

The Doctor's Foundling

By Quiller-Couch

There are said to be many vipers on the Downs above the sea; but it was so pleasant to find a breeze up there allaying the fervid afternoon, that I risked the consequences and stretched myself at full length, tilting my straw hat well over my nose.

Presently, above the *tic-a-tic-tick* of the grasshoppers, and the wail, of a passing gull, a human sound seemed to start abruptly out of the solitude—the voice of a man singing. I rose on my elbow, and pushed the straw hat up a bit. Under its brim through the quivering atmosphere, I saw the fellow, two hundred yards away, a dark obtrusive blot on the bronze landscape. He was coming along the track that would lead him down-hill to the port; and his voice fell louder on the still air—

*“Ho! the prickly briar,
It prickles my throat so sore—
If I get out o’ the prickly briar,
I’ll never get in any more.*

Ho! just loosen the rope” —

At this point I must have come within his view, for he halted a moment, and then turned abruptly out of the track towards me,—a scare-crow of a figure, powdered white with dust. In spite of the weather, he wore his tattered coat buttoned at the throat, with the collar turned up. Probably he possessed no shirt; certainly no socks, for his toes protruded from the broken boots. He was quite young.

Without salutation he dropped on the turf two paces off and remarked—

“It’s bleedin’ ’ot.”

There was just a pause while he cast his eyes back on the country he had travelled; then, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the port, he inquired—

“ ’Ow’s the old lot?”

Said I, “Look here; you’re Dick Jago. How far have you walked to-day?”

He had turned on me as if ready with a sharp question, but changed his mind and answered doggedly—

“All the way from Drakeport.”

“Very well; then it’s right-about-face with you and back to Drakeport before I let you go. Do you see this stick? If you attempt to walk a step more towards the port, I’ll crack your head with it.”

He gulped down something in his throat. “Is the old man ill?” he asked.

“He’s dead,” said I, simply.

The fellow turned his eyes to the horizon, and began whistling the air of “The Prickly Briar” softly to himself. And while he whistled, my memory ran back to the day when he first came to trouble us, and play the fiend’s mischief with a couple of dear honest hearts.

The day I travelled back to was one in the prime of May, when the lilacs were out by Dr. Jago's green gate, and the General from Drakeport Barracks, with the red and white feathers in his cocked-hat, had just cantered up the street, followed by a dozen shouting urchins, on his way to the Downs. For it was the end of the militia-training, when the review was always held; and all the morning the bugles had been sounding at the head of every street and lane where the men were billeted.

When the gold-laced General disappeared, he left the streets all but empty; for the townspeople by this time had flocked to the Downs. Only by Dr. Jago's gate there stood a small group in the sunshine. Kitty, the doctor's mare that had pulled his gig for ten years, was standing saddled in the roadway, with a stable-boy at her head; just outside the gate, the little doctor himself in regimentals and black cocked-hat with black feathers, regarding her; behind, the pleasant old face of his wife, regarding him; and, behind again, the two maid-servants regarding the group generally from behind their mistress's shoulder.

"Maria, I shall never do it," said the doctor, measuring with his eye the distance between the ground and the stirrup.

"Indeed, John, I don't think you will."

"There was a time when I'd have vaulted it. I'm abominably late as it is, Maria."

"Shall I give master a leg up?" suggested one of the maids.

"No, Susan, you will do nothing of the kind." Mrs. Jago paused, her brow wrinkled beneath her white lace cap. Then an inspiration came—"The chair—a kitchen chair, Susan!"

The maid flew; the chair was brought; and that is how the good old doctor mounted for the review. Three minutes later he was trotting soberly up the street, pausing twice to kiss his hand to his wife, who watched him proudly from the green gate, and took off her spectacles and wiped them, the better to see him out of sight.

By the time Dr. Jago reached the Downs, the review was in full swing. The colonel shouted, the captains shouted, the regiment formed, re-formed, marched, charged at the double, and fired volleys of blank cartridges. The General and orderlies galloped from spot to spot without apparent object; and all was very martial. At last the doctor grew tired of trotting up and down without being wanted. He thought with longing of some pools, half a mile away, in a hollow of the Downs, that contained certain freshwater shells about which he held a theory. The afternoon was hot. He glanced round—no one seemed to want him: so he turned Kitty into a grassy defile that led to the pools, and walked her leisurely away.

Half an hour later he stood, ankle-deep in water, groping for his shells and oblivious of the review, the firing that echoed far away, the flight of time—everything. Kitty, with one fore-leg through the bridle, was cropping on the brink. Minutes passed, and the doctor raised his head, for the blood was running into it. At that moment his eye was caught by a scarlet object under a gorse-bush on the opposite bank. He gave a second look, then waded across towards it.

It was a baby: a baby not a week old, wrapped only in a red handkerchief.

The doctor bent over it. The infant opened its eyes and began to wail. At this instant an orderly appeared on the ridge above, scanning the country. He caught sight of the doctor and descended to the opposite shore of the pool, where he saluted and yelled his message. It appeared that some awkward militiaman had blown his thumb off in the blank cartridge practice and surgical help was wanted at once.

Doctor Jago dropped the corner of the handkerchief, returned across the pool, was helped on to Kitty's back and cantered away, the orderly after him.

In an hour's time, having put on a tourniquet and bandaged the hand, he was back again by the pool. The baby was still there. He lifted it and found a scrap of paper underneath. . . .

The doctor returned by devious ways to his home, a full hour before he was expected. He rode in at the back gate, where to his secret satisfaction he found no stable-boy. So he stabled Kitty himself, and crept into his own house like a thief. Nor was it like his habits to pay, as he did, a visit to the little cupboard (where the brandy-bottle was kept) underneath the stairs, before entering the drawing-room, with his face full of guilt and diplomacy.

"Graious, John!" cried out Mrs. Jago, dropping her knitting. "Is the review over already?"

"No, I don't think it is—at least, I don't know," stammered the doctor.

"John, you have had another attack of that vertigo."

"Upon my honour I have not, Maria." The doctor was vehement; for the vertigo necessitated brandy, and a visit to the little cupboard below the stairs meant hideous detection.

So he sat up and tried to describe the review to his wife, and made such an abject mess of it, that after twenty minutes she made up her mind that he must have a headache, and, leaving the room quietly, went to the little cupboard below the stairs. She found the door ajar. . . .

When, after a long absence, she reappeared in the drawing-room, she had forgotten to bring the brandy, and wore a look as guilty as her husband's. So they sat together and talked in the twilight on trivial matters; and each had a heart insufferably burdened, and each was waiting desperately for an opportunity to lighten it.

"John," said Mrs. Jago at last, "we are getting poor company for each other."

"Maria!"

The doctor leapt to his feet: and these old souls, who knew each other so passing well, looked into each other's eyes, half in terror.

At that instant a feeble wail smote on their ears. It came from the cupboard underneath the stairs.

"Maria! I put it there myself, two hours ago. I picked it up on the downs. I've been—"

"You! I thought it was some beggarwoman's doing. John, John—why didn't you say so before!"

And she rushed out of the room.

This seedy scamp who reclined beside me was the child that she brought back with her from the little cupboard. They had adopted him, fed him, educated him, wrapped him round with love; and he had lived to break their hearts. Possibly there was some gipsy blood in him that defied their nurture. But the speculation is not worth going into. I only know that I felt the better that afternoon as I watched his figure diminishing on the road back to Drakeport. He had a crown of mine in his pocket, and was still singing—

*"Ho! just loosen the rope,
If it's only just for a while;
I fancy I see my father coming
Across from yonder stile."*

I had lied in telling him that the old doctor was dead. As a matter of fact he lay dying that afternoon. Half-way down the hill I saw the small figure of Jacobs, the sexton, turn in at the church-gate. He was going to toll the passing-bell.