

TOM ROCKET, THE ENGLISH HIGHWAYMAN.

Tom Rocket was a highwayman. No one ever christened him Tom; his father's name was not Rocket. When he was tried for his life at Warwick assizes, he was arraigned as Charles Jackson, and they were particular about names then. If you indicted a man as Jim, and his true name was Joe, he got off; and when the law was altered—so that they could set such errors right at the trial—people, leastwise lawyers, said the British constitution was being pulled up, root and branch. But that's neither here nor there. I cannot tell you how it was that he came to be known as Tom Rocket, and, if I could, it would not have anything to do with my story. For six years he was the most famous thief in the Midland counties, and for six years no one knew what he was like. He was a lazy fellow, was Tom; he never came out except when there was a good prize to be picked up, and he had his scouts and his spies all over the place to get him information about booty, and warn him of danger. But to judge by what people said, he was "on the road" to half a dozen different places at once every day of his life; for you see when any one was robbed of his property, or found it convenient so to account for it, why, he laid it upon Tom Rocket, as a sort of excuse for giving it up easily, because, you see, no one thought of resisting Tom.

So it was, that all sorts of conflicting descriptions of his person got abroad. One said that he was an awful tall man, and had a voice like thunder; another that he was a mild little man, with black eyes and light hair. He was a very fat man with blue eyes and black hair, with some; he had a jolly red face; he was pale as death, and his nose was Roman one day and Grecian or snub the next.

His dress was all the colors of the rainbow, and as for his horse!—that was of every shade and breed that was ever heard of, and a good many more beside, that have yet to be found out. He wore a black half mask, but some how or other it was always obliging enough to slip off, so as to give each of his victims a full view of his face, only no two of them could ever agree as to what it was like.

My father was a Gloucestershire man. He stood six feet three in his stockings, and measured thirty-six inches across the chest. He could double up a half crown between his finger and thumb, and was brave as a lion. So, many a time and oft, when any one talked of the dangers of the road, he would set his teeth together, shake his head and say that he would like to see the man that could rob him on the highway; and, as he said before, he did see him and it was Tom Rocket.

My father was a lawyer, and was, at the time I have mentioned, engaged in a great tithe cause that was to be tried at Warwick spring assizes. So, shortly before Christmas, he had to go over and look up the evidence. There was no cross country coach, so he rode; and being, as I have said, a brave man; he rode alone. He transacted his business, and my mother being ill, and not liking to leave her alone longer than he could help, he set out to ride home again about half-past nine o'clock that same evening. It was as beautiful a winter's night as ever you were out in. His nag was a first-rate hunter, as docile as a dog, and fit to carry even his weight over, or past, anything. He had a brace of excellent pistols in his holsters; and he jogged along, humming a merry tune, neither thinking or caring for any robber under the sun. All of a sudden it struck him that the pretty bar-maid of an inn just out of Warwick town, where he had stopped to have a girth that he had broken, patched together, had been very busy with those self-same pistols; and suspecting that she might have been tampering with them, he drew the charges and reloaded them carefully. This done, he jogged on again as before.

He had ridden about ten miles, when he came to a wooden bridge that was there in those days over the Avon. Just beyond it rose a stiffish hill, at the top of which was a sudden bend in the road. Just as my father reached this turn, a masked horseman suddenly wheeled upon him and bade him "Stand and deliver!" It was Tom Rocket! In a second my father's pistols were out, and snapped within a yard of the highwayman's chest; but, one after another, they missed fire. The pretty bar-maid—a special favorite of Tom's—was too sharp to rely on the old dodge of drawing the balls or dampening the charge; she thrust a pin in each vent hole, and broke it off.

"Any more?" Tom inquired, as coolly as you please, when my father's second pistol flashed in the pan.

"Yes," shouted my father, in a fury, "one for your nob!" And seizing the weapon last used by the muzzle he hurled it with all his might and main at Rocket's head. Tom ducked, the pistol flew over the hedge, and my father, thrown out of balance by his exertion, lost his seat and fell heavily on the grass by the road side. In less time than it takes to say so, Tom dismounted, seizing my father by the collar and presenting a pistol within an inch of his face, bade him be quiet, or it would be worse for him.

"You've given me a deal of trouble," said Tom, "so just hand over your purse without any more ado, or by G—d! I'll send a bullet through your skull—just there;" and he laid the cold muzzle of his pistol on my father's forehead just between his eyes.

It is bad enough to have to look down the barrel of loaded fire-arms upon full cock, with a highwayman's finger upon the trigger; but to have the cold muzzle pressed slowly upon your head—ugh!—it makes me creep to think about it.

My father made a virtue of necessity, and quickly gave up his purse.

"Much good may it do you," he said, "for there's only three and sixpence in it."

"Now for your pocket book," said Tom, not heeding him.

"Pocket book?" inquired my father, turning a little pale.

"Aye, pocket book!" Tom repeated, "a thick black one; it is in the left hand pocket of your riding coat."

"Here it is," said my father, "you know so much about it, that perhaps you can tell what its contents are."

"I'll see," said Tom, quietly taking out and unfolding half a dozen legal looking documents.

"They are law papers—not worth a rush to you or any one else," said my father.

"Then," Tom replied, "I may tear them up," and made as though he would do so.

"Hold! on your life!" my father shouted, struggling hard, but in vain, to rise.

"Oh, they are worth something, are they?" said Tom, with a grin.

"It would take a deal of trouble to make them out again," my father replied sulkily, "that's all."

"How much trouble?" Tom inquired, with a meaning look.

"Well," my father answered, "I suppose I know what you are driving at. Hand me them back and let me go, and I promise to send you a hundred pounds when and where you please."

"You know very well that these papers are worth more than a hundred," said Tom.

"A hundred and fifty, then," continued my father.

"Go on," said Tom.

"I tell you what it is, you scoundrel," cried my father, "I'll stake five hundred against them, if you will loose your hold and fight me fairly for it."

Tom only chuckled.

"Why, what a ninny you must take me for," he said; why should I bother myself fighting for what I can get without?"

"You're a cur, that's what you are," my father shouted in a fury.

"Don't be cross," said Tom, "it don't become you to look red in the face. Now attend to me," he continued in an altered tone, "do you see that bridge? Well! there is a heap of stones in the center, isn't there? Very good. If you will place five hundred guineas in gold, in a bag, amongst those stones, at 12 o'clock at night, this day week, you shall have your pocket book and all its contents in the same place two hours afterwards."

"How am I to know that you will keep your word," my father replied, a little softened by the hope of regaining, even at so heavy a price, the papers that were invaluable to him.

"I'm Tom Rocket," replied the robber, securing the pocket book upon his person, "and what I mean I say, and what I say I stick to. Now, get up and mind," he added, as my father sprang to his feet, "my pistols don't miss fire."

"I shall live to see you hanged," my father muttered, adjusting his disordered dress.

"Shall I help you to catch your horse, sir?" asked Tom politely.

"I'll never rest till I lodge you in the jail," said my father savagely.

"Give my compliments to your wife," said Tom, mounting his horse.

"Confound your impudence," howled my father.

"Good night," said Tom, waving his hand, and turning short round, jumped his horse over the fence and was out of sight in a moment.

It was not quite fair of my father, I must own, but he determined to set a trap for Tom Rocket, baited with five hundred guineas, at the bridge. He posted up to London, saw Bradshaw, a famous Bow street runner, and arranged that he and his men should come down and help catch Tom; but just at the last moment Bradshaw was detained upon some important government trial, and so another runner, Fraser, a no less celebrated officer, took his place.

It was settled that the runners should come by different roads, and all meet at a way-side inn about five miles from the bridge, at eight o'clock p.m., on the day my father's pocket-book was to be returned. An hour afterwards they were to join him on the road three miles farther on. Their object, you see, in taking this round-about course was to baffle Tom's spies and accomplices, and to get securely hid about the appointed spot long before the appointed time.

My father was a little late at the place of meeting; but when he arrived there he could see no one about, except a loutish looking countryman, in a smock frock, who was swinging on a gate hard by.

"Good noight, maister," said the yokel.

"Good night to you," my father replied.

"Can ye tell me who this yer letter's for?" said the yokel, producing a folded paper.

My father saw in a moment it was his own letter to Bradshaw.

"Where did you get that?" said my father quickly.

"Ah!" replied the yokel, placing the letter in his pocket, "that ud be tellins. Be yer expecting anybody?"

"What's that to you?" said my father.

"Oh, nought," said the yokel, "only a gentleman from London—"

"Ha!" cried my father, "what gentleman?"

"Will a name beginning with F suit you?" asked the yokel.

"That's the name," replied the yokel, jumping down from his seat, and changed his tone and manner in a moment. "I'm Fraser, sir, and you're Mr. Sandiger, as has been robbed of a pocket book containing valuable papers; we're going to catch Tom Rocket, as has got it; that's our game, sir. All right, sir, and now to business."

"But where are your men?" my father inquired, when Fraser had explained the reason for his disguise.

"All right again, sir; they will join us. We have not much time to lose, so please lead the way."

So my father led the way, followed by Fraser, and by the time they came in sight of the bridge they had been joined by four London officers, in different disguises and from different directions. One appeared as a tramp, one as a peddler, another as a gentleman's servant leading a horse, and the fourth as a soldier. No one could have guessed that they had met before, much less that they were engaged in a preconcerted scheme. My father gave Fraser great credit for the dextrous way in which he had collected his forces.

The bridge upon which the money was to be placed, consisted of two arches across the river, and was joined on either side by a long sort of causeway, built upon piles over meadows, that in the winter were generally covered with water. It so happened that the very next morning after the robbery a heavy rain set in, and soon the floods were out so that there was no way of getting on the bridge but by going along the causeway, which extended a distance of a hundred yards, sloping down gradually to the road on each side of the river. This causeway was built of wood. At some places the timbers were covered with earth and stones, but at others the roadway had worn out, so that any one looking up from underneath could see who was passing overhead. Mr. Fraser's eye took in the position in a moment. He got two hurdles out of a field close by, and with some rope that he had brought for another purpose, fastened them to the piles so that they hung like shelves between the roadway and the flood, one at each end of the bridge, and about 20 yards from it. This was his plan: two of his men were to be hidden on each hurdle, whilst he and my father, in a boat that was concealed beneath the main arch of the bridge, unseen themselves, could watch the heap of stones where the money was to be placed, and the stolen pocket book left in exchange for it. As soon as Tom Rocket or any of his friends removed the bag in which the gold was placed, Fraser was to whistle, and his men were to jump from their hiding places, and secure whoever it might be. If he leaped over the causeway and took to the water, there was the boat in which to follow and capture him.

Mr. Fraser was particular to practise his allies in springing quickly from their place of concealment, and impressing upon them and my father the necessity of all acting together, keeping careful watch and strict silence. "And now, sir," said he to my father, as a distant clock chimed a quarter of twelve, "it is time to go to our places and to bait the trap, so please hand me the bag, that I may mark it and some of the coins, so as to be able to identify them at the trial." He had made up his mind, you see, to nail master Tom this time.

My father gave him the bag, saw him write upon it, and make some scratches on about a dozen of the guineas, and then my father let himself down into the boat, in which he was immediately joined by the runner.

"It's all right," said Fraser, in a low tone. "Do you think he will come?" whispered my father.

"Certainly," replied Fraser, "but we must not talk, sir, time is up."

For three mortal hours did my father sit in that boat, and the runners lay stretched out on the broad of their backs upon these hurdles watching for Tom Rocket to come for his money; and for three mortal hours not a soul approached the bridge, not a sound but the wash of the swollen river was heard. By the time the clock struck three, my father, who had been nodding for the last twenty minutes, fell fast asleep as he sat covered up in his cloak, for it was a bitter cold night; but was very speedily aroused by hearing Fraser cry out that they were drift.

Adrift they were, sure enough. The rope that held them had been chafed against the corner of a sharp pile (so Mr. Fraser explained) till it broke, and away went the boat, whirling around in the eddies of the river, fit to make any one giddy. So strong was the current of the stream that they were carried a mile and a half down it before they could get ashore. My father was for returning directly to the bridge and so was Fraser, but somehow or other, they lost each other in the dark; and when my father arrived there, having run nearly all the way, he found, to his great surprise, that the officers had left. He rushed to the heap of stones and there the first thing that caught his eye was the pocket book—the bag of money was gone.

Lord, how he did swear.

Determined to have it out with the runners for deserting their posts, he hurried on to the inn where they had met, and where to pass the night. He knocked at the door. No answer. He knocked at the door again, louder. No answer. He was not in the very best of tempers, as you may guess, so he gave the door a big kick. In it flew, and a sight met his view that fairly took away his breath. Tied into five chairs, hand and foot, trussed up like so many Christmas turkeys, with five gags in their mouths, and their five pair of eyes glaring at him owlishly, sat the real Fraser and his four Bow street runners. Tom Rocket had managed the business at the bridge himself. How he managed to get scent of the plot, and seize the officers, all together, just at the nick of time, my father could never find out, and no one knows to this day.

Upon examining his pocket book, my father found all his documents, and a paper on which was written these words:

"By destroying these writings, I could have ruined you. In doing so I should have injured your client, whom I respect. For his sake I keep my word, though you have played me false. Tom Rocket."

"And what became of Tom?" asked one of the company.

"Well," replied Mr. Josh, "after having been tried three times, and getting off upon some law quibble on each occasion, he—who had robbed the worth of thousands of pounds and escaped—was executed at Nottingham for stealing an old bridle.—[London "Once a Week."

MINUTES OF A CONFERENCE,

Held in Cedar City, on Saturday and Sunday, December 17 and 18, 1859.

Bishop Henry Lunt, presiding.

Saturday, at 2 o'clock p. m., meeting was called to order by Elder R. V. Morris, and opened by singing and prayer by Elder J. Whittaker. The conference was addressed by Bishop Lunt, Pres. W. H. Dame of Parowan, Bishop Farnsworth of Beaver, and Elder Theodore Turley of Washington on various subjects pertaining to the kingdom of God, exhorting the Saints to cultivate the spirit of truth, and to be obedient to the commandments of God, to practice virtue and holiness, which if they would do, they would have the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort them in those scenes of trial through which they might have to pass, and be a light to their path at all times.

Adjourned till Sunday, at 10 a. m.

Benediction by F. T. Whitney.

At 6 o'clock in the evening, a meeting of the High Priests was held at the house of Bishop Lunt. They had an interesting time in speaking their feelings in regard to the work of God. The Spirit of the Almighty inspired every bosom with a stronger determination to persevere in the work of the Most High, by living the religion of Jesus Christ and striving to put down the works of sin and death.

SUNDAY—10 a. m.

Meeting opened by singing and prayer by Elder J. Allen.

Elder J. Whittaker said it was the duty of the Saints to live up to their privileges and improve the talents the Lord had given them.

Elder D. Thomas of Beaver, felt glad to meet with the Saints in conference. There has existed too much sectional feeling among the different settlements; exhorted the Saints to quit their tattlings, bickerings and fault-finding and enjoy the spirit of their religion, which was calculated to unite them together, and hoped that the fire now kindled would spread among the Saints until it had consumed every principle and power that was not of God.

Elder C. C. Pendleton, of Parowan, spoke at length upon the necessity and importance of sustaining the priesthood of the kingdom of God.

Bishop Lunt then presented the authorities of the church, who were unanimously sustained in their several callings.

Bishop Warren of Parowan, was highly pleased with what he had heard in this conference and wished the Saints to be honest with themselves, and practice upon the things they had heard.

Bishop Rollins of Minersville, felt the necessity of the Saints waking up to a sense of their duties and said that unless they were of one heart and mind, they could not accomplish much in building up the kingdom of their Redeemer.

Elder T. Jones bore testimony to what he had heard, and said that the instructions given would not benefit the Saints unless they were carried out practically.

Elder R. V. Morris felt it his duty to live to the covenants he had made this day in sustaining the servants of God and one another; instructed the Saints not to listen to evil reports, nor judge before they heard both sides of a question.

Bishop Lunt felt to impress upon the minds of the Saints the necessity of being watchful and on their guard, to humble themselves before their God, to attend to their prayers and to strive to have the Spirit of the Lord to guide them in the path of virtue and righteousness.

Benediction by Bishop Lunt.

HENRY LUNT, President.

MARTIN SLACK, Clerk.

The following song was composed by sister Mary Ann Lunt, and sung at the conference:

AIR—SHADES OF EVENING.

Welcome, brethren, to our circle—
We are glad to see you here;
Unto God ascribe the glory
And His Holy name revere,
That we've been preserved and guided
By His ever-ruling power,
When with foes we've been surrounded,
And in sorrow's darkest hour.

May we all become united
In the glorious gospel plan,
As drops of water run together
Till they form a perfect one;
May we all obtain this blessing,
Confidence in one another;
Each to each by love cemented,
Be indeed a friend and brother.

—Morphy, blindfold, beat four of the best chess players in Philadelphia recently—one at the 24th, another at the 25th, and a third at the 26th, and a fourth at the 33d move.