

# THE COCK OF THE MOORS

## Galloping Dick Ryder Encounters a Strange Lady

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I HAVE known many gentry of the toby in my day, though 'twas never my practice to make myself familiar with any; and some I have joined with on occasion; and some I have ever avoided like the pest. I have drunk with Hancock and Irons, and I have heard tales of Jeremy Starbottle, who, to judge by them, was not all that he is commonly accounted. But of all the rank ill-mannered and crass-headed knaves I'll wager a nag Ned Scales was the worst. He was of an evil kidney from his birth, I take it, and his one eye scowled out of a rough quarried face like an owl's in a belfry. There was no knowing which way Scales looked, and there were some that swore his one eye, as it were swinging on a pivot, commanded all sides of his body. He was a loose-tongued, foul-faced, bandy-legged rogue, with a temper like poison. And the first time I clapped eyes on him in a tavern by York I took a distaste for him. The second time it was a longer affair and a pretty business, as you shall hear.

I was never overland of the North Road, nor wandered far in those cold regions where the purses were meager and the winters long; but 'twas the summer after I had encountered Scales that I found myself at three of a warm afternoon upon Wensil Moor with the sky heavy and menacing thunder.

"I shall crow where I like," I said, "and no one-eyed apple squire shall question me."

"I'll cut that comb for you!" he says furiously. "I'll learn you to trespass on my domain! Get you gone to your mincing South with its mollies and nizzies!" he said.

"May I perish," said I nettled at this demeanor, "if I let you go ere I have taught you to respect your betters, you one-eyed Yorkshireman!"

His one eye rolled at me viciously, and his fangs showed under his lip. "You're a pack of dancing masters in Lunnon," said he, "and dance you shall like a monkey on hot plates!"

"You toad!" said I, and whipping out my toast-fork I made at him.

**B**UT just on this moment came an interruption which surprised me; for Scales, even as he drew, put back his ugly head and seemed to hearken; and in the distance I could catch the rumbling of wheels.

"Strip your hide!" said he furiously. "I'll card you another time," and turned his nag abruptly round the bend in the hill.

turned never a feature, but surveyed him mildly. 'Tis true she was meager of body; but her face had something taking in it for a woman past her bloom.

"Now," says she slowly, "you present me with a nice problem, my good fellow. Here are two of you, thundering in my ears for plunder."

"By your Ladyship's leave, one," says I with a congee.

"Oh!" she says, raising her brows. "You are not in competition then? Why, that makes a difference."

"Stop, madam," said I, laughing. "I would have the jewels fair enough; but by Beelzebub I make no thunder for you! I know better manners than to scare timid women into fits, or pulling children."

"I will own I am wrong," says she submissively. "I spoke without thought. 'Tis but one of you, and t'other robs like a gentleman. But then I am naturally scared, as you say, and cannot measure my words."

But that set me off in laughter, to think that she was frightened, bless the old ewe! She would not have baaed at a wolf, let alone this broken-down mongrel cur, Ned Scales.

He rolled his round eye on her. "Deliver, and stop your mouth, you cat!" says he furiously. "And as for you, Dick Ryder, I'll spoil the topsman's business for you, if you intermeddle in my affairs!"

She looked from one to t'other, did her Ladyship, with a quiet face, as if she would estimate us both, and at last her eyes fastened, as if with a fascination, on the barrel of Scales's pistol.

"You have persuasive ways, sir," she said, and began to fiddle in her lap.

Now, at this I was sure she had surrendered, and was for delivering to Scales the jewel box all along of his barker; and that nettled me, who had used her so gently all through.

And so, not to be outwitted by a dull oaf like Scales, I plucked out my own pistol, and gave her the gleam of it.

"This side, your Ladyship," said I. "One barrel is as good as another."

"It seems I must decide which is the better," she said sharply, shutting her prim mouth.

"I would you had got your quarrel over previously and settled this awkward question of precedence."

"'Tis my lay!" shouted Ned Scales in a frenzy to see his enemy escaping him; and whether he did it by accident or design I know not; but the barker gave tongue, and the ball shot past the lady's head and out of the window by mine.

She winced and dodged after it had passed, but made no cry.

'Twas I that called out, and that I did right loudly. "The devil take you, you squab! I said, 'to treat a lady so! Hands off, or I will riddle your rat trap for you!'"

**S**CALES, who, to do him justice, was no coward, dropped his pistol, and drew his toast-fork, and would have sprung upon me; but that at that moment his nag whinnied, and twisted on the bridle he had over his arm, dragging him aback. I stood at the window of the chaise, pretty much indifferent, for I cared not two cackles for that red ogre, and I would have given him his quietus without a ruffle had he attacked me. But that which had frightened the horse now drew my attention; for, unnoticed, the thunderstorm that had threatened was upon us. The moor was grown black in the dark of that night sky, which moved leaden, blue black with intestine fires, menacing and slow. The heaven was pendent just above our heads, and as we gazed it roared and opened.

The flood descended in torrents, and Scales seized the horses of the chaise lest they should take fright. He shouted some words that I could not hear in the clamor, and pulled the wheels off the road, moving upon a rugged, jolting track. The postilion, who was the figure of fear, paid no heed at all, but sat on the box wretchedly. And what the old lady thought I know not, for in the sheets of rain I lost sight of her, and was content to follow in the wake of the chaise, whithersoever it might go.

'Twas not more than half a mile farther that a small tavern emerged from the storm, set in a wild scene, and no doubt a haunt of Scales and his kidney. So, says I to myself, as I leaped from the mare, this Yorkshire bully shall fight for his fodder,



"Is It a Case of Highway Robbery?" Says She Quietly.

'Twas a long, wild stretch of open country, of fall and woid, with an inn here and there, and an occasional farmhouse to sprinkle the monotony. And what I was doing there is more than I can remember now; but at all events I'll warrant 'twas only with the design at the bottom of my mind to get out of it as fast as the mare would carry me. And that made what happened all the more provoking. For 'twas this way.

I was jogging along in a passable mood, bound for some brighter and less barbarous place, when of a sudden I perceived a man astraddle of his horse gazing at me at the turn of a bluff in the moor, where the hills came down. And as I came nearer he pulled his beast across the way as if to bar it.

"Sit your weasand!" said I angrily, "what tippler's trick's this? I did not know Yorkshire ale was of so much strength."

"Ho!" said he, and stared. "I thought you was another," said he; "but, rip me! I have seen that phiz before."

"And, stab my reins! I have set peepers on that crib before," said I to that. "'Tis Ned Scales," said I.

"Your servant, Dick Ryder," said he in a surly voice. And we sat looking at each other in silence for awhile, for neither fancied t'other.

"Look ye here!" says he speaking first. "You may be cock of a hill down in the fat lands of the south, Dick Ryder," he says; "but I will be run through before you come to crow here!"

You may conceive that I followed his example, not knowing what was afoot, but willing to learn. And no sooner was I clear of the bluff than the explanation was plain: for

there rocking along the road towards us was a heavy chaise and pair. Scales was by this some way in front of me, and I pushed on the mare to overtake him; seeing which he snatched an oath to throw at me, brandished his pistol, and stuck his rowels into the nag. But I came up with the chaise as he did, and wheeled t'other side of the horses.

"Stand, damn ye!" says he to the postilion, who, poor fool! had all but brought his nags to a pause on the sight of us. But now he had them on their haunches, and sat atremble.

"Deliver, damn ye!" cries Ned Scales foully into the window, and a woman's head popped out.

She was of an age more than middle, with a small lined face, and full eyes that took in the position without wincing. "Is it a case of highway robbery?" she says quite quietly.

Ned Scales flung a surly answer at her, and threatened her with his pistol; but I from t'other side and t'other window spoke out.

"Give a lady a civil answer, my man!" I said in a lordly tone. She turned back her head, and regarded me steadfastly, as if she would measure me, and then returned to the contemplation of Scales, who was swearing like a trooper.

"If you fetch not forth those Hubberholme jewels which your Ladyship carries in two blinks of the sun, fester me! I'll blow right through your lean carcass!" says this toad.

Her Ladyship (which seemed to be her style)