

Prester John

by

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1. The Man On The Kirkcable Shore

I mind as if it were yesterday my first sight of the man. Little I knew at the time how big the moment was with destiny, or how often that face seen in the fitful moonlight would haunt my sleep and disturb my waking hours. But I mind yet the cold grue of terror I got from it, a terror which was surely more than the due of a few truant lads breaking the Sabbath with their play.

The town of Kirkcable, of which and its adjacent parish of Portincross my father was the minister, lies on a hillside above the little bay of Cagle, and looks squarely out on the North Sea. Round the horns of land which enclose the bay the coast shows on either side a battlement of stark red cliffs through which a burn or two makes a pass to the water's edge. The bay itself is ringed with fine clean sands, where we lads of the burgh school loved to bathe in the warm weather. But on long holidays the sport was to go farther afield among the cliffs; for there there were many deep caves and pools, where podleys might be caught with the line, and hid treasures sought for at the expense of the skin of the knees and the buttons of the trousers. Many a long Saturday I have passed in a crinkle of the cliffs, having lit a fire of driftwood, and made believe that I was a smuggler or a Jacobite new landed from France. There was a band of us in Kirkcable, lads of my own age, including Archie Leslie, the son of my father's session-clerk, and Tam Dyke, the provost's nephew. We were sealed to silence by the blood oath, and we bore each the name of some historic pirate or sailorman. I was Paul Jones, Tam was Captain Kidd, and Archie, need I say it, was Morgan himself. Our tryst was a cave where a little water called the Dyve Burn had cut its way through the cliffs to the sea. There we forgathered in the summer evenings and of a Saturday afternoon in winter, and told mighty tales of our prowess and flattered our silly hearts. But the sober truth is that our deeds were of the humblest, and a dozen of fish or a handful of apples was all our booty, and our greatest exploit a fight with the roughs at the Dyve tan-work.

My father's spring Communion fell on the last Sabbath of April, and on the particular Sabbath of which I speak the weather was mild and bright for the time of year. I had been surfeited with the Thursday's and Saturday's services, and the two long diets of worship on the Sabbath were hard for a lad of twelve to bear with the spring in his bones and the sun slanting through the gallery window. There still remained the service on the Sabbath evening - a doleful prospect, for the Rev. Mr Murdoch of Kilchristie, noted for the length of his discourses, had exchanged pulpits with my father. So my mind was ripe for the proposal of Archie Leslie, on our way home to tea, that by a little skill we might give the kirk the slip. At our Communion the pews were emptied of their regular occupants and the congregation seated itself as it pleased. The manse seat was full of the Kirkcable relations of Mr Murdoch, who had been invited there by my mother to hear him, and it was not hard to obtain permission to sit with Archie and Tam Dyke in the cock-loft in the gallery. Word was sent to Tam, and so it happened that three abandoned lads duly passed the plate and took their seats in the cock-loft. But when the bell had done jowing, and we heard by the sounds of their feet that the elders had gone in to the kirk, we slipped down the stairs and out of the side

door. We were through the churchyard in a twinkling, and hot-foot on the road to the Dyve Burn. It was the fashion of the genteel in Kirkcable to put their boys into what were known as Eton suits - long trousers, cut-away jackets, and chimney-pot hats. I had been one of the earliest victims, and well I remember how I fled home from the Sabbath school with the snowballs of the town roughs rattling off my chimney-pot. Archie had followed, his family being in all things imitators of mine. We were now clothed in this wearisome garb, so our first care was to secrete safely our hats in a marked spot under some whin bushes on the links. Tam was free from the bondage of fashion, and wore his ordinary best knickerbockers. From inside his jacket he unfolded his special treasure, which was to light us on our expedition - an evil-smelling old tin lantern with a shutter.

Tam was of the Free Kirk persuasion, and as his Communion fell on a different day from ours, he was spared the bondage of church attendance from which Archie and I had revolted. But notable events had happened that day in his church. A black man, the Rev. John Something-or-other, had been preaching. Tam was full of the portent. 'A nagger,' he said, 'a great black chap as big as your father, Archie.' He seemed to have banged the bookboard with some effect, and had kept Tam, for once in his life, awake. He had preached about the heathen in Africa, and how a black man was as good as a white man in the sight of God, and he had forecast a day when the negroes would have something to teach the British in the way of civilization. So at any rate ran the account of Tam Dyke, who did not share the preacher's views. 'It's all nonsense, Davie. The Bible says that the children of Ham were to be our servants. If I were the minister I wouldn't let a nigger into the pulpit. I wouldn't let him farther than the Sabbath school.'

Night fell as we came to the broomy spaces of the links, and ere we had breasted the slope of the neck which separates Kirkcable Bay from the cliffs it was as dark as an April evening with a full moon can be. Tam would have had it darker. He got out his lantern, and after a prodigious waste of matches kindled the candle-end inside, turned the dark shutter, and trotted happily on. We had no need of his lighting till the Dyve Burn was reached and the path began to descend steeply through the rift in the crags.

It was here we found that some one had gone before us. Archie was great in those days at tracking, his ambition running in Indian paths. He would walk always with his head bent and his eyes on the ground, whereby he several times found lost coins and once a trinket dropped by the provost's wife. At the edge of the burn, where the path turns downward, there is a patch of shingle washed up by some spate. Archie was on his knees in a second. 'Lads,' he cried, 'there's spoor here;' and then after some nosing, 'it's a man's track, going downward, a big man with flat feet. It's fresh, too, for it crosses the damp bit of gravel, and the water has scarcely filled the holes yet.'

We did not dare to question Archie's woodcraft, but it puzzled us who the stranger could be. In summer weather you might find a party of picnickers here, attracted by the fine hard sands at the burn mouth. But at this time of night and season of the year there was no call for any one to be trespassing on our preserves. No fishermen came this way, the lobster-pots being all to the east, and the stark headland of the Red Neb made the road to them by the water's

edge difficult. The tan-work lads used to come now and then for a swim, but you would not find a tan-work lad bathing on a chill April night. Yet there was no question where our precursor had gone. He was making for the shore. Tam unshuttered his lantern, and the steps went clearly down the corkscrew path. 'Maybe he is after our cave. We'd better go cannily.'

The glim was doused - the words were Archie's - and in the best contraband manner we stole down the gully. The business had suddenly taken an eerie turn, and I think in our hearts we were all a little afraid. But Tam had a lantern, and it would never do to turn back from an adventure which had all the appearance of being the true sort. Half way down there is a scrog of wood, dwarf alders and hawthorn, which makes an arch over the path. I, for one, was glad when we got through this with no worse mishap than a stumble from Tam which caused the lantern door to fly open and the candle to go out. We did not stop to relight it, but scrambled down the screes till we came to the long slabs of reddish rock which abutted on the beach. We could not see the track, so we gave up the business of scouts, and dropped quietly over the big boulder and into the crinkle of cliff which we called our cave.

There was nobody there, so we relit the lantern and examined our properties. Two or three fishing-rods for the burn, much damaged by weather; some sea-lines on a dry shelf of rock; a couple of wooden boxes; a pile of driftwood for fires, and a heap of quartz in which we thought we had found veins of gold - such was the modest furnishing of our den. To this I must add some broken clay pipes, with which we made believe to imitate our elders, smoking a foul mixture of coltsfoot leaves and brown paper. The band was in session, so following our ritual we sent out a picket. Tam was deputed to go round the edge of the cliff from which the shore was visible, and report if the coast was clear.

He returned in three minutes, his eyes round with amazement in the lantern light. 'There's a fire on the sands,' he repeated, 'and a man beside it.'

Here was news indeed. Without a word we made for the open, Archie first, and Tam, who had seized and shuttered his lantern, coming last. We crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered round, and there sure enough, on the hard bit of sand which the tide had left by the burn mouth, was a twinkle of light and a dark figure.

The moon was rising, and besides there was that curious sheen from the sea which you will often notice in spring. The glow was maybe a hundred yards distant, a little spark of fire I could have put in my cap, and, from its crackling and smoke, composed of dry seaweed and half-green branches from the burnside thickets. A man's figure stood near it, and as we looked it moved round and round the fire in circles which first of all widened and then contracted.

The sight was so unexpected, so beyond the beat of our experience, that we were all a little scared. What could this strange being want with a fire at half-past eight of an April Sabbath night on the Dyve Burn sands? We discussed the thing in whispers behind a boulder, but none of us had any solution. 'Belike he's come ashore in a boat,' said Archie. 'He's maybe a foreigner.' But I pointed out that, from the tracks which Archie himself had found, the man must have come

overland down the cliffs. Tam was clear he was a madman, and was for withdrawing promptly from the whole business.

But some spell kept our feet tied there in that silent world of sand and moon and sea. I remember looking back and seeing the solemn, frowning faces of the cliffs, and feeling somehow shut in with this unknown being in a strange union. What kind of errand had brought this interloper into our territory? For a wonder I was less afraid than curious. I wanted to get to the heart of the matter, and to discover what the man was up to with his fire and his circles.

The same thought must have been in Archie's head, for he dropped on his belly and began to crawl softly seawards. I followed, and Tam, with sundry complaints, crept after my heels. Between the cliffs and the fire lay some sixty yards of debris and boulders above the level of all but the high spring tides. Beyond lay a string of seaweedy pools and then the hard sands of the burnfoot. There was excellent cover among the big stones, and apart from the distance and the dim light, the man by the fire was too preoccupied in his task to keep much look-out towards the land. I remember thinking he had chosen his place well, for save from the sea he could not be seen. The cliffs are so undercut that unless a watcher on the coast were on their extreme edge he would not see the burnfoot sands.

Archie, the skilled tracker, was the one who all but betrayed us. His knee slipped on the seaweed, and he rolled off a boulder, bringing down with him a clatter of small stones. We lay as still as mice, in terror lest the man should have heard the noise and have come to look for the cause. By-and-by when I ventured to raise my head above a flat-topped stone I saw that he was undisturbed. The fire still burned, and he was pacing round it. On the edge of the pools was an outcrop of red sandstone much fissured by the sea. Here was an excellent vantage-ground, and all three of us curled behind it, with our eyes just over the edge. The man was not twenty yards off, and I could see clearly what manner of fellow he was. For one thing he was huge of size, or so he seemed to me in the half-light. He wore nothing but a shirt and trousers, and I could hear by the flap of his feet on the sand that he was barefoot.

Suddenly Tam Dyke gave a gasp of astonishment. 'Gosh, it's the black minister!' he said.

It was indeed a black man, as we saw when the moon came out of a cloud. His head was on his breast, and he walked round the fire with measured, regular steps. At intervals he would stop and raise both hands to the sky, and bend his body in the direction of the moon. But he never uttered a word.

'It's magic,' said Archie. 'He's going to raise Satan. We must bide here and see what happens, for he'll grip us if we try to go back. The moon's ower high.'

The procession continued as if to some slow music. I had been in no fear of the adventure back there by our cave; but now that I saw the thing from close at hand, my courage began to ebb. There was something desperately uncanny about this great negro, who had shed his clerical garments, and was now practising some strange magic alone by the sea. I had no doubt it was the black art, for there was that in the air and the scene which spelled the unlawful. As we watched, the circles stopped, and the man threw something on the fire. A thick smoke rose of which we could feel the aromatic scent, and when it was gone the

flame burned with a silvery blueness like moonlight. Still no sound came from the minister, but he took something from his belt, and began to make odd markings in the sand between the inner circle and the fire. As he turned, the moon gleamed on the implement, and we saw it was a great knife.

We were now scared in real earnest. Here were we, three boys, at night in a lonely place a few yards from a savage with a knife. The adventure was far past my liking, and even the intrepid Archie was having qualms, if I could judge from his set face. As for Tam, his teeth were chattering like a threshing-mill.

Suddenly I felt something soft and warm on the rock at my right hand. I felt again, and, lo! it was the man's clothes. There were his boots and socks, his minister's coat and his minister's hat.

This made the predicament worse, for if we waited till he finished his rites we should for certain be found by him. At the same time, to return over the boulders in the bright moonlight seemed an equally sure way to discovery. I whispered to Archie, who was for waiting a little longer. 'Something may turn up,' he said. It was always his way.

I do not know what would have turned up, for we had no chance of testing it. The situation had proved too much for the nerves of Tam Dyke. As the man turned towards us in his bowings and bendings, Tam suddenly sprang to his feet and shouted at him a piece of schoolboy rudeness then fashionable in Kirkcapple.

'Wha called ye partan-face, my bonny man?' Then, clutching his lantern, he ran for dear life, while Archie and I raced at his heels. As I turned I had a glimpse of a huge figure, knife in hand, bounding towards us.

Though I only saw it in the turn of a head, the face stamped itself indelibly upon my mind. It was black, black as ebony, but it was different from the ordinary negro. There were no thick lips and flat nostrils; rather, if I could trust my eyes, the nose was high-bridged, and the lines of the mouth sharp and firm. But it was distorted into an expression of such a devilish fury and amazement that my heart became like water.

We had a start, as I have said, of some twenty or thirty yards. Among the boulders we were not at a great disadvantage, for a boy can flit quickly over them, while a grown man must pick his way. Archie, as ever, kept his wits the best of us. 'Make straight for the burn,' he shouted in a hoarse whisper; we'll beat him on the slope.'

We passed the boulders and slithered over the outcrop of red rock and the patches of sea-pink till we reached the channel of the Dyve water, which flows gently among pebbles after leaving the gully. Here for the first time I looked back and saw nothing. I stopped involuntarily, and that halt was nearly my undoing. For our pursuer had reached the burn before us, but lower down, and was coming up its bank to cut us off.

At most times I am a notable coward, and in these days I was still more of one, owing to a quick and easily-heated imagination. But now I think I did a brave thing, though more by instinct than resolution. Archie was running first, and had already splashed through the burn; Tam came next, just about to cross, and the black man was almost at his elbow. Another second and Tam would have been in his clutches had I not yelled out a warning and made straight up the bank of

the burn. Tam fell into the pool - I could hear his spluttering cry - but he got across; for I heard Archie call to him, and the two vanished into the thicket which clothes all the left bank of the gully. The pursuer, seeing me on his own side of the water, followed straight on; and before I knew it had become a race between the two of us.

I was hideously frightened, but not without hope, for the screes and shelves of this right side of the gully were known to me from many a day's exploring. I was light on my feet and uncommonly sound in wind, being by far the best long-distance runner in Kirkcable. If I could only keep my lead till I reached a certain corner I knew of, I could outwit my enemy; for it was possible from that place to make a detour behind a waterfall and get into a secret path of ours among the bushes. I flew up the steep screes, not daring to look round; but at the top, where the rocks begin, I had a glimpse of my pursuer. The man could run. Heavy in build though he was he was not six yards behind me, and I could see the white of his eyes and the red of his gums. I saw something else - a glint of white metal in his hand. He still had his knife.

Fear sent me up the rocks like a seagull, and I scrambled and leaped, making for the corner I knew of. Something told me that the pursuit was slackening, and for a moment I halted to look round. A second time a halt was nearly the end of me. A great stone flew through the air, and took the cliff an inch from my head, half-blinding me with splinters. And now I began to get angry. I pulled myself into cover, skirted a rock till I came to my corner, and looked back for the enemy. There he was scrambling by the way I had come, and making a prodigious clatter among the stones. I picked up a loose bit of rock and hurled it with all my force in his direction. It broke before it reached him, but a considerable lump, to my joy, took him full in the face. Then my terrors revived. I slipped behind the waterfall and was soon in the thicket, and toiling towards the top.

I think this last bit was the worst in the race, for my strength was failing, and I seemed to hear those horrid steps at my heels. My heart was in my mouth as, careless of my best clothes, I tore through the hawthorn bushes. Then I struck the path and, to my relief, came on Archie and Tam, who were running slowly in desperate anxiety about my fate. We then took hands and soon reached the top of the gully.

For a second we looked back. The pursuit had ceased, and far down the burn we could hear the sounds as of some one going back to the sands.

'Your face is bleeding, Davie. Did he get near enough to hit you?' Archie asked.

'He hit me with a stone. But I gave him better. He's got a bleeding nose to remember this night by.'

We did not dare take the road by the links, but made for the nearest human habitation. This was a farm about half a mile inland, and when we reached it we lay down by the stack-yard gate and panted.

'I've lost my lantern,' said Tam. 'The big black brute! See if I don't tell my father.'

'Ye'll do nothing of the kind,' said Archie fiercely. 'He knows nothing about us and can't do us any harm. But if the story got out and he found out who we were, he'd murder the lot of US.'

He made us swear secrecy, which we were willing enough to do, seeing very clearly the sense in his argument. Then we struck the highroad and trotted back at our best pace to Kirkcapple, fear of our families gradually ousting fear of pursuit. In our excitement Archie and I forgot about our Sabbath hats, reposing quietly below a whin bush on the links.

We were not destined to escape without detection. As ill luck would have it, Mr Murdoch had been taken ill with the stomach-ache after the second psalm, and the congregation had been abruptly dispersed. My mother had waited for me at the church door, and, seeing no signs of her son, had searched the gallery. Then the truth came out, and, had I been only for a mild walk on the links, retribution would have overtaken my truancy. But to add to this I arrived home with a scratched face, no hat, and several rents in my best trousers. I was well cuffed and sent to bed, with the promise of full-dress chastisement when my father should come home in the morning.

My father arrived before breakfast next day, and I was duly and soundly whipped. I set out for school with aching bones to add to the usual depression of Monday morning. At the corner of the Nethergate I fell in with Archie, who was staring at a trap carrying two men which was coming down the street. It was the Free Church minister - he had married a rich wife and kept a horse - driving the preacher of yesterday to the railway station. Archie and I were in behind a doorpost in a twinkling, so that we could see in safety the last of our enemy. He was dressed in minister's clothes, with a heavy fur-coat and a brand new yellow-leather Gladstone bag. He was talking loudly as he passed, and the Free Church minister seemed to be listening attentively. I heard his deep voice saying something about the 'work of God in this place.' But what I noticed specially - and the sight made me forget my aching hinder parts - was that he had a swollen eye, and two strips of sticking-plaster on his cheek.

2. Furth! Fortune!

In this plain story of mine there will be so many wild doings ere the end is reached, that I beg my reader's assent to a prosaic digression. I will tell briefly the things which happened between my sight of the man on the Kirkcable sands and my voyage to Africa. I continued for three years at the burgh school, where my progress was less notable in my studies than in my sports. One by one I saw my companions pass out of idle boyhood and be set to professions. Tam Dyke on two occasions ran off to sea in the Dutch schooners which used to load with coal in our port; and finally his father gave him his will, and he was apprenticed to the merchant service. Archie Leslie, who was a year my elder, was destined for the law, so he left Kirkcable for an Edinburgh office, where he was also to take out classes at the college. I remained on at school till I sat alone by myself in the highest class - a position of little dignity and deep loneliness. I had grown a tall, square-set lad, and my prowess at Rugby football was renowned beyond the parishes of Kirkcable and Portincross. To my father I fear I was a disappointment. He had hoped for something in his son more bookish and sedentary, more like his gentle, studious self.

On one thing I was determined: I should follow a learned profession. The fear of being sent to an office, like so many of my schoolfellows, inspired me to the little progress I ever made in my studies. I chose the ministry, not, I fear, out of any reverence for the sacred calling, but because my father had followed it before me. Accordingly I was sent at the age of sixteen for a year's finishing at the High School of Edinburgh, and the following winter began my Arts course at the university.

If Fate had been kinder to me, I think I might have become a scholar. At any rate I was just acquiring a taste for philosophy and the dead languages when my father died suddenly of a paralytic shock, and I had to set about earning a living. My mother was left badly off, for my poor father had never been able to save much from his modest stipend. When all things were settled, it turned out that she might reckon on an income of about fifty pounds a year. This was not enough to live on, however modest the household, and certainly not enough to pay for the colleting of a son. At this point an uncle of hers stepped forward with a proposal. He was a well-to-do bachelor, alone in the world, and he invited my mother to live with him and take care of his house. For myself he proposed a post in some mercantile concern, for he had much influence in the circles of commerce. There was nothing for it but to accept gratefully. We sold our few household goods, and moved to his gloomy house in Dundas Street. A few days later he announced at dinner that he had found for me a chance which might lead to better things.

'You see, Davie,' he explained, 'you don't know the rudiments of business life. There's no house in the country that would take you in except as a common clerk, and you would never earn much more than a hundred pounds a year all your days. If you want to better your future you must go abroad, where white men are at a premium. By the mercy of Providence I met yesterday an old friend,

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