

The Tavern Knight

by

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On The March

He whom they called the Tavern Knight laughed an evil laugh - such a laugh as might fall from the lips of Satan in a sardonic moment.

He sat within the halo of yellow light shed by two tallow candles, whose sconces were two empty bottles, and contemptuously he eyed the youth in black, standing with white face and quivering lip in a corner of the mean chamber. Then he laughed again, and in a hoarse voice, sorely suggestive of the bottle, he broke into song. He lay back in his chair, his long, spare legs outstretched, his spurs jingling to the lilt of his ditty whose burden ran:

On the lip so red of the wench that's sped
His passionate kiss burns, still-O!
For 'tis April time, and of love and wine
Youth's way is to take its fill-O!
Down, down, derry-do!

So his cup he drains and he shakes his reins,
And rides his rake-helly way-O!
She was sweet to woo and most comely, too,
But that was all yesterday-O!
Down, down, derry-do!

The lad started forward with something akin to a shiver.

"Have done," he cried, in a voice of loathing, "or, if croak you must, choose a ditty less foul!"

"Eh?" The ruffler shook back the matted hair from his lean, harsh face, and a pair of eyes that of a sudden seemed ablaze glared at his companion; then the lids drooped until those eyes became two narrow slits - catlike and cunning - and again he laughed.

"Gad's life, Master Stewart, you have a temerity that should save you from grey hairs! What is't to you what ditty my fancy seizes on? 'Swounds, man, for three weary months have I curbed my moods, and worn my throat dry in praising the Lord; for three months have I been a living monument of Covenanting zeal and godliness; and now that at last I have shaken the dust of your beggarly Scotland from my heels, you - the veriest milksop that ever ran tottering from its mother's lap would chide me because, yon bottle being done, I sing to keep me from waxing sad in the contemplation of its emptiness!"

There was scorn unutterable on the lad's face as he turned aside.

"When I joined Middleton's horse and accepted service under you, I held you to be at least a gentleman," was his daring rejoinder.

For an instant that dangerous light gleamed again from his companion's eye. Then, as before, the lids drooped, and, as before, he laughed.

"Gentleman!" he mocked. "On my soul, that's good! And what may you know of gentlemen, Sir Scot? Think you a gentleman is a Jack Presbyter, or a droning member of your kirk committee, strutting it like a crow in the gutter? Gadswounds, boy, when I was your age, and George Villiers lived - "

"Oh, have done!" broke in the youth impetuously. "Suffer me to leave you, Sir Crispin, to your bottle, your croaking, and your memories."

"Aye, go your ways, sir; you'd be sorry company for a dead man - the sorriest ever my evil star led me into. The door is yonder, and should you chance to break your saintly neck on the stairs, it is like to be well for both of us."

And with that Sir Crispin Galliard lay back in his chair once more, and took up the thread of his interrupted song

But, heigh-o! she cried, at the Christmas-tide,
That dead she would rather be-O!
Pale and wan she crept out of sight, and wept

'Tis a sorry -

A loud knock that echoed ominously through the mean chamber, fell in that instant upon the door. And with it came a panting cry of -

"Open, Cris! Open, for the love of God!"

Sir Crispin's ballad broke off short, whilst the lad paused in the act of quitting the room, and turned to look to him for direction.

"Well, my master," quoth Galliard, "for what do you wait?"

"To learn your wishes, sir," was the answer sullenly delivered.

"My wishes! Rat me, there's one without whose wishes brook less waiting! Open, fool!"

Thus rudely enjoined, the lad lifted the latch and set wide the door, which opened immediately upon the street. Into the apartment stumbled a roughly clad man of huge frame. He was breathing hard, and fear was writ large upon his rugged face. An instant he paused to close the door after him, then turning to Galliard, who had risen and who stood eyeing him in astonishment -

"Hide me somewhere, Cris," he panted - his accent proclaiming his Irish origin. "My God, hide me, or I'm a dead man this night!"

"Slife, Hogan! What is toward? Has Cromwell overtaken us?"

"Cromwell, quotha? Would to Heaven 'twere no worse! I've killed a man!"

"If he's dead, why run?"

The Irishman made an impatient gesture.

"A party of Montgomery's foot is on my heels. They've raised the whole of Penrith over the affair, and if I'm taken, soul of my body, 'twill be a short shrift they'll give me. The King will serve me as poor Wrycraft was served two days ago at Kendal. Mother of Mercy!" he broke off, as his ear caught the clatter of feet and the murmur of voices from without. "Have you a hole I can creep into?"

"Up those stairs and into my room with you!" said Crispin shortly. "I will try to head them off. Come, man, stir yourself; they are here."

Then, as with nimble alacrity Hogan obeyed him and slipped from the room, he turned to the lad, who had been a silent spectator of what had passed. From the pocket of his threadbare doublet he drew a pack of greasy playing cards.

"To table," he said laconically.

But the boy, comprehending what was required of him, drew back at sight of those cards as one might shrink from a thing unclean.

"Never!" he began. "I'll not defile - "

"To table, fool!" thundered Crispin, with a vehemence few men could have withstood. "Is this a time for Presbyterian scruples? To table, and help a me play this game, or, by the living God, I'll - " Without completing his threat he leaned forward until Kenneth felt his hot, wine-laden breath upon his cheek. Cowed by his words, his gesture, and above all, his glance, the lad drew up a chair, mumbling in explanation - intended as an excuse to himself for his weakness - that he submitted since a man's life was at stake.

Opposite him Galliard resumed his seat with a mocking smile that made him wince. Taking up the cards, he flung a portion of them to the boy, whilst those he retained he spread fanwise in his hand as if about to play. Silently Kenneth copied his actions.

Nearer and louder grew the sounds of the approach, lights flashed before the window, and the two men, feigning to play, sat on and waited.

"Have a care, Master Stewart," growled Crispin sourly, then in a louder voice - for his quick eye had caught a glimpse of a face that watched them from the window - "I play the King of Spades!" he cried, with meaning look.

A blow was struck upon the door, and with it came the command to "Open in the King's name!" Softly Sir Crispin rapped out an oath. Then he rose, and with a last look of warning to Kenneth, he went to open. And as he had greeted Hogan he now greeted the crowd mainly of soldiers - that surged about the threshold.

"Sirs, why this ado? Hath the Sultan Oliver descended upon us?"

In one hand he still held his cards, the other he rested upon the edge of the open door. It was a young ensign who stood forward to answer him.

"One of Lord Middleton's officers hath done a man to death not half an hour agone; he is an Irishman Captain Hogan by name."

"Hogan - Hogan?" repeated Crispin, after the manner of one who fumbles in his memory. "Ah, yes - an Irishman with a grey head and a hot temper. And he is dead, you say?"

"Nay, he has done the killing."

"That I can better understand. 'Tis not the first time, I'll be sworn."

"But it will be the last, Sir Crispin."

"Like enough. The King is severe since we crossed the Border." Then in a brisker tone: "I thank you for bringing me this news," said he, "and I regret that in my poor house there be naught I can offer you wherein to drink His Majesty's health ere you proceed upon your search. Give you good night, sir." And by drawing back a pace he signified his wish to close the door and be quit of them.

"We thought," faltered the young officer, "that - that perchance you would assist us by -"

"Assist you!" roared Crispin, with a fine assumption of anger. "Assist you take a man? Sink me, sir, I would have you know I am a soldier, not a tipstaff!"

The ensign's cheeks grew crimson under the sting of that veiled insult.

"There are some, Sir Crispin, that have yet another name for you."

"Like enough - when I am not by," sneered Crispin. "The world is full of foul tongues in craven heads. But, sirs, the night air is chill and you are come inopportunately, for, as you'll perceive, I was at play. Haply you'll suffer me to close the door."

"A moment, Sir Crispin. We must search this house. He is believed to have come this way."

Crispin yawned. "I will spare you the trouble. You may take it from me that he could not be here without my knowledge. I have been in this room these two hours past."

"Twill not suffice," returned the officer doggedly. "We must satisfy ourselves."

"Satisfy yourselves?" echoed the other, in tones of deep amazement. "What better satisfaction can I afford you than my word? 'Swounds, sir jackanapes," he added, in a roar that sent the lieutenant back a pace as though he had been struck, "am I to take it that your errand is a trumped-up business to affront me? First you invite me to turn tipstaff, then you add your cursed innuendoes of what people say of me, and now you end by doubting me! You must satisfy yourself!" he thundered, waxing fiercer at every word. "Linger another moment on that threshold, and d -n me, sir, I'll give you satisfaction of another flavour! Be off!"

Before that hurricane of passion the ensign recoiled, despite himself.

"I will appeal to General Montgomery," he threatened.

"Appeal to the devil! Had you come hither with your errand in a seemly fashion you had found my door thrown wide in welcome, and I had received you courteously. As it is, sir, the cause for complaint is on my side, and complain I will. We shall see whether the King permits an old soldier who has followed the fortunes of his family these eighteen years to be flouted by a malapert bantam of yesterday's brood!"

The subaltern paused in dismay. Some demur there was in the gathered crowd. Then the officer fell back a pace, and consulted an elderly trooper at his elbow. The trooper was of opinion that the fugitive must have gone farther. Moreover, he could not think, from what Sir Crispin had said, that it would have been possible for Hogan to have entered the house. With this, and realizing that much trouble and possible loss of time must result from Sir Crispin's obstinacy, did they attempt to force a way into the house, and bethinking himself, also, maybe, how well this rascally ruffler stood with Lord Middleton, the ensign determined to withdraw, and to seek elsewhere.

And so he took his leave with a venomous glance, and a parting threat to bring the matter to the King's ears, upon which Galliard slammed the door before he had finished.

There was a curious smile on Crispin's face as he walked slowly to the table, and resumed his seat.

"Master Stewart," he whispered, as he spread his cards anew, "the comedy is not yet played out. There is a face glued to the window at this moment, and I make little doubt that for the next hour or so we shall be spied upon. That pretty fellow was born to be a thief-taker."

The boy turned a glance of sour reproof upon his companion. He had not stirred from his chair while Crispin had been at the door.

"You lied to them," he said at last.

"Sh! Not so loud, sweet youth," was the answer that lost nothing of menace by being subdued. "Tomorrow, if you please, I will account to you for offending your delicate soul by suggesting a falsehood in your presence. To-night we have a man's life to save, and that, I think, is work enough. Come, Master Stewart, we are being watched. Let us resume our game."

His eye, fixed in cold command upon the boy, compelled obedience. And the lad, more out of awe of that glance than out of any desire to contribute to the saving of Hogan, mutely consented to keep up this pretence. But in his soul he rebelled. He had been reared in an atmosphere of honourable and religious bigotry. Hogan was to him a coarse ruffler; an evil man of the sword; such a man as he abhorred and accounted a disgrace to any army - particularly to an army launched upon England under the auspices of the Solemn League and Covenant.

Hogan had been guilty of an act of brutality; he had killed a man; and Kenneth deemed himself little better, since he assisted in harbouring instead of discovering him, as he held to be his duty. But 'neath the suasion of Galliard's inexorable eye he sat limp and docile, vowing to himself that on the morrow he would lay the matter before Lord Middleton, and thus not only endeavour to make amends for his present guilty silence, but rid himself also of the companionship of this ruffianly Sir Crispin, to whom no doubt a hempen justice would be meted.

Meanwhile, he sat on and left his companion's occasional sallies unanswered. In the street men stirred and lanthorns gleamed fitfully, whilst ever and anon a face surmounted by a morion would be pressed against the leaded panes of the window.

Thus an hour wore itself out during which poor Hogan sat above, alone with his anxiety and unsavoury thoughts.

Arcades Ambo

Towards midnight at last Sir Crispin flung down his cards and rose. It was close upon an hour and a half since Hogan's advent. In the streets the sounds had gradually died down, and peace seemed to reign again in Penrith. Yet was Sir Crispin cautious - for to be cautious and mistrustful of appearances was the lesson life had taught him.

"Master Stewart," said he, "it grows late, and I doubt me you would be abed. Give you good night!"

The lad rose. A moment he paused, hesitating, then -

"To-morrow, Sir Crispin - " he began. But Crispin cut him short.

"Leave to-morrow till it dawn, my friend. Give you good night. Take one of those noisome tapers with you, and go."

In sullen silence the boy took up one of the candle-bearing bottles and passed out through the door leading to the stairs.

For a moment Crispin remained standing by the table, and in that moment the expression of his face was softened. A momentary regret of his treatment of the boy stirred in him. Master Stewart might be a milksop, but Crispin accounted him leastways honest, and had a kindness for him in spite of all. He crossed to the window, and throwing it wide he leaned out, as if to breathe the cool night air, what time he hummed the refrain of 'Rub-a-dub-dub' for the edification of any chance listeners.

For a half-hour he lingered there, and for all that he used the occasion to let his mind stray over many a theme, his eyes were alert for the least movement among the shadows of the street. Reassured at last that the house was no longer being watched, he drew back, and closed the lattice.

Upstairs he found the Irishman seated in dejection upon his bed, awaiting him.

"Soul of my body!" cried Hogan ruefully, "I was never nearer being afraid in my life."

Crispin laughed softly for answer, and besought of him the tale of what had passed.

"Tis simple enough, faith," said Hogan coolly. "The landlord of The Angel hath a daughter maybe 'twas after her he named his inn - who owns a pair of the most seductive eyes that ever a man saw perdition in. She hath, moreover, a taste for dalliance, and my brave looks and martial trappings did for her what her bold eyes had done for me. We were becoming the sweetest friends, when, like an incarnate fiend, that loutish clown, her lover, sweeps down upon us, and, with more jealousy than wit, struck me - struck me, Harry Hogan! Soul of my body, think of it, Cris!" And he grew red with anger at the

recollection. "I took him by the collar of his mean smock and flung him into the kennel - the fittest bed he ever lay in. Had he remained there it had been well for him; but the fool, accounting himself affronted, came up to demand satisfaction. I gave it him, and plague on it - he's dead!"

"An ugly tale," was Crispin's sour comment.

"Ugly, maybe," returned Hogan, spreading out his palms, "but what choice had I? The fool came at me, bilbo in hand, and I was forced to draw.'

"But not to slay, Hogan!"

"Twas an accident. Sink me, it was! I sought his sword-arm; but the light was bad, and my point went through his chest instead."

For a moment Crispin stood frowning, then his brow cleared, as though he had put the matter from him.

"Well, well - since he's dead, there's an end to it."

"Heaven rest his soul!" muttered the Irishman, crossing himself piously. And with that he dismissed the subject of the great wrong that through folly he had wrought - the wanton destruction of a man's life, and the poisoning of a woman's with a remorse that might be everlasting.

"It will tax our wits to get you out of Penrith," said Crispin. Then, turning and looking into the Irishman's great, good-humoured face - "I am sorry you leave us, Hogan," he added.

"Not so am I," quoth Hogan with a shrug. "Such a march as this is little to my taste. Bah! Charles Stuart or Oliver Cromwell, 'tis all one to me. What care I whether King or Commonwealth prevail? Shall Harry Hogan be the better or the richer under one than under the other? Oddslife, Cris, I have trailed a pike or handled a sword in well-nigh every army in Europe. I know more of the great art of war than all the King's generals rolled into one. Think you, then, I can rest content with a miserable company of horse when plunder is forbidden, and even our beggarly pay doubtful? Whilst, should things go ill - as well they may, faith, with an army ruled by parsons - the wage will be a swift death on field or gallows, or a lingering one in the plantations, as fell to the lot of those poor wretches Noll drove into England after Dunbar. Soul of my body, it is not thus that I had looked to fare when I took service at Perth. I had looked for plunder, rich and plentiful plunder, according to the usages of warfare, as a fitting reward for a toilsome march and the perils gone through.

"Thus I know war, and for this have I followed the trade these twenty years. Instead, we have thirty thousand men, marching to battle as prim and orderly as a parcel of acolytes in a Corpus-Christi procession. 'Twas not so bad in Scotland haply because the country

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