sound—the *tink-tink* of a decanter on the rim of a wine-glass. It came from the room where the light was.

Now perhaps it was that the very thought of liquor put warmth into my cold bones. It is certain that all of a sudden I straightened my back, took the remaining stairs at two strides and walked down the passage as bold as brass, without caring a jot for the noise I made.

In the doorway I halted. The room was long, lined for the most part with books bound in what they call “divinity calf,” and littered with papers like a barrister’s table on assize day. A leathern elbow-chair faced the fireplace, where a few coals burned sulkily, and beside it, on the corner of a writing-table, were set an unlit candle and a pile of manuscripts. At the opposite end of the room a curtained door led (as I guessed) to the chamber that I had first seen illuminated. All this I took in with the tail of my eye, while staring straight in front, where, in the middle of a great square of carpet, between me and the windows, stood a table with a red cloth upon it. On this cloth were a couple of wax candles lit, in silver stands, a tray, and a decanter three parts full of brandy. And between me and the table stood a man.

He stood sideways, leaning a little back, as if to keep his shadow off the threshold, and looked at me over his left shoulder—a bald, grave man, slightly under the common height, with a long clerical coat of preposterous fit hanging loosely from his shoulders, a white cravat, black breeches, and black stockings. His feet were loosely thrust into carpet slippers. I judged his age at fifty, or thereabouts; but his face rested in the shadow, and I could only note a pair of eyes, very small and alert, twinkling above a large expanse of cheek.

He was lifting a wine-glass from the table at the moment when I appeared, and it trembled now in his right hand. I heard a spilt drop or two fall on the carpet. This was all the evidence he showed of discomposure.

Setting the glass back, he felt in his breast-pocket for a handkerchief, failed to find one, and rubbed his hands together to get the liquor off his fingers.

“You startled me,” he said, in a matter-of-fact tone, turning his eyes upon me, as he lifted his glass again, and emptied it. “How did you find your way in?”

“By the front door,” said I, wondering at his unconcern.

He nodded his head slowly.

“Ah! yes; I forgot to lock it. You came to steal, I suppose?”

“I came because I’d lost my way. I’ve been traveling this God-forsaken moor since dusk—”

“With your boots in your hand,” he put in quietly.

“I took them off out of respect to the yellow dog you keep.”

“He lies in a very natural attitude—eh?”

“You don’t tell me he was *stuffed*?”

The old man’s eyes beamed a contemptuous pity.

“You are indifferent sharp, my dear sir, for a housebreaker. Come in. Set down those convicting boots, and don’t drip pools of water in the doorway. If I must entertain a burglar, I prefer him tidy.”

He walked to the fire, picked up a poker, and knocked the coals into a blaze. This done, he turned round on me with the poker still in his hand. The serenest gravity sat on his large, pale features.

“Why have I done this?” he asked.

“I suppose to get possession of the poker.”

“Quite right. May I inquire your next move?”

“Why,” said I, feeling in my tail-pocket; “I carry a pistol.”

“Which I suppose to be damp?”

“By no means. I carry it, as you see, in an oilcloth case.”

He stooped, and laid the poker carefully in the fender.

“That is a stronger card than I possess. I might urge that by pulling the trigger you would certainly alarm the house and the neighborhood, and put a halter round your neck. But it strikes me as safer to assume you capable of using a pistol with effect at three paces. With what might happen subsequently I will not pretend to be concerned. The fate of your neck”—he waved a hand—“well I have known you for just five minutes, and feel but a moderate interest in your neck. As for the inmates of this house, it will refresh you to hear that there are none. I have lived here two years with a butler and a female cook, both of whom I dismissed yesterday at a minute’s notice, for conduct which I will not shock your ears by explicitly naming. Suffice it to say, I carried them off yesterday to my parish church, two miles away, married them and dismissed them in the vestry without characters. I wish you had known that butler—but excuse me; with the information I have supplied, you ought to find no difficulty in fixing the price you will take to clear out of my house instanter.”

“Sir,” I answered, “I have held a pistol at one or two heads in my time, but never at one stuffed with nobler indiscretion. Your chivalry does not, indeed, disarm me, but prompts me to desire more of your acquaintance. I have found a gentleman, and must sup with him before I make terms.”

This address seemed to please him. He shuffled across the room to a sideboard, and produced a plate of biscuits, another of almonds and dried raisins, a glass and two decanters.

“Sherry and Madeira,” he said. “There is also a cold pie in the larder, if you care for it.”

“A biscuit will serve,” I replied. “To tell the truth, I’m more for the bucket than the manger, as the grooms say; and the brandy you were tasting just now is more to my mind than wine.

“There is no water handy.”

“I have soaked in enough to-night to last me with this bottle.”

I pulled over a chair, laid my pistol on the table, and held out the glass for him to fill.

Having done so, he helped himself to a glass, and a chair, and sat down facing me.

“I was speaking, just now, of my late butler,” he began, with a sip at his brandy. “Does it strike you that, when confronted with moral delinquency, I am apt to let my indignation get the better of me

“Not at all,” I answered heartily, refilling my glass.

It appeared that another reply would have pleased him better.

“H’m. I was hoping that; perhaps, I had visited his offense too strongly. As a clergyman, you see, I was bound to be severe; but upon my word, sir, since Parkinson left I have felt like a man who has lost a limb.”

He drummed with his fingers on the cloth for a few moments, and went on:

“One has a natural disposition to forgive butlers—Pharaoh, for instance, felt it. There hovers around butlers an atmosphere in which common ethics lose their pertinence. But mine was a rare bird—a black swan among butlers! He was more than a butler: he was a quick and brightly gifted man. Of the accuracy of his taste, and the unusual scope of his endeavor, you will be able to form some opinion when I assure you he modeled himself upon *me*.”

I bowed, over my brandy.

“I am a scholar; yet I employed him to read aloud to me, and derived pleasure from his intonation. I talk with refinement; yet he learned to answer me in language as precise as my own. My cast-off garments fitted him not more irreproachably than did my amenities of manner. Divest him of his tray, and you would find his mode of entering a room hardly distinguishable from my own—the same urbanity, the same alertness of carriage, the same superfine deference toward the weaker sex. All—all my idiosyncrasies I saw reflected in him; and can you doubt that I was gratified? He was my *alter* ego—which, by the way, makes it harder for me to pardon his behavior with the cook.”

“Look here,” I broke in; “you want a new butler?”

“Oh, you really grasp that fact, do you?” he retorted.

“Why, then,” said I, “let me cease to be your burglar and let me continue here as your butler.”

He leant back, spreading out the fingers of each hand on the table’s edge.

“Believe me,” I went on, “you might do worse. I have been in my time a demy of Magdalen College, Oxford, and retain some Greek and Latin. I’ll undertake to read the Fathers with an accent that shall not offend you. My taste in wine is none the worse for having been formed in other men’s cellars. Moreover, you shall engage the ugliest cook in Christendom, so long as I’m your butler. I’ve taken a liking to you—that’s flat—and I apply for the post.”

“I give forty pounds a year,” said he. “And I’m cheap at that price.” He filled up his glass, looking up at me while he did so with the air of one digesting a problem. From first to last his face was grave as a judge’s.

“We are too impulsive, I think,” was his answer, after a minute’s silence; “and your speech smacks of the amateur. You say, ‘Let me cease to be your burglar and let me be your butler.’ The aspiration is respectable; but a man might as well say, ‘Let me cease to write sermons, let me paint pictures.’ And truly, sir, you impress me as no expert even in your present trade.”

“On the other hand,” I argued, “consider the moderation of my demands; that alone should convince you of my desire to turn over a new leaf. I ask for a months trial; if at the end of that time I don’t suit, you shall say so, and I’ll march from your door with nothing in my pocket but my month’s wages. Be hanged, sir! but when I recollect on the amount you’ll have to pay to get me to face to-night’s storm again, you seem to be getting off dirt cheap!” cried I, slapping my palm on the table.

“Ah, if you had only known Parkinson!” he exclaimed.

Now the third class of clean spirit had always a deplorable effect on me. It turns me from bright to black, from levity to extreme sulkiness. I have done more wickedness over this third tumbler than in all the other states of comparative inebriety within my experience. So now I glowered at my companion and cursed.

“Look here, I don’t want to hear any more of Parkinson, and I’ve a pretty clear notion of the game you’re playing. You want to make me drunk, and you’re ready to sit prattling there plying me till I drop under the table.”

“Do me the favor to remember that you came, and are staying, on your own motion. As for the brandy, I would remind you that I suggested a milder drink. Try some Madeira.

He handed me the decanter, as he spoke, and I poured out a glass.

“Madeira!” said I, taking a gulp. “Ugh! it’s the commonest Marsala!”

I had no sooner said the words than he rose up, and stretched a hand gravely across to me.

“I hope you will shake it,” he said; “though, as a man who after three glasses of neat spirit can distinguish between Madeira and Marsala, you have every right to refuse me. Two minutes ago you offered to become my butler and I demurred. I now beg you to repeat that offer. Say the word and I employ you gladly: you shall even have the second decanter (which contains genuine Madeira) to take to bed with you.”

We shook hands on our bargain, and catching up a candlestick, he led the way from the room.

Picking up my boots, I followed him along the passage and down the silent staircase. In the hall he paused to stand on tiptoe, and turn up the lamp, which was burning low. As he did so, I found time to fling a glance at my old enemy, the mastiff. He lay as I had first seen him—a stuffed dog, if ever there was one. “Decidedly,” thought I, “my wits are to seek to-night;” and with the same, a sudden suspicion made me turn to my conductor, who had advanced to the left-hand door, and was waiting for me, with a hand on the knob.

“One moment!” I said: “This is all very pretty, but how am I to know ye a’re not sending me to bed while you fetch in all the countryside to lay me by the heels?”

“I’m afraid,” was his answer, “you must be content with my word, as a gentleman, that never, to-night or hereafter, will I breathe a syllable about the circumstances of your visit. However, if you choose, we will return upstairs.”

“No; I’ll trust you,” said I; and he opened the door.

It led into a broad passage paved with slate, upon which three or four rooms opened. He paused by the second and ushered me into a sleeping-chamber, which, though narrow, was comfortable enough—a vast improvement, at any rate, on the mumpers’ lodgings I had been used to for many months past.

“You can undress here,” he said. “The sheets are aired and, if you’ll wait a moment, I’ll fetch a nightshirt—one of my own.”

“Sir, you heap coals of fire on me.”

“Believe me that for ninety-nine of your qualities I do not care a tinker’s curse; but for your palate you are to be taken care of.”

He shuffled away, but came back in a couple of minutes with the nightshirt.

“Good-night,” he called to me, flinging it in at the door; and without giving me time to return the wish, went his way upstairs.

Now it might be supposed I was only too glad to toss off my clothes and climb into the bed I had so unexpectedly acquired a right to. But, as a matter of fact, I did nothing of the kind. Instead, I drew on my boots and sat on the bed’s edge, blinking at my candle till it died down in its socket, and afterward at the purple square of window as it slowly changed to gray with the coming of dawn. I was cold to the heart, and my teeth chattered with an ague. Certainly I never suspected my host’s word; but was even occupied in framing good resolutions and shaping out a reputable future, when I heard the front door gently pulled to, and a man’s footsteps moving quietly to the gate.

The treachery knocked me in a heap for the moment. Then, leaping up and flinging my door wide, I stumbled through the uncertain light of the passage into the front hall.

There was a fan-shaped light over the door, and the place was very still and gray. A quick thought, or, rather, a sudden prophetic guess at the truth, made me turn to the figure of the mastiff curled under the hall table.

I laid my hand on the scruff of his neck. He was quite limp, and my fingers sank into the flesh on either side of the vertebræ. Digging them deeper, I dragged him out into the middle of the hall and pulled the front door open to see the better.

His throat was gashed from ear to ear.

How many seconds passed after I dropped the senseless lump on the floor, and before I made another movement, it would puzzle me to say. Twice I stirred a foot as if to run out at the door. Then, changing my mind, I stepped over the mastiff, and ran up the staircase.

The passage at the top was now dark; but groping down it, I found the study door open, as before, and passed in. A sick light stole through the blinds—enough for me to distinguish the glasses and decanters on the table, and find my way to the curtain that hung before the inner room.

I pushed the curtain aside, paused for a moment, and listened to the violent beat of my heart, then felt for the door-handle and turned it.

All I could see at first was that the chamber was small; next, that the light patch in a line with the window was the white coverlet of a bed; and next that somebody, or something, lay on the bed.

I listened again. There was no sound in the room; no heart beating but my own. I reached out a hand to pull up the blind, and drew it back again. I dared not.

The daylight grew minute by minute on the dull oblong of the blind, and minute by minute that horrible thing on the bed took something of distinctness.

The strain beat me at last. I fetched a loud yell to give myself courage, and reaching for the cord, pulled up the blind as fast as it would go.

The face on the pillow was that of an old man—a face waxen and peaceful, with quiet lines about the mouth and eyes, and long lines of gray hair falling back from the temples. The body was turned a little on one side, and one hand lay outside the bedclothes, in a very natural manner. But there were two big dark stains on the pillow and coverlet.

Then I knew I was face to face with the real householder, and it flashed on me that I had been indiscreet in taking service as his butler, and that I knew the face his ex-butler wore.

And, being by this time awake to the responsibilities of the post, I quitted it three steps at a time, not once looking behind me. Outside the house the storm had died down, and white daylight was gleaming over the sodden moors. But my bones were cold, and I ran faster and faster.