

At the Salisbury Assizes

Another Adventure of Galloping Dick on the King's Highway

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

Of all that practised upon the toby whom I encountered in my time, the most to my palate was Jack Blake, a cock of spirit; and I was sore when he went out of the cart at Tyburn all for robbing of an attorney. Yet 'tis a hazard in the way we gentlemen of the road do make, and I for one would not snaffle at it.

It was along of Jack that a pretty adventure befell me in the West Country one day in autumn. Young Blake had hit upon me by mere chance in the neighborhood of Yeovil, and being in an easy mood I joked with him, though 'tis not my habit to hunt with any jackal. I am my own tiger. But Blake had a merry heart, and was a sprightly youth, and we saw some humorous life together; till close upon noon of a drizzling day we fetched up on Salisbury Plain in a mood for anything,—when the coach of My Lord lurched into view.

'Twas jogging and rolling pretty lumpishly along the ruts, the postilion cracking of a whip as if he were in haste. And Jack Blake, young cockerel, shoots a glance at it, and says he right away:

"Damme, Dick! I'll race your nag for 'un—purse and all."

This was a challenge I would not abide without acceptance, seeing that Calypso's glory is in her feet; and so I shook the reins on her withers, clapped my spurless heels to her flanks, and she stretched her long nose to the wind. Jack Blake was astride a beast that was very well in his way, being thick and short and strong for endurance. But neither for fortitude nor speed was he a match for the mare. So I beat him easily in the first rush, and, reaching the road where the coach was wobbling about, reined in, and leaned back.

"There's legs for you, Jack," says I,—"she's a hare, as you might have guessed. Damme! if you'd a beat, I would ha' thrown in the nag for riddance;" and by that, the coach being nigh abreast of me, I remembered the business in hand, and drew a pistol.

"There's a hole to blow in you, my frog," said I to the postilion, "if so be you do not halt! I'm not particular which. I like blood or money. One's same as t'other," I said roisterously.

"Damme! I prefer blood!" cries young Jack, pulling up his horse on its haunches, with a loud holloa, and wildly waving his weapon.

There was no resistance in the postilion any more than in a caterpillar; so Jack fixed him with his pistol, and I went to the window, where a sour countenance looked out.

"What rascals are you?" said the gentleman, a pompous fellow with a stout face and fat paunch.

"What is this outrage?" says he.

"'Tis the Dutch have took England," said I, "and are pressing for an indemnity. So make a contribution, kind gentleman!"

He scowled, and spoke loftily. "You do not know who I am, fellow! How dare you use the representative of the law with contumely? You shall suffer for this! I will have you hanged, rogue! Do ye not understand?"

"Pray pardon, My Lord," said I in a mockery of humility, "I am but the instrument. Disgorge then cheerfully, My Lord, for the good of the country, and incidentally for yours worshipfully. Come, I'll wager some goldfinches are hidden about that fat carcass."

"Rogue!" says he; and seeing him to be busy pulling at a pistol that would not come clear of his heavy body, I just pointed a backer at him.

"Come off that," I said, "or I'll riddle your gizzard, you old capon!" and I pretty soon had the contents of his pockets; for when it came to powder and ball, there was not even a yelp in him. He watched me with a moving face, and, gathering some of his native assurance, as he went unharmed, at last addressed me.

"You are on the way to the gallows, my man. I will remember your face, and will yet wear the black cap for you."

At that Jack, who was wearying of the delay, called out impatiently, "Haven't ye eat that morsel yet? Grrr-oo! Let me at him! Throw him out to me!"

That phrase put the notion in my head, which was the origin of the subsequent entertainment; and, seized of my whimsy, I opened the door of the carriage, and caught hold of the rooster.

"Come forth," said I, "and melt off that suet with exercise! Jack, have down that Cupid!"

And no sooner had he the command than Blake had pulled the postilion from his seat, and both he and his master lay in the dirty road.

"Damme, if I don't suit this coach!" said I, and



throwing the mare loose I leaped into the vehicle, and called loudly on my man to drive us. Well, 'twas plain enough to Jack, who took the hint merrily.

"My Lord," says he, louting like a beadle afore a Bishop. "I beg Your Lordship's pardon, but I thought Your Lordship spoke;" and when I had sworn at him like a live lord he did the same by his horse as I had by Calypso, and, mounting the coach's leader, smacked his whip, and drove on like any postilion, leaving man and master in the mud in the road.

We were not more than a few miles out of Salisbury, the which town we approached in fine style, with Jack using his whip, and myself lolling back in the cushions, and the horses jogging after us in the rear like obedient animals. To say the truth, I had thought very little of whither we were bound, being in so merry a mood, and young Blake was even more light headed than I. And so it came that when we were entered upon the town I put out my nose and shouted to him to stay, for I was not anxious to draw more eyes upon us than was necessary. But Jack whipped up his horses and paid no heed at all, the rascal; so that I was forced to draw in again, and wait what might fall with as good a grace as may be. But shortly after the coach came to a sudden stop, and looking out again there I saw in the road a white bearded, old maw worm with a paper in his hand, and robes of some office on his shelving shoulders.

"What's this?" says I to myself, getting afoot; and I came down to earth, just as the old chap hurried up.

"Save Your Lordship," says he, making a leg.

"Ay, save My Lordship," thinks I, "but what gruel's this?"

At that he began to read from the paper at a rate which I could hardly follow, and others gathered about him, some also in robes. I listened as well as I could, to determine what stuff this might be. And it was sniveling rubbish of how they were honored by my coming, and how the blessing of Providence would fall upon me, and the King, and what not. I was about to open my mouth to let 'em know pretty plainly how I looked upon their buffoonery, when the man in robes came to some words that made me shut it like the door in a jug.

"Ho!" says I to myself, "that's it, is it?"

Damme, if they did not take me for a Justice or a Judge that was expected! and I now understood the identity of the fat man we had left on the heath. The humor of it took me, and I straightened my features very solemnly.

"I thank you, worshipful sir," said I, "for this address. And you must be the Mayor."

"That I am, My Lord," said he, "by your leave. And I hope Your Lordship has had an excellent journey."

"Tolerable," said I. "I provi-

dentially escaped a pair of rascally highwaymen on the road."

There was eager surprise expressed by the little knot of followers, and then says little Mr. Mayor again:

"Ah, Your Lordship will have the sentencing of these some day, I doubt not."

"I would string 'em to the church steeple, had I my way," I said vehemently.

"Yours is the source and fount of justice, My Lord," he said respectfully.

"Aye," said I, remembering my new honor, and added with solemnity, "by His Majesty's favor."

The old pantaloon with the sloping shoulders was a pleasant old fellow, and as talkative a gossip as I ever met. Pretty soon he let me into the news of half the town, and all the while we were driving in state for the court house. For you will conceive that I was mightily taken by the accident of the situation, and was by this resolved to carry it through for a jest's sake. And so I had bid old spindle legs hop into the carriage, and given my instructions to Jack in a voice of insolent authority. "The court house, you roach!" says I, and he saluted with his broad face very solemn and passive.

The Mayor seemed overcome by the honor of accompanying a judge of His Majesty's courts, which is a respect I cannot understand. I have stood before these cullies in the dock, and rip me if I care two brass fardens for them!—thin shanked, knock-kneed, pot bellied guffers, most of 'em. Well, this graybeard entertained me royally with stories of the morals of the townsfolk, until we had reached the court house, where we descended, and, not wishing to discover my ignorance of the place, I desired him to lead on. It had appeared in his talk that the Judge, that was supposed to be I, was new to the job, and there was some wonder and anxiety as to how he would conduct the affairs. For, bless you! this was the assizes I was come to preside over. Lord love you! I could ha' fallen down and hugged myself as I thought of it, and of the old fat wether wadding and bleating some miles away on the empty moor.

But the knowledge that it was to so important an office I was called made me very careful, as you may guess. I kept my eyes wide open, and took a nudge for a knock. First of all there was the old



"Ay, Save My Lordship!" Says I. "What's This?"