

The Affair of Bleakirk-on-Sands

By Quiller-Couch

[*The events, which took place on. November 23, 186-, are narrated by Reuben Cartwright Esq., of Bleakirk Hall, Bleakirk-on-Sands, in the North Riding of Yorkshire.*]

A rough, unfrequented bridle-road rising and dipping towards the coast, with here and there a glimpse of sea beyond the sad-coloured moors: straight overhead, a red and wintry sun just struggling to assert itself: to right and left, a stretch of barren down still coated white with hoar-frost.

I had flung the reins upon my horse's neck, and was ambling homewards. Between me and Bleakirk lay seven good miles, and we had come far enough already on the chance of the sun's breaking through; but as the morning wore on, so our prospect of hunting that day faded further from us. It was now high noon, and I had left the hunt half an hour ago, turned my face towards the coast, and lit a cigar to beguile the way. When a man is twenty-seven he begins to miss the fun of shivering beside a frozen cover.

The road took a sudden plunge among the spurs of two converging hills. As I began to descend, the first gleam of sunshine burst from the dull heaven and played over the hoar-frost. I looked up, and saw, on the slope of the hill to the right., a horseman also descending.

At first glance I took him for a brother sportsman who, too, had abandoned hope of a fox. But the second assured me of my mistake. The stranger wore a black suit of antique, clerical cut, a shovel hat, and gaiters; his nag was the sorriest of ponies, with a shaggy coat of flaring yellow, and so low in the legs that the broad flaps of its rider's coat all but trailed on the ground. A queerer turnout I shall never see again, though I live to be a hundred.

He appeared not to notice me, but pricked leisurably down the slope, and I soon saw that, as our paths ran and at the pace we were going, we should meet at the foot of the descent: which we presently did.

"Ah, indeed!" said the stranger, reining in his pony as though now for the first time aware of me: "I wish you a very good day, sir. We are well met."

He pulled off his hat with a fantastic politeness. For me, my astonishment grew as I regarded him more closely. A mass of lanky, white hair drooped on either side of a face pale, pinched, and extraordinarily wrinkled; the clothes that wrapped his diminutive body were threadbare, greasy, and patched in all directions. Fifty years' wear could not have worsened them; and, indeed, from the whole aspect of the man, you might guess him a century old, were it not for the nimbleness of his gestures and his eyes, which were grey, alert, and keen as needles.

I acknowledged his salutation as he ranged up beside me.

"Will my company, sir, offend you? By your coat I suspect your trade: *venatorem sapit*—hey?"

His voice exactly fitted his eyes. Both were sharp and charged with expression; yet both carried also a hint that their owner had lived long in privacy. Somehow they lacked touch.

"I am riding homewards," I answered.

"Hey? Where is that?"

The familiarity lay rather in the words than the manner; and I did not resent it.

"At Bleakirk."

His eyes had wandered for a moment to the road ahead; but now he turned abruptly, and looked at me, as I thought, with some suspicion. He seemed about to speak, but restrained himself, fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and producing a massive snuff-box, offered me a pinch. On my declining, he helped himself copiously; and then, letting the reins hang loose upon his arm, fell to tapping the box.

“To me this form of the herb *nicotiana* commends itself by its cheapness: the sense is tickled, the purse consenting—like the complaisant husband in Juvenal: you take me? I am well acquainted with Bleakirk-*super-saabulum*. By the way, how is Squire Cartwright of the Hall?”

“If,” said I, “you mean my father, Angus Cartwright, he is dead these twelve years.”

“Hey?” cried the old gentleman, and added after a moment, “Ah, to be sure, time flies—*quo dives Tullus et*—Angus, eh? And yet a hearty man, to all seeming. So you are his son.” He took another pinch. “It is very sustaining,” he said.

“The snuff?”

“You have construed me, sir. Since I set out, just thirteen hours since, it has been my sole viaticum.” As he spoke he put his hand nervously to his forehead, and withdrew it.

“Then,” thought I, “you must have started in the middle of the night,” for it was now little past noon. But looking at his face, I saw clearly that it was drawn and pinched with fasting. Whereupon I remembered my flask and sandwich-box, and pulling them out, assured him, with some apology for the offer, that they were at his service. His joy was childish. Again he whipped off his hat, and clapping it to his heart, swore my conduct did honour to my dead father; “and with Angus Cartwright,” said he, “kindness was intuitive. Being a habit, it outran reflection; and his whisky, sir, was undeniable. Come, I have a fancy. Let us dismount, and, in heroic fashion, spread our feast upon the turf; or, if the hoarfrost deter you, see, here are boulders, and a running brook to dilute our cups; and, by my life, a foot-bridge, to the rail of which we may tether our steeds.”

Indeed, we had come to a hollow in the road, across which a tiny beck, now swollen with the rains, was chattering bravely. Falling in with my companion’s humour, I dismounted, and, after his example, hitched my mare’s rein over the rail. There was a raciness about the adventure that took my fancy. We chose two boulders from a heap of lesser stones close beside the beck, and divided the sandwiches, for though I protested I was not hungry, the old gentleman insisted on our sharing alike. And now, as the liquor warmed his heart and the sunshine smote upon his back, his eyes sparkled, and he launched on a flood of the gayest talk—yet always of a world that I felt was before my time. Indeed, as he rattled on, the feeling that this must be some Rip Van Winkle restored from a thirty years’ sleep grew stronger and stronger upon me. He spoke of Bleakirk, and displayed a knowledge of it sufficiently thorough—intimate even—yet of the old friends for whom he inquired many names were unknown to me, many familiar only through their epitaphs in the windy cemetery above the cliff. Of the rest, the pretty girls lie named were now grandmothers, the young men long since bent and rheumatic; the youngest well over fifty. This, however, seemed to depress him little. His eyes would sadden for a moment, then laugh again. “Well, well,” he said, “wrinkles, bald heads, and the deafness of the tomb—we have our day notwithstanding. Pluck the bloom of it—hey? a commonplace of the poets.”

“But, sir,” I put in as politely as I might, “you have not yet told me with whom I have the pleasure of lunching.”

“Gently, young sir.” He waved his hand towards the encircling moors. “We have feasted *more Homeric*, and in Homer, you remember the host allowed his guest fourteen days before asking that question. Permit me to delay the answer only till I have poured libation on the turf here. Ah!

I perceive the whisky is exhausted: but water shall suffice. May I trouble you—my joints are stiff—to fill your drinking-cup from the brook at your feet?”

I took the cup from his hands and stooped over the water. As I did so, he leapt on me like a cat from behind. I felt a hideous blow on the nape of the neck: a jagged flame leapt up: the sunshine turned to blood—then to darkness. With hands spread out, I stumbled blindly forward and fell at full length into the beck.

When my senses returned, I became aware, first that I was lying, bound hand and foot and securely gagged, upon the turf; secondly, that the horses were still tethered, and standing quietly at the foot-bridge; and, thirdly, that my companion had resumed his position on the boulder, and there sat watching my recovery.

Seeing my eyes open, he raised his hat and addressed me in tones of grave punctilio.

“Believe me, sir, I am earnest in my regret for this state of things. Nothing but the severest necessity could have persuaded me to knock the son of my late esteemed friend over the skull and gag his utterance with a stone—to pass over the fact that it fairly lays my sense of your hospitality under suspicion. Upon my word, sir, it places me in a cursedly equivocal position!”

He took a pinch of snuff absorbed it slowly, and pursued.

“It was necessary, however. You will partly grasp the situation when I tell you that my name is Teague—the Reverend William Teague, Doctor of Divinity, and formerly incumbent of Bleakirk-on-Sands.”

His words explained much, though not everything. The circumstances which led to the Reverend William’s departure from Bleakirk had happened some two years before my birth: but they were startling enough to supply talk in that dull fishing village for many a long day. In my nursery I had heard the tale that my companion’s name recalled: and if till now I had felt humiliation, henceforth I felt absolute fear, for I knew that I had to deal with a madman.

“I perceive by your eyes, sir,” he went on, “that with a part of my story you are already familiar: the rest I am about to tell you. It will be within your knowledge that late on a Sunday night, just twenty-nine years ago, my wife left the Vicarage-house, Bleakirk, and never returned; that subsequent inquiry yielded no trace of her flight, beyond the fact that she went provided with a small hand-bag containing a change of clothing; that, as we had lived together for twenty years in the entirest harmony, no reason could then, or afterwards, be given for her astonishing conduct. Moreover, you will be aware that its effect upon me was tragical; that my lively emotions underneath the shock deepened into a settled gloom; that my faculties (notoriously eminent) in a short time became clouded, nay, eclipsed—necessitating my removal (I will not refine) to a madhouse. Hey, is it not so?”

I nodded assent as well as I could. He paused, with a pinch between finger and thumb, to nod back to me. Though his eyes were now blazing with madness, his demeanour was formally, even affectedly, polite.

“My wife never came back: naturally, sir—for she was dead.”

He shifted a little on the boulders, slipped the snuff-box back into his waistcoat pocket, then crossing his legs and clasping his hands over one knee, bent forward and regarded me fixedly.

“I murdered her,” he said slowly, and nodded.

A pause followed that seemed to last an hour. The stone which he had strapped in my mouth with his bandanna was giving me acute pain; it obstructed, too, what little breathing my emotion left me; and I dared not take my eyes off his. The strain on my nerves grew so tense that I felt myself fainting when his voice recalled me.

"I wonder now," he asked, as if it were a riddle—"I wonder if you can guess why the body was never found?"

Again there was an intolerable silence before he went on.

"Lydia was a dear creature: in many respects she made me an admirable wife. Her affection for me was canine—positively. But she was fat, sir; her face a jelly, her shoulders mountainous. Moreover, her voice!—it was my cruciation—monotonously, regularly, desperately voluble. If she talked of archangels, they became insignificant—and her themes, in ordinary, were of the pettiest. Her waist, sir, and my arm had once been commensurate: now not three of Homer's heroes could embrace her. Her voice could once touch my heart-strings into music; it brayed them now, between the millstones of the commonplace. Figure to yourself a man of my sensibility condemned to live on these terms!"

He paused, tightened his grasp on his knee, and pursued.

"You remember, sir, the story of the baker in Langius? He narrates that a certain woman conceived a violent desire to bite the naked shoulders of a baker who used to pass underneath her window with his wares. So imperative did this longing become, that at length the woman appealed to her husband, who (being a good-natured man, and unwilling to disoblige her) hired the baker, for a certain price, to come and be bitten. The man allowed her two bites, but denied a third, being unable to contain himself for pain. The author goes on to relate that, for want of this third bite, she bore one dead child, and two living. My own case," continued the Reverend William, "was somewhat similar. Lydia's unrelieved babble reacted upon her bulk, and awoke in me an absorbing, fascinating desire to strike her. I longed to see her quiver. I fought against the feeling, stifled it, trod it down: it awoke again. It filled my thoughts, my dreams; it gnawed me like a vulture. A hundred times while she sat complacently turning her inane periods, I had to hug my fist to my breast, lest it should leap out and strike her senseless. Do I weary you? Let me proceed:—

"That Sunday evening we sat, one on each side of the hearth, in the Vicarage drawing room. She was talking—talking; and I sat tapping my foot and whispering to myself, 'You are too fat, Lydia, you are too fat.' Her talk ran on the two sermons I had preached that day, the dresses of the congregation, the expense of living, the parish ailments—inexhaustible, trivial, relentless. Suddenly she looked up and our eyes met. Her voice trailed off and dropped like a bird wounded in full flight. She stood up and took a step towards me. 'Is anything the matter, William?' she asked solicitously. 'You are too fat, my dear,' I answered, laughing, and struck her full in the face with my fist.

"She did not quiver much—not half enough—but dropped like a half-full sack on to the carpet. I caught up a candle and examined her. Her neck was dislocated. She was quite dead."

The madman skipped up from his boulder, and looked at me with indescribable cunning.

"I am so glad, sir," he said, "that you did not bleed when I struck you; it was a great mercy. The sight of blood affects me—ah!" he broke off with a subtle quiver and drew a long breath. "Do you know the sands by Woeful Ness—the Twin Brothers?" he asked.

I knew that dreary headland well. For half a mile beyond the grey Church and Vicarage of Bleakirk it extends, forming the northern arm of the small fishing-bay, and protecting it from the full set of the tides. Towards its end it breaks away sharply, and terminates in a dorsal ridge of slate-coloured rock that runs out for some two hundred feet between the sands we call the Twin Brothers. Of these, that to the south, and inside the bay, is motionless, and bears the name of the 'Dead-Boy;' but the 'Quick-Boy,' to the north, shifts continually. it is a quicksand, in short; and will swallow a man in three minutes.

“My mind,” resumed my companion, “was soon made up. There is no murder, thought I, where there is no corpse. So I propped Lydia in the armchair, where she seemed as if napping, and went quietly upstairs. I packed a small hand-bag carefully with such clothes as she would need for a journey, descended with it, opened the front door, went out to be sure the servants had blown out their lights, returned, and hoisting my wife on my shoulder, with the bag in my left hand, softly closed the door and stepped out into the night. In the shed beside the garden-gate the gardener had left his wheelbarrow. I fetched it out, set Lydia on the top of it, and wheeled her off towards Woeful Ness. There was just the rim of a waning moon to light me, but I knew every inch of the way.

“For the greater part of it I had turf underfoot; but where this ended and the rock began, I had to leave the barrow behind. It was ticklish work, climbing down; for footing had to be found, and Lydia was a monstrous weight. Pah! how fat she was and clumsy—lolling this way and that! Besides, the bag hampered me. But I reached the foot at last, and after a short rest clambered out along the ridge as fast as I could. I was sick and tired of the business.

“Well, the rest was easy. Arrived at the farthest spit of rock, I tossed the bag from me far into the northern sand. Then I turned to Lydia, whom I had set down for the moment. In the moonlight her lips were parted as though she were still chattering; so I kissed her once, because I had loved her, and dropped her body over into the Quick-Boy Sand. In three minutes or so I had seen the last of her.

“I trundled home the barrow, nixed myself a glass of whisky, sat beside it for half an hour, and then aroused the servants. I was cunning, sir; and no one could trace my footprints on the turf and rock of Woeful Ness. The missing hand-bag, and the disarray I had been careful to make in the bed-room, provided them at once with a clue—but it did not lead them to the Quick-Boy. For two days they searched; at the end of that time it grew clear to them that grief was turning my brain. Your father, sir, was instant with his sympathy—at least ten times a day I had much ado to keep from laughing in his face. Finally two doctors visited me, and I was taken to a madhouse.

“I have remained within its walls twenty-nine years; but no—I have never been thoroughly at home there. Two days ago I discovered that the place was boring me. So I determined to escape; and this to a man of my resources presented few difficulties. I borrowed this pony from a stable not many yards from the madhouse wall; he belongs, I think, to a chimneysweep, and I trust that, after serving my purpose, he may find a way back to his master.”

I suppose at this point he must have detected the question in my eyes, for he cried sharply,

“You wish to know my purpose? It is simple.” He passed a thin hand over his forehead. “I have been shut up, as I say, for twenty-nine years, and I now discover that the madhouse bores me. If they re-take me—and the hue and cry must be out long before this—I shall be dragged back. What, then, is my proposal? I ride to Bleakirk and out along the summit of Woeful Ness. There I dismount, turn my pony loose, and, descending along the ridge, step into the sand that swallowed Lydia. Simple, is it not? *Excessi, evasi, evanui*. I shall be there before sunset—which reminds me,” he added, pulling out his watch, “that my time is nearly up. I regret to leave you in this plight, but you see how I am placed. I felt, when I saw you, a sudden desire to unbosom myself of a secret which, until the past half-hour, I have shared with no man. I see by your eyes again that if set at liberty you would interfere with my purpose. It is unfortunate that scarcely a soul ever rides this way—I know the road of old. But to-morrow is Sunday: I will scribble a line and fix it on the church-door at Bleakirk, so that the parish may at least know your predicament before twenty-four hours are out. I must now be going. The bandanna about your mouth I entreat

you to accept as a memento. With renewed apologies, sir, I wish you good-day; and count it extremely fortunate that you did not bleed.”

He nodded in the friendliest manner, turned on his heel, and walked quietly towards the bridge. As he untethered his pony, mounted, and ambled quietly off in the direction of the coast, I lay stupidly watching him. His black coat for some time lay, a diminishing blot, on the brown of the moors, stood for a brief moment on the sky-line, and vanished.

I must have lain above an hour in this absurd and painful position, wrestling with my bonds, and speculating on my chances of passing the night by the beck-side. My ankles were tied with my own handkerchief, my wrists with the thong of my own whip, and this especially cut me. It was knotted immovably; but by rolling over and rubbing my face into the turf, I contrived at length to slip the gag down below my chin. This done, I sat up and shouted lustily.

For a long time there was no reply but the whinnying of my mare, who seemed to guess something was wrong, and pulled at her tether until I thought she would break away. I think I called a score of times before I heard an answering “Whoo-oo!” far back on the road, and a scarlet coat, then another, and finally a dozen or more appeared on the crest of the hill. It was the hunt returning.

They saw me at once, and galloped up, speechless from sheer amazement. I believe my hands were loosened before a word was spoken. The situation was painfully ridiculous; but my story was partly out before they had time to laugh, and the rest of it was gasped to the accompaniment of pounding hoofs and cracking whips.

Never did the Netherkirk Hunt ride after fox as it rode after the Rev. William Teague that afternoon. We streamed over the moor, a thin red wave, like a rank of charging cavalry, the whip even forgetting his tired hounds that straggled aimlessly in our wake. On the hill above Bleakirk we saw that the tide was out, and our company divided without drawing rein, some four horsemen descending to the beach, to ride along the sands out under Woeful Ness, and across the Dead-Boy, hoping to gain the ridge before the madman and cut him off. The rest, whom I led by a few yards, breasted the height above and thundered past the grey churchyard wall. Inside it I caught a flying glimpse of the yellow pony quietly cropping among the tombs. We had our prey, then, enclosed in that peninsula as in a trap; but there was one outlet.

I remember looking down towards the village as we tore along, and seeing the fisher-folk run out at their doors and stand staring at the two bodies of horsemen thus rushing to the sea. The riders on the beach had a slight lead of us at first; but this they quickly lost as their horses began to be distressed in the heavy sand. I looked back for an instant. The others were close at my heels; and, behind again, the bewildered hounds followed, yelping mournfully. But neither man nor hound could see him whom they hunted, for the cliffs edge hid the quicksand in front.

Presently the turf ceased. Dismounting, I ran to the edge and plunged down the rocky face. I had descended about twenty feet, when I came to the spot where, by craning forward, I could catch sight of the spit of rock, and the Quick-Boy Sand to the right of it.

The sun—a blazing ball of red—was just now setting behind us, and its level rays fell fall upon the man we were chasing.

He stood on the very edge of the rocks, a black spot against the luminous yellow of sea and sand. He seemed to be meditating. His back was towards us, and he perceived neither his pursuers above nor the heads that at this moment appeared over the ridge behind him, and not fifteen yards away. The party on the beach had dismounted and were clambering up stealthily. Five seconds more and they could spring upon him.

But they under-estimated a madman's instinct. As if for no reason, he gave a quick start, turned, and at the same instant was aware of both attacking parties. A last gleam of sunlight fell on the snuff-box in his left hand; his right thumb and fore-finger hung arrested, grasping the pinch. For fully half a minute nothing happened; hunters and hunted eyed each other and waited. Then carrying the snuff to his nose, and doffing his hat, with a satirical sweep of the hand and a low bow, he turned again and tripped off the ledge into the jaws of the Quick-Boy.

There was no help now. At his third step the sand had him by the ankles. For a moment he fought it, then, throwing up his arms, sank forward, slowly and as if bowing yet, upon his face. Second by second we stood and watched him disappear. Within five minutes the ripples of the Quick-Boy Sand met once more above him.

In the course of the next afternoon the Vicar of Bleakirk called at the Hall with a paper which he had found pinned to the church door. It was evidently a scrap torn from an old letter, and bore, scribbled in pencil by a clerkly hand, these words: "The young Squire Cartwright in straits by the foot-bridge, six miles toward Netherkirk. *Orate pro anima Guliemi Teague.*"