

DENIS VOIGNIER

SCARBOROUGH FAIR

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FIRST PART

WILLIAM

1

A gusty wind, gold coloured trees bending in the squall, while sheets of rain beat down on the already soaked earth. Some flashes of lightning streak across the sky and the crash of thunder rolls from valley to valley.

I move forward, my back bent, struggling against the elements. It is a very long time now that my thick woollen overcoat has no longer been protecting me from the water nor the cold. I have to find shelter quickly. I spot a group of rocks in the undergrowth. So I leave the soaked path and climb up to these blocks of granite which will perhaps serve as a temporary refuge for me. In fact, one of them looks like an overhang which I can slip under. Fortunately, the ground, at this spot, is almost dry and that makes me feel a little better. If only I could light a fire...

It is mid-afternoon and yet, the sky is so dark that you would think night has fallen. I am going to bear my misfortune patiently; this rain will finally stop.

From under my overcoat, I pull out of my knapsack some pieces of dried meat bought at the Kirby market. I must say that I have eaten nothing since that last stop, in other words since morning.

While I munch the lightly salted pork, it seems to me that the rain is abating. The wind is calming down, the tops of the beech trees are less agitated. Perhaps I may be able to reach a more decent shelter before dusk. This is crucial, because I am not too keen on spending the night on these muddy roads. Finally, the clouds break up, a few glimmers of sun shed some light on the hill opposite; I feel that it is time to take advantage of it before the elements, perhaps, break loose again. I reach the path and resume heading towards the east. In my estimation, three to four hours must remain to be travelled. So I can arrive in time...

The beech woods have given way to green valleys. Grasslands, bordered by hedgerows, succeed, and I notice, on my right, some peaceful sheep lying under some flowerless sweetbriars. I quicken my pace; I can't wait to get there.

Suddenly, from a slope of brambles, three individuals with threatening appearances emerge. Dressed in woollen overcoats, wearing broad-brimmed hats, I can hardly make out their faces. They are holding rough wooden forks that could nevertheless turn out to be dangerous.

“Hey, villain! Stop!”

I am very astonished by this welcome, but out of prudence I am inclined to obey. These three men seem determined. However, they do not look like bandits. They are probably peasants from this region.

“Well, gentlemen, that's some welcome! Is this how good people are treated in this region?”

The men look at one another questioningly. Perhaps my vocabulary surprises them.

“Let’s see!”

“Money? You want money, that’s it?”

“No, let’s see. Open this coat and show us your chest.”

I then understand their fears. I will quickly reassure them. I comply without delay. Observation of my chest should satisfy them.

“Raise your arms!”

One man comes close and also examines my neck.

“It’s good,” he says.

And his companions lower their forks while I close back my soaked overcoat.

“Are you satisfied, gentlemen?”

“Yes, sir; you understand, with...”

The radical change in my status makes me smile. Perhaps the sight of the dagger that I carry in my belt and my cambric shirt have impressed them.

“I understand. Do you have any cases here?”

“Not yet. That is why we are very cautious. People who are affected must not enter the region.”

Their faces, which I can make out a little better, now, become less hostile.

“So where are you going then, sir?”

“I’m making my way to Scarborough. I would like to be there before night-time.”

One of the peasants looks at the sky, towards the west.

“That’s not wise; the storm is going to resume shortly.”

I have confidence in these native people. They have a knack for and perfect knowledge of the weather conditions of their

region. The direction of the wind, the appearance of the clouds, the flight of a bird and that's it, they have the information.

I open my eyes wide. Do they have a solution to propose to me? There is a silence; the men retreat and confer a few steps away from me. One of them, the one who had examined me more closely, approaches.

“If you want, sir, come and spend the night in our humble abode. You will get supper and you will be able to dry your clothes.”

“That is very kind, gentlemen. I accept gladly. I will pay what is necessary, of course.”

I accepted immediately because the idea of a warm place and a meal is very tempting. I quickly abandoned the idea that it may be a trap. Isn't it said that under the guise of coming to the aid of persons in difficulty, bands of pillagers hold up travellers in this way? But these peasants seemed to me to be honest and sincere.

We climb the bank to get up to a slight grassy slope. A path looms a little higher up and my three companions take it, signalling me to follow them. Once again, a doubt runs through my mind. Am I doing the right thing following them like this? Aren't they going to kill me the moment they consider it convenient to relieve me of the little money I have? The sight of a cottage cheers me up. A modest shack, of grey stone, with a thick thatched roof. A chimney emits dense smoke which smells like pine. While I am still hesitant, the door of the house opens and a woman, rather plump, appears on the threshold. Her reddish face and smile reassure me.

“There you are, with company, it seems!” she began,

addressing the three men.

“A traveller drenched to the skin. Have we done the right thing?”

“Of course! Let him come in and dry himself, poor devil.”

I go into a large room with a dirt floor. Some logs are crackling in the hearth and a gentle warmth pervades the room. Simple rustic furniture occupies the centre of the room. An oak table and two benches, two chests and some planks serve as shelves. A wide smooth stone, located at the side of the fireplace accommodates various pots, of earthenware and metal, a pan and some wooden cups. As I hesitate a moment, the woman calls out to me :

“Come in, come in then. Don’t be afraid. Here, sit there on this bench. You have to get dry before you catch your death.”

She is right, this good woman. I am not fragile by nature, but this is not the time to catch a bad cold.

“And you others,” she says, turning towards the men, “don’t just stand around there. Look for something to drink and put some wood on this fire.”

The men comply. One of them goes towards the back of the room, parts a curtain and disappears. I just have time to see a goat and the smell coming from the place leaves me thinking that pigs are not very far off.

“Come on, young man, take off all this for me so we can get your clothes dry.”

That is how my overcoat, my cambric shirt and my hose get hung above the hearth. The clothes are steaming, being so water-logged. I am handed a sort of thick cloth robe to cover myself.

“I don’t know how to thank you... after all, yes, I know. I will repay you for all this.”

“Well, young man, don’t worry about that.”

“But, Ellyn,” one of the men then intervened, “a few coins...”

His two companions nod in agreement. Ellyn does not reply, but I am very certain that she would not be averse to compensation.

She places in front of me a wooden bowl filled with steaming soup. Undoubtedly peas and some pieces of bacon – the pigs whose presence I suspect. The brew warms up my soul as much as my body. These people are really nice. For their part, they serve themselves bowls of soup and eat with me. One of the men, with a long knife, cuts some big slices of grey bread which he shares out to everyone.

“Did these louts at least introduce themselves?” Ellyn asks me.

“Yes, with some forks.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. And to think that I have to feed these good-for-nothings.”

The men laugh heartily; they are no doubt accustomed to this kind of remark. So I learn that their names are respectively Blaize, Gobind and Vincent, that the first two are Ellyn’s brothers, and that the third is a distant cousin whom they have taken in.

So I introduce myself in turn.

“William Robertson. I live in York. I am headed to Scarborough; I have to meet a cousin there to do some business.

“Business?” asks Vincent, curious.

“Yes, I run a small printing firm and this cousin might need my services. And then, the big fair and market, don’t they begin in a few days?”

Ellyn then intervenes.

“You feel better, sir?”

“This soup is excellent and has done me a lot of good. I am very happy that I met you on my way.”

“We keep watch over that path that you took. The news from the south is not very good lately and we don’t want the epidemic to reach our region.”

“I understand. However, the disease is losing ground; the known cases, and the deaths, are less numerous these last two weeks.”

“Are you very sure about that?”

“This is rather reliable information.”

“So you are coming from York. On foot?”

“Yes, on foot. I actually had a horse, but it died, struck down by the disease. Others as well and the survivors have been requisitioned to draw the carts transporting the corpses.”

“Well, young man,” Ellyn intervened, “that is a really sad story. It’s true, around here, we have been spared. For the time being.”

I see a shadow of fear pass across her eyes. The reports that are circulating are revealing and disturbing. I understand her anguish.

“Set your mind at rest, Ellyn, this will pass. It can’t be otherwise.”

I try to reassure her, but am not myself totally convinced of it.

And what if the areas spared up to then happened to be struck by this terrible plague? But perhaps the towns, the health conditions of which turn out to be rather deplorable, are more favourable than the countryside for the development of the disease? Here, the air is fresh and invigorating, the inhabitants do not live in unpleasant proximity, far from it; they probably have a very healthy diet and seem more robust.

“Heaven grant it, heaven grant it,” Elyn then mutters.

Night has fallen. Through the only window looking towards the west I see a less stormy sky. I go closer and confirm that the sky is opening up, stars are appearing in places as if by magic.

“Don’t be afraid, sir, the weather will be good tomorrow morning. You will be able to get to Scarborough safely.”

I have confidence in Blaize; he seems to know what he is talking about.

The men leave the large room. I suppose they are going to check the compound before going to sleep. I gather that this family, apart from the goat and three quite fat pigs, also owns a few fowls and geese. Completing this list is an ox, a very useful animal for ploughing and pulling a cart. With an adjoining vegetable garden, I quite understand how these people, without living in wealth, have no shortage of food.

Gobind is back, looking satisfied.

“Come, sir, I am going to show you where you’ll spend the night. Here, we don’t have enough room, but in the shed, we have available a place that is well-sheltered and equipped with good, very dry straw. You will be comfortable there.”

“Thank you, Gobind; that will suit me perfectly.”

“We are going to feed the fire properly,” adds Ellyn. “Tomorrow, your clothes will be perfectly dry.”

“Thanks again.”

And I follow Gobind who leads me to the shed. It is a shack located at the side of the house and which I did not notice at the time. It adjoins one of the walls of the building and in a corner, protected from the wind and out of sight, is a site of beaten earth covered with straw.

“You will be fine here, sir. Sleep tight; the area is very peaceful. Until tomorrow, at daybreak.”

“Agreed, at daybreak.”

And Gobind moved away with his heavy tread after giving me a friendly wave. How lucky I was to have come across them! Without them I would have been numbed by cold and perhaps would have picked up a bad cough. These people are really helpful and have done me a great favour. Stretched out on my back, inhaling the delightful smell of the damp earth, mingled with that of the straw and hay, I close my eyes and fall asleep peacefully.

It is a furtive noise that drags me from my sleep and my dreams. I raise myself on my elbows. The night is almost pitch black. I scrutinize the surroundings. A moving shadow is a few yards away from me, visibly in front of the enclosure serving as a fowl-house. A fox! He is coming to look for food and will perhaps succeed in getting into the enclosure. This animal is cunning and clever. I quickly get up to scare it off. The animal, surprised, dashes off without further ado. The danger, for that night, is averted.

The door of the house has opened. In the rectangle of light provided by the hearth, I observe three shadows. My peasant friends. I am astonished by such a night outing because it seems to me that it is already late in the night. Perhaps they are keeping watch over their domain, because predators are maybe more prevalent than I imagine. I get ready to join them when, thanks to the light, I make out, in their hands, some long, pointed blades. They are moving, quietly, towards the shed. Good heavens! I very quickly realize the purpose of this manoeuvre. I don't delay. While they reach the shelter, I rush into the large room. Luckily, Ellyn is not there. I retrieve my hose, my shirt, my overcoat and my dagger. I leave the premises just as quickly and head in the opposite direction, running into the grass. When, after a mad dash, I figure that I have sufficiently put some distance between my attackers and myself, I sit down at the foot of a tree. It is at this moment that fear rises in me and makes me tremble nervously.

2

I put back on my clothes, dry, it is true. I also have my purse, rather full, I must admit. I am still reeling with astonishment. So my initial hesitation was not unfounded. These practices, of which I have frequently heard, are rather common. I had a narrow escape. If that fox had not woken me up, it would have been all over for me. Those three villains would not have hesitated to stab me in my sleep to deprive me of my purse. They would also have got a high-quality overcoat, a fine shirt and a valuable dagger.

I listen carefully. No suspicious noises, except those from local fauna stirring in the night. I don't think they are pursuing me; I am now on my guard and I could, in case of confrontation, kill one of them. Doubtlessly, they do not want that. As for reporting them, that is utopian. I have not one bit of proof of what I may affirm; undoubtedly, no one would believe me. It is better to forget this episode; I will certainly not hear about these people any more. But that is surely going to increase my suspicion in respect of persons that I meet in the future.

I decide nevertheless not to hang around in this area.

So I continue heading for Scarborough. The sky is turning blue toward the east; dawn is not far off. It is a magical moment. Nature is awakening, light is being reborn; my lungs expand with fresh air which makes life sparkle in me. This life that I nearly

lost a while ago. The sky is washed clean by the storms of the previous day. Alone, some high clouds are fraying out still and reflect the light, now rosy, of the first rays of sun. It will be a beautiful day; it bodes well for my arrival in Scarborough.

There only remain three or four leagues to travel; I should reach the town by the middle of the day. This prospect makes me quicken my step, but I curb my enthusiasm. I have not eaten since the previous night and I have nothing to sink my teeth into; so I must conserve my strength. The road takes a long curve going down between two pale green valleys. Magnificent scenery that delights me. Coming out of this curve, I spot a cart, partly overturned on the bank. Two persons seem to be moving around this vehicle.

I hesitate for a moment; I am inclined towards caution by the events of the previous day. But must I see evil everywhere because of that? This situation is not a trap, or else I am cursed...

“Good people, troubles?” I ask as I approach. The individuals turn towards me. A man of about fifty years old, with short grey hair, looking despondent, who is panting and seems exhausted. His eyes, deep-set in their sockets, reflect a sort of hopelessness to me. The young woman with him, his daughter perhaps, seems less despondent. If she is in despair, it is perhaps more because of her father than because of the current situation, at least that is what I feel.

“As you can observe, young man. This confounded mud drove us into this bank. No way to get out of it. But perhaps with your help...”

I glance at the front of the covered cart.

“Perhaps it would be better to unfasten the animal?”

“You think so?”

“Yes, certainly. We will have more freedom of movement. And if this cart happens to overturn completely, it could carry off your animal and seriously damage it.”

“Jane, do what’s needed.”

“Yes, father.”

I am not wrong. She has the same straight forehead and the same aquiline nose as her father. On the other hand, her eyes, almond-shaped, very pale green, must be those of her mother. Her hair also, which is very long and a mix of red and auburn. For a short moment I have some difficulty taking my eyes off this sweet face. After the devils of the night I seem to be glimpsing an angel. Jane knows what she is doing. She does not take much time to unfasten the bay horse.

“Come Titus, come here,” she whispers to him, stroking his neck.

The horse snorts, shakes his long mane and allows himself to be led towards a young beech-tree nearby. The young woman wraps the tether around the trunk.

“You’ll be fine there. You even have plenty to fill your stomach.”

Then, as she comes back towards us.

“It’s done, father.”

“Very well, my dear. But thinking about it, who am I dealing with here?”

“William Robertson, from York. I am on my way to Scarborough.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir. I am Walter Pending and this is my daughter Jane. We are also heading for Scarborough. For the market.”

“I see, the cart.”

“That’s right”

“If I’m not prying too much, what are you transporting? I say that because if your merchandise has significant weight, we could perhaps offload your cart.”

“In fact, that’s an excellent idea. In this cart there are countless numbers of objects, also different from one another and which are necessary for my ... our business.”

I look at the man, awaiting further details.

“I am a magician and Jane masters the art of medicinal herbs. She also very often achieves things that most people would believe impossible.”

I was thinking I was in the presence of merchants, but lo and behold, these two individuals have a rather astonishing and less common business.

“Very well, Mr Pending, let’s see.”

Lifting the canvas tarpaulin, Mr Pending shows me the interior of the cart. There are chests and boxes of all sizes, phials, hats, knives, mirrors, a rattan chair and rolls of fabric.

“I think that we could perhaps take out some of them. The heaviest things, perhaps”

“Of course.”

Within a quarter of an hour, we empty the cart of half its content. We place the objects along the road.

I inspect the front of the vehicle, where the wheels are stuck in

the mud. I check the angle between the platform and the ground.

“Some stones, and some hefty sticks. That’s what we need. Do you have a good cutlass?”

Pending begins to laugh heartily.

“Sorry,” I respond. “Of course.”

There is no shortage of knives, clearly. Pending has a whole set of them.

“Find some stones, to put on the right side; I am going to cut a stick.”

While Pending and his daughter begin to look for stones, I spot a dogwood. Its wood, very ligneous, will undoubtedly be solid enough for what I want to use it for. After a few minutes of exertion, I succeed in cutting a branch an inch and a half in diameter.

“Here’s what will do the trick. And for your part?”

Father and daughter have prepared an impressive heap of stones.

“Let’s put some chocks in front of each wheel, except the front right.”

They do it and I decide to try a risky process. I put my stick under the right wheel and, exerting all my strength, I prise. The cart rises slightly.

“Push! Now!”

Pending and his daughter give a rather strong and sudden push. The vehicle moves back a few inches, then falls back on the ground.

“The chocks! The chocks!”

My two drudges put back the stones. Everyone is sweating

profusely; it is a rather strenuous effort.

“That will do it, papa?” Jane asks.

“Yes, my girl; that will work. Do we have any choice?”

We repeat this process five times, until the cart, extricated from the bank, was almost horizontal again.

“This is it,” declares the father. “Without you... how can I thank you?”

“Can you take me with you? I mean, for the rest of the journey.”

“Of course. But before that, let us have a drink.”

As if by magic, a bottle of whisky appears.

3

I settle myself in the back of the cart, the tarpaulin having been turned up. Jane is sitting next to me, her legs swinging above the road.

Her father has taken the reins and, perched on a kind of seat located at the front, he drives the cart. Titus moves along easily; he has recovered his strength and above all he is stuffed with some very succulent and nourishing grass.

While we admire the scenery which passes behind us, not daring to say a word, a small animal, agile and swift, leaps on to my shoulder. Surprised at first, I discover a small white cat which purrs as it rubs against me.

“Oh, that’s Snow, don’t be afraid. He is adorable. He must have hidden himself all this time. He is still young; he loves to have fun.”

Indeed, the cat jumps on my knees, then grabs the tarpaulin, and slips away again into the cart to hide under some thick woollen blankets.

“We found him on the road. My father thinks that he can get him to participate in his tricks, but frankly, I doubt it. Training a cat is near impossible.”

“Then that could be right up your alley, according to your father.”

Jane looks at me mischievously.

“Maybe.”

The rest of the trip passes smoothly. The sky has cleared up, the countryside is bathed in a lovely golden light. As we approach the town, we now meet other people, on foot. They are going in the same direction and we slowly overtake them. Mr Pending greets them with some grand gestures. He is probably preparing his future customers, because no doubt about it, these people are making their way to the Scarborough fair.

Jane is not very talkative, neither am I. But she seems curious all the same.

“You have family in Scarborough?” she asks me.

“A cousin, Perdy Warren. I don’t know him so well. He sent me a letter and wants me to provide him with my services.”

“Your services?”

“Yes, I am a printer. Oh, it’s quite a small printery. My cousin is an enthusiast for legends and strange stories. All that he can glean, he has written down, by hand. His wish is to have these productions printed. I must admit that I am very interested in it.”

Jane seems pretty captivated by my explanations. Her bright eyes sparkle.

“Indeed, that must be fascinating. Legends...”

I then come back to the imminent market event.

“And you, furthermore you and your father, how do you deal with setting up?”

“It is the burgomaster who arranges all these issues. Scarborough is one of the most important fairs in the country. The Dutch come as well, the Flemish, Norwegians and some French

people.”

“They will perhaps be in the majority this year, with this terrible epidemic.”

“Yes, some of our friends and colleagues have defected. Others, unfortunately, are dead, struck down by the plague.”

Evoking this situation brings us back to silence.

During this short exchange we have got close to the town.

“There it is!” shouts Mr Pending, from his driver’s seat.

We jump down from the cart and go to the front.

From the top of a slight hill, we make out the village, nestled in the heart of a setting of greenery. It is a rather significant group of houses which extends to the south of a sort of rocky spur projecting into the sea. I gaze, awestruck.

“This is the first time that you are coming here?” asks Jane, who is walking beside me.

“I came when I was a child, but I hardly have any recollections of it.”

“Look up there, at that magnificent castle.”

Perched on the cliff, a fortress overlooks the sea, dominates the town, and protects the area. Made of grey stones, it stands out against the blue of the sky. The rampart is imposing and towers, at regular intervals, stand out on the surrounding wall.

Now that we are getting closer, the crowd is thicker. Mr Pending is very cautious with Titus because the onlookers or other merchants do not seem to be concerned about the cart. The road now descends, as far as the first houses. Pending brings the cart to a halt.

“Here we are,” he says to me. “Without you, we would still be

on the muddy bank or slaughtered by highwaymen.”

I smile for a moment, thinking over my encounter with my so-called peasants.

“So where are you going in this town?” he continued.

“In the area around St Mary’s Church. My cousin Percy lives in that neighbourhood, on [Wool Lane](#), I think.”

“Oh, very well. So it’s not complicated; you just need to head for the church.”

From our location, we can see the two stately towers of the edifice. I even make out the square public garden and the cemetery adjacent to it.

I bow to Mr Pending and give a little wave to Jane before moving off. Snow runs near me for a moment, then goes back to her mistress.

“We will see each other again no doubt, at the market,” Jane calls out to me.

I really hope so.

Mr Pending does not move off the cart again. I gathered that he had to await the inspection by the Burgomaster’s agents who have to check the contents of the cart and collect the requisite tax to enter the town as a participant in the market. In fact, I come across two horsemen dressed in blue, carrying swords and wearing belts of gold flannel.

For my part, I am a mere visitor; these administrative worries do not concern me. I get on to the main street. Some men, up on tall ladders, are stretching ropes across the streets and hanging small flags of all colours on them. On the balconies of houses with half-timbering, are brightly coloured fabrics and planters

with multi-coloured flowers. The doors of the houses are also decorated; people are sweeping up in front of their homes. Joyful children are running and singing; the fair is coming soon.

Here a cordial atmosphere prevails. These people I come across, clearly busy with the preparation for the festivities, seem happy to me. It must be said that this festival, which will last six weeks, will enrich the town and its inhabitants. A child who is crossing the street bumps into my legs.

“Sorry, sir.”

“It’s all right, laddie. You didn’t hurt yourself, at least?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you point out Wool Lane for me? I have to go there.”

“Of course, sir. I can even take you there. It’s just around the corner.”

And here I am, equipped with a knee-high guide who surely knows the town inside out.

We make our way towards St Mary’s Church, then turn left into some partly paved lanes. Here, there is little rubbish or horse dung. The inhabitants are making their village shine. Two crossroads, a sloping alley and the boy stops, with a look of satisfaction.

“It’s here, sir.”

“Thank you, my boy. So, what is your name?”

“Jack, Jack the menace. At your service.”

“Well, Jack, thank you for your help. Perhaps we’ll meet again?”

“Maybe, sir.”

“This is for your trouble.”

I hand him a small coin. The child's eyes light up with happiness.

“Thank you, sir.”

And he moves off, whistling.

In Wool Lane, I rather quickly spot my cousin Perdy's house. The letter mentioned a modest building with mud walls and a door of polished wood. On the left of the door is a bronze bell which can be activated by a string.

I hardly have time to get close when the door opens, allowing two very stout persons to pass through. They both have faces covered with thick beards; broad hats tipped forward do not allow you to figure out much about their faces. I step aside because obviously these two men would have violently pushed me down.

But the door remains open and I make out a more slender silhouette. A young man, with a doll-like face framed by a blonde, curly head of hair, is staring at me.

“William!”

“Perdy! It's been a while.”

4

Undoubtedly more than 20 years that I have not seen him. It was at the time when his parents sometimes came to York to pay us a visit. Despite the passage of time, I recognize the features of the child that he was; then he was perhaps no more than ten years old.

“So, come in, don’t just stand there.”

I first turn my head in the direction of the street and Perdy understands the reason for it.

“Bah, don’t worry. Some friends. A little rough, but not the least bit bad.”

Strangely enough, I have some difficulty believing that explanation. But that is not important. His house is rather dark. After coming through the door, the main room is lit only by a single window overlooking the lane. The walls are covered with dark wall-hangings and the floor is made of almost black wood.

“Sit down, sit down.”

He points to an armchair with emerald green velvet which seems quite shabby.

“I am going to look for something for us to drink.”

He lifts a cloth panel and disappears into a small adjoining room, I hear noises of crockery.

“Here you are. It’s perfect. I have there a little Spanish wine

that will delight your palate. This trip must have parched your throat.”

“That’s to say I had a lot of rain on the way and ended the journey by cart.”

“Good! And you are here, in fine form. I am really pleased by that.”

For a moment, we don’t know what to say. We are enjoying this wine which is really delicious.

“You have a place to stay?”

“Not yet. I’ll deal with it.”

“I can recommend ‘The Diligence’. The establishment is clean and the innkeeper is very attentive. It’s near the harbour.”

“Very well, I will go and see it then.”

Perdy serves a little more wine.

“And in York, how are things going? Your business?”

He seems interested in my work.

“Well, it’s not going too badly. My father acquired a clientele among the eminent persons in the town and they have confidence in me. So I get regular orders and I print almost continuously. So I won’t complain.”

“That is excellent news. But, tell me... still not married?”

This question brings up some painful memories. Ann, my lovely fiancée whom I was to marry three years ago. Taken away by a nasty fever in the middle of winter. Since that event, I had scarcely thought about finding another soul mate.

“No. I hardly have time to think... I am going to wait a while still, until my situation really stabilizes. I would like to be able to hire someone; that would relieve me a little.”

“I understand.”

Some shouts in the lane interrupt me and I turn towards the little window.

“It’s nothing. Those are my neighbours. They are rather noisy; there’s no need to worry.”

The shouts diminish and quiet quickly returns.

“But,” I then say, “what if we get on to our business.”

“Of course, isn’t that the primary reason for your coming here?”

“Indeed, but I have to admit that it coincides perfectly with the holding of the festival. That also persuaded me.”

Perdy pauses, appears to be searching for his words. He seems a bit embarrassed.

“These are legends that you have discovered, is that right? Some unusual story?”

I look at the shelves attached to the wall behind my cousin; they are collapsing under papers. Probably material that Perdy has collected.

“The fact is... It’s a bit peculiar.”

“How is that?”

“Let me show you, that’s best.”

He then gets up and opens one of the chests located in the room. He takes out an inlaid box, secured by an iron lock. That surprises me. Notes, texts in regard to the legends protected like this... It must be that these documents have great value. He opens the lock with a key that he has on him and shows me some pages.

“Please, have a look.”

I take the pages that he offers me and take advantage of a

candle that Perdy brings to view this script.

“But... what is this then? It is not...”

“It’s in keeping with the times, you know. You have to choose your side.”

“Listen, Perdy, it bothers me to tell you this, but I don’t think that I will be able to print these texts. I don’t get involved with politics much and I am not pleased with this choice, which you seem to be making. I tell myself that there is still a peaceful solution to this problem.”

“So you prefer to see the monarchy establish itself in an even more oppressive manner over our country rather than to hope for a new, freer and more fearless world.”

“Fearless? With this Cromwell who is slaughtering the Irish and comes as far as here to repel the Scots? I don’t like his methods; he is a violent man whom I don’t trust.”

Perdy seems dumbfounded. I have raised my voice; I am a bit carried away, it is true, and that disturbs him intensely. Undoubtedly he was hoping to have me on his side and thought I was going to print his revolutionary leaflets.

“That’s your final word?”

“Yes, Perdy, I’m sorry. But understand that I am not obliged to adhere to your convictions. And as I told you, I do not like this Cromwell. He will bring nothing but disaster.”

From being surprised, Perdy now seems to be angry. He was not expecting this refusal. He was hoping that our family ties would make me accept his request.

“Very well,” he says, in a voice in which bitterness now shows up, “in that case, we have nothing else to say to each other. I will

remember this refusal.”

I get up, disconcerted.

“Is that a threat?”

“Perhaps.”

Perdy is scaring me. His physical build is not that of a giant, but I sense in him a rage that could increase his strength tenfold.

Although I think I have the size to wrestle with him if necessary, I prefer to beat a retreat. Moreover, I do not like violence.

Without a word, I reach the door and get back on to the lane. I will go and check around the harbour and forget this business. In two days the festival begins; I certainly intend to enjoy it.

5

The Diligence is a very friendly establishment. Although the inn is of modest size, it seems to enjoy a good reputation. The interior is neat, the main room is very clean, coloured curtains hang at the windows, and the tables are covered with tablecloths. Behind a huge oak counter the innkeeper is at work, a pot-bellied guy with a ruddy face. His corpulence suggests that the food must be good. At the tables, two groups of three men, seated in front of mugs of beer, are chatting in low voices. When they see me, they turn their heads and insistently stare at me. The inhabitants of this town are however accustomed to strangers, especially at the time of the festivities.

“Hello, sir. How can I help you?” the owner says to me.

“Food and a night’s stay, innkeeper. That’s what would please me.”

“Then you are in the right place. There is no better place in the town to spend a few days. And my prices are very reasonable, see, sixpence for the bed and three meals. Only beer is extra, but I also have an excellent Spanish wine.”

“Indeed, then we are meant to get along.”

I draw near the counter.

“A little thirsty?”

I still have the taste of Spanish wine clinging to my palate, but

a cold beer is very tempting.

“A beer, the best.”

That means something other than an insipid beverage mixed with water. It’s a current practice in inns and taverns. Low-quality beer mixed with water is less expensive and less strong in alcohol content. It’s a means of avoiding thirsty clients getting drunk and sometimes uncontrollable.

I sip this beer, with my elbows resting on the counter. The other customers, now, no longer seem interested in me.

The innkeeper then shows me my room, on the first floor of the building. It is a very bright room, which directly overlooks the harbour. The sea air comes in through the window and I breathe deeply. I feel that I am going to be comfortable here; this is a change from the tumult of York for me. I look at the boats, moored at the dock, which rock gently at the will of the waves. Some fishermen are bustling about, preparing boats and repairing nets. I unpack my meagre luggage, which comprises a change of clothes. I did not anticipate staying very long, a few days at most.

I have my meal in the main hall. There are few people and the innkeeper has seated me a little distance away, along a blank wall on which some candle holders are fixed. He constantly moves back and forth to the end of the room, passing through a rather wide door through which a kitchen can be seen. He shouts orders and I hear some people bustling around the stoves.

I enjoy an excellent omelette flavoured with herbs. Sheep’s cheese and honey cake complete the menu.

“Did you have a good meal, sir?” the innkeeper asks me when I finish my dessert.

“Absolutely. This meal was excellent. I think I’m going to take a little walk because this diet could very well make me gain weight quickly.”

“With all due respect, sir, you don’t seem to have any problem in that regard.”

It is true that I am not very fat. Not thin either, but rather slender and lanky. However, I like to walk and a little stroll around the harbour could not hurt me.

To get on to what serves as a wharf, you only need to take a sandy road which skirts the side of the inn. So I am there rather quickly and walk for a while along the strand. The sea is calm, blue, almost green, and the water is translucent. The harbour then gives way to a beach of fine sand that stretches over a quarter of a mile right up to a rockier and more jagged area. This spot is truly magnificent, relaxing and invigorating. I believe I will enjoy being in Scarborough. I retrace my steps. From here, I can see the castle, proudly perched on the headland. Built in the 11th century to protect the harbour and the town from Scottish incursions, it imposes its reassuring silhouette. I will have to go there and take a walk around, of course.

On the square, traders are setting up trestles and in the surrounding lanes, it is the artisans who are preparing their stalls. I then notice Mr Pending’s cart. I quicken my pace.

“Hello, Mr Pending! Jane!”

They both turn around, Jane with a broad smile.

“Oh, Mr Robertson, how are you?”

“Very well. I am settled in at the inn that you can see over there.”

“And your cousin?” Jane asks me.

“We did not really agree on the anticipated job.”

“Isn’t that troublesome for your business?” the young girl inquires.

“No, it’s not very serious. But I am going stay two or three days to enjoy the fair.”

Meanwhile, Mr Pending seems to be sorting out various objects and checking their condition.

“He always checks his material a million times,” Jane whispers to me. “That’s how it is.”

“I understand. He is determined that everything should be ready for the beginning of the festivities. So you will be set up in this spot?”

“Absolutely. We are going to put up an awning and we will free up some space in the cart to be able to sleep in it. We have a good location here; it should work well.”

At this moment, two officers from the town, on horseback, appear. They are undoubtedly coming to see if everything is going well.

“Father, may I go and take a walk with Mr Robertson while you speak with these gentlemen?”

“Huh...yes, my dear, go on, go on. But don’t be too long, we haven’t finished.”

Jane slipped her arm under mine and leads me towards the sea.

She seems joyful, her eyes sparkle. Her liveliness is catching and I feel exhilarated.

She leads me towards the inn then turns towards the beach and

so we walk right up to the first rocks that I had seen a little while ago.

“Let’s sit down for a while, if you wish,” she says to me.

The sand is fine and comfortable. We remain for a while, without speaking, observing the constant movement of the waves, this ebb and flow that never ceases.

“You seem very happy. The prospect of the fair?”

“Yes, I can’t wait for it to start.”

“But exactly what do you do there?” I ask, curious.

“I offer plant-based remedies. There are a lot of people who suffer from coughs, joint pains or poor digestive systems. I know medicinal herbs quite well and I often succeed in giving some relief to all these poor people.”

“That’s an admirable job. But don’t official doctors take a dim view of that?”

“Yes, of course. And there are no end of attacks to try and prevent me from practising. These ignorant persons are only good for wielding the lancet. They refute the benefits that nature offers and hide behind principles from a bygone era.”

For a brief moment Jane’s voice had become sharper.

“And then... I have other gifts that are not always welcome.”

“How is that?”

Jane begins to laugh. A resounding laughter that tinkles like a crystal bell and which is immediately carried away by the wind.

She scans the shore.

“Here you go, look at those two stones over there.”

“Which ones? There are so many there.”

“Indeed. That little, very round, purplish one, and that other

one on its right, rose coloured with greyish streaks.”

I spot the two stones, very spherical, polished by the sea. A process that must have taken thousands of years. These two stones are no further than about ten inches from each other and we ourselves are only, at the most, five or six yards from them.

“I’m seeing them, finally, I think.”

“Very well then, look at them closely and don’t take your eyes off them.”

I wonder where Jane is going with this. It must be some sort of game; I cheerfully get ready for it. I stare at these two pebbles and I see them gently, in fits and starts, begin to move, to roll, and to move towards each other until they touch and finally stop.

“What is this?” I ask, turning towards Jane.

Her face is tight, as if in the throes of internal tension. Her hands are raised, palms towards the shore. Finally, she seems to relax and smiles at me.

“That’s your doing, isn’t it?”

“It could well be.”

“No, no, it’s the wind. You are pulling my leg.”

“William, there is not a breath of wind.”

I have to face the facts. There is not a breath of air. Moreover, a mere breeze would have no effect on spherical stones placed on the bare ground.

I remain dumbfounded. My rational spirit must have had difficulty accepting this kind of phenomena, or special talent. I think that there must be a trick in it; I should not forget that her father is a magician.

“No, no, there’s a trick. It’s your father who taught you that.”

“No, William, I swear. Since I was very young, I discovered this strange gift. And this is only a glimpse.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can do things that are a lot more spectacular or which would seem totally inconceivable.”

“But then,” I say laughing, “you could have taken the cart off the bank.”

Jane begins to laugh with me. She looks at me intensely. She looks ravishing in her sun-coloured dress, her bright eyes are almost translucent in the light that the surface of the water reflects. Our faces draw near, our lips touch and press together for a long kiss. Time seems suspended.

“I don’t know what took hold of me,” I stammer. “I...”

By way of response, Jane kisses me again.

“Neither do I,” she replies.

That had to happen. I had no doubt about it from the moment I met her on the road leading to Scarborough. Something had to happen...

“You seem like everything to me,” she says.

“Yes... I... this is so sudden.”

“I have the same feeling. When I saw you, on the road, helping us out, I knew immediately that...”

All this is astonishing. This is very often how things happen, at the time when you least expect it. Some call that chance, others destiny, still others circumstances. As far as I am concerned, I don’t name it. Too many elements enter into play to determine any involvement whatever of external events. My stay at the home of the pseudo-peasants who made me get back on the road

later under circumstances that are known, the rain that made the cart skid into the bank, etc. It matters little; I am very happy with the situation and I feel my heart pounding for this lovely young lady.

“Your father is going to get impatient.”

“You’re right. We should go. Do you wish to have supper with us tonight?”

“Your father will not...?”

“Have no fear. He is adorable and he always gives in to my whims.”

“Your whims?”

“That’s not what I mean, William, certainly not”

“I’m teasing you.”

We get back on the road to the town square and I leave Jane to return to the inn. I am going to tell the innkeeper that I am not having the meal in his establishment and I am going to freshen up and put on some clean clothes.

“Oh, Mr Robertson! Two men have been asking for you,” the innkeeper informs me.

“Two men?”

“Yes, two fellows with unpleasant appearances. They did not seem very friendly. They even wanted to know where your room was. I showed them out, of course. Did I do the right thing?”

“I think so. Thank you.”

The innkeeper looks worried as I am going up the stairs to the first floor. He certainly does not want any trouble in his inn. I take no comfort in this unexpected visit. These two oddballs are undoubtedly the two men I saw when I was going to Perdy’s

house. My cousin, no doubt, has not taken my refusal well and is perhaps seeking to intimidate me so that I might agree to print his leaflets. But I am not a man to take things lying down. From now on I am not going to go out without my dagger in my belt and a long cutlass slipped into my boot.

I rest for a while, stretched out on the rather comfortable bed. The bedroom is simple, furnished with a beech table and a chair of the same nature. A huge chest allows for clothes to be put away. A three-footed stand supports a tin basin and a ewer. There is what is necessary for spending a few days. What am I saying? A few days? But how does Jane fit in all this? I can't leave her; I think I realize that is not conceivable. Take her to York? And her father, is he ready to lose his daughter who accompanies him on his rounds? And Jane, is she ready to give up this life that she seems to love? Perhaps it is up to me to make that effort? I am a bit lost. And then, will this burgeoning love last?

I dozed off for a moment and it is some footsteps in the corridor that rouse me from my drowsiness. Some new arrivals, no doubt.

The sun is going down on the horizon, diffusing its first orange-coloured rays. The beach, which I can see from the window, as well as the rocks, are suddenly ablaze. It is a delightful sight that I am not used to seeing. I then think about this demonstration, a while ago, on the beach. Did I dream it? Did Jane make fun of me with an extraordinary sleight of hand, the secret of which she no doubt possesses? Actually, I don't think so; I am sure she has a very peculiar gift that I can't explain, and yet.

I get up; it is time to get back to the square for this invitation to supper.

I put on a fresh unbleached cambric shirt, tight greyish blue breeches and wore a light cape. Of course, I slipped on my yellow leather belt with my dagger. The cutlass is hidden in my right boot. I pull back my hair with a ribbon because it is a bit long and falls on my shoulders.

The innkeeper greets me when I cross the main hall, a little smile on his lips.

“Good evening, sir. When you come back, go to the side, through the little door. Brutus is on guard, but I have him securely tied up. It’s better like that; in the night he would leap at your throat without warning.”

“Thank you for alerting me. See you later.”

I reach the square. Since the afternoon a half-dozen more carts have come and settled in. The carts are several feet apart, which allows each of them some privacy. People are bustling about, setting up trestles, putting banners in place, taking out trunk and cases, and making inventories of stock. Beyond, the village is quiet, windows begin to light up with yellowish gleams from candles inside.

I spot Jane who, under the awning which has been unfurled, is setting what serves as a table. Bending over a circle of stones, her father is fanning a fire. This fireplace will provide light and warmth and will enable cooking of the fish that I observe on a platter, a few inches from the flames.

“Oh, William, here you are,” Mr Pending calls out to me. “Jane told me you were coming to have supper.”

“I wouldn’t want to...”

“Don’t worry, young man. Jane always has the gift of arranging surprises for me, but this one is quite pleasing to me and so I will gladly include you at our table.”

“Thank you, Mr Pending. Perhaps I can help?”

“Yes, William, if you will,” Jane intervenes. “Help me lift this plank; I find it a bit wobbly.”

I have an irresistible urge to take her in my arms, she too, I believe.

The plank in question is the board designated to serve as a table. I lift the panel, which is rather heavy, it’s true, while Jane repositions one of the trestles. Our hands touch, and our fingers entwine for a brief moment. Cruel desire mounts in us...

Mr Pending, during this time, has placed a grill on the fire and put the fish on it. An aroma rises immediately. The neighbours who can be seen on the right and left are doing the same thing.

“Let’s have a drink while we wait, if you wish.”

Three cut glasses appear as if by magic. Mr Pending makes some quick gestures; he makes objects appear with an uncommon speed. Without doubt his profession as a magician. He brings out the bottle of aged whisky which I had glimpsed on the road and he serves me a generous shot of the amber liquid. Jane is satisfied with some water which she pours from a glazed earthenware jug.

“Well, young man, talk to me a bit.”

“Talk to you?”

“Yes, about your life, your profession. I imagine that if my daughter invites you so quickly to have supper, it’s because she is not insensitive to your person. Also you can perhaps tell me a

little more about it.”

“I understand, Mr Pending, I understand. That is quite justifiable.”

And in the dancing light from the flames, I begin to tell the story of my life. I speak about the printery, which my father handed down to me, about my mother who died while I was still a child, about the first difficult moments managing my company and finally happier days.

“As I understand it, your business seems to be doing well now.”

“Father, stop with all these questions, will you? You’re annoying William.”

“Am I annoying you, Mr Robertson?”

“Of course not.”

“Come on, father, you can very well see that our guest is too polite to contradict you.”

Mr Pending pouts, swallows down a swig of whisky and turns toward the fireplace.

“Oh, these fish are just right. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

The fish is excellent. Well-browned on the outside, cooked to perfection inside.

“It was a fisherman returning from sea who passed by this afternoon. That was very fortunate.”

“Indeed, you would have been very wrong not to have bought them. And besides, you are assured of having fresh produce.”

After a spell of trivial talk, Mr Pending speaks to me about his profession, which he learnt at a very young age from an uncle who moved from town to town. Very quickly, he realizes that he

has a talent for this profession and he makes it his occupation. His daughter Jane, born as a result of an encounter with a young woman from Northumberland, will grow up with him. Her mother was killed during a violent storm that ravaged the region.

“Now, Mr Robertson, you know almost everything. And yourself, you aren’t married?”

“The fact is, that with the printery, I haven’t yet found the time to...”

“Bah, you will, no doubt, end up finding a soul mate. That happens without a word of warning.”

“Certainly.”

Jane, at that moment glances at me with a sparkle in her eyes.

Mr Pending offers a cheese plate, comprising a roll of fresh goat cheese and a sort of baked cheese with an orange-coloured crust.

“This one is not bad,” he says to me. The Flemish are passionately fond of it and some of our farmers have begun to make it.”

Mr Pending gives me the impression that he likes good food and whisky, obviously. As seen in his slight corpulence, sign of a good appetite. Jane, in this respect, does not resemble him. She picks at food, seems happy with little and her tiny waist is proof that she does not abuse food. Nevertheless, father and daughter do not appear to be in need; their business must be doing rather well.

Mr Pending’s eyes suddenly light up.

“Look at this, young man, an apricot jam with cinnamon, a miracle,” he says to me, as he offers me a small blue-tinted

earthenware container.

“You astonish me, Mr Pending. Where do you find all this?”

“You know, at the markets, we meet a lot of people. Other travelling merchants who themselves come across other merchants. And so, this jam from Portugal finds its way to us. You will see, it’s excellent. For the digestion and the lungs.”

The meal ends. To my great regret, I am going to have to take my leave. Jane, who has only spoken very little for the evening, looks at me intensely.

“Father, can I take a little walk with our guest? The fresh air will do us good.”

“Do you mean that the meal was heavy?”

“Of course not, father.”

“Go on, my child, go. But don’t stay late, night has almost fallen.”

We are in a hurry to be alone. All this is so sudden. We realize that we cannot remain apart for very long. How are we going to envisage the future? So many questions that remain, for the moment, without responses.

We are going back to the beach with the fine sand. Night is near; twilight is spreading over the town; you can scarcely see more than a few yards away. We hold hands and are moving at a good pace, when two shadows, coming out of nowhere, stand in front of us.

“Stop there, my good young people,” a voice shouts.

In spite of the darkness, I recognized the two persons I saw earlier at Perdy’s home. The same ones who probably passed by the inn to try to meet me.

Jane looks at me, speechless. She is giving me a questioning look.

“These gentlemen are friends of my cousin Perdy. Don’t worry,” I tell her.

“Excuse me, Miss,” then says the second man. “We don’t want to scare you. We simply want to speak to your friend.”

“At this hour? Like this, in the dark?” Jane retorts.

She does not seem to be intimidated.

The man does not appear to be paying heed to her remark and addresses me.

“Mr Robertson, we would very much like you to follow us.”

“And why should I do that?”

“Our master, Mr Warren, would like to see you again. About the work that he wants you to do.”

“I have already discussed this with him. There is no coming back about it. That will be my response. Convey it to him.”

“It does not seem that we are well understood, Mr Robertson. You have to follow us.”

Jane stares at me for a short moment. Her eyes harden, the muscles of her jaws contract.

The man who spoke moves aside the right flap of his ample coat to reveal a long foil with a twisted knob. He places hand on the latter. The message is clear.

I do not like threats, but I am not a reckless person or a hothead who would throw himself into an uncertain fight. These two men seem powerful; they must be accustomed to handling a sword and undoubtedly I do not have much chance of getting through it. However, I also put my hand on my dagger, a matter

of showing that I am not unarmed.

“That’s what you want?” continues the brigand. “I am very much afraid that you are not quite capable.”

The man begins to draw his sword from its sheath. Jane, at the same time, is focused, tense, as she was earlier on the beach when she gave me that astonishing demonstration with the stones.

The man grimaces, he seems to be expending extraordinary energy in trying to draw his sword from its sheath. But clearly, he is not succeeding.

“What the devil! How...”

I take advantage of the opportunity. I draw my dagger and getting closer with a long stride, I place its tip on the scoundrel’s throat.

“Don’t move, friend. And you neither,” I say, also addressing the second ruffian. “One false move and I fear that this blade, very well sharpened, will open your throat like a common hog.”

The man rolls his eyes mixed with fear and anger. His companion stands back, not daring to make a move. Jane has regained a more relaxed appearance.

“Go and see my dear cousin Perdy Warren and tell him this. I do not wish to hear any more about this matter. If he gets the desire to reiterate his request, I will alert the town’s officers. And if I see your ugly faces again, I might very well, this time, lose my self-control.”

The man nods his head in a sign of assent.

I release the pressure of my blade and the two men disappear into the night without saying a word.

“What a situation,” I then comment. “Actually, I was not

feeling very confident. Never would I have been capable of killing that man. And you, what did you do?”

“I told you, I’m capable of astonishing things. My strange powers are very much in harmony with metal. It was not too difficult to act on the blade of his foil. I had never yet succeeded to that point.”

“You had to be very motivated.”

And our lips come together in a long kiss. The air is mild, the moon, although pale, lights up the shore and diffuses a silvery light on the waves that come and expire on the sand. We are in paradise.