

Crowdy Marsh

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I believe that one of the most desolate spots in the west is the moor about Brown Willy, and one of the most unpleasant experiences I have encountered is being lost at the fall of night on that moor late in the autumn, and when the days are short and the darkness settles down as a black pall over moor and fen, when even the tors no longer reflect the dying light, and are seen only as black profiles against a sky in which is scarce a ray or only a ghastly glare in the west.

I was out one day at the end of October with my friend Richards, shooting on the Bodmin moors, or to be more exact, we went out with the purpose of shooting blackcock, but saw not one. The fact that we had been unsuccessful tended to make us prolong our tramp, always hoping that we might see one, and always disappointed. At last I said, "Come, Richards, we must turn back; the sun has set, and I don't want to lose my way about Brown Willy and run the risk of stumbling into Crowdy Marsh."

Brown Willy, the highest of the Cornish tors, is not of great height, only 1,375 feet, but with its five-horned head it proves a bold and conspicuous object, and in ancient times it was a beacon; three immense cairns are piled up on the summit on which once blazed fires to warn the country round when foreign sails appeared on the sea, and there was thought to be risk of invasion.

We were bound for Camelford, where is a comfortable hotel, and where we were aware that a good supper was awaiting us.

But then—how to get there? Now the moor about Brown Willy and his sister, Rough Tor, is peculiarly nasty with bogs, and these bogs are not to be trifled with. On the west of Rough Tor is Stannon Marsh, and below the tor it possesses a little odious morass of its own, Rough Tor Marsh, in which the De Lank river rises. Then under Buttern Hill is another, much bigger, that festers in its own muck, feeding no stream at all. Due north of Rough Tor on Davidstow Moor is a tract of comparatively dry land, lying between the swamp just mentioned and the redoubted Crowdy Marsh, but this measures only two-thirds of a mile in breadth, and Crowdy Marsh throws out a wet and oozy arm into this dry moorland to grip

and draw under an incautious wanderer.

Now it is no joke finding one's way by daylight from Brown Willy across this bridle path between morasses into the Camelford Road, and I did not much relish the prospect of venturing on it with night falling. So now I urged Richards to step out, as we had seven miles to walk if we went the way indicated. But there was another way over Lower Moor between Stannon Marsh and Crowdy that was much shorter, but I was not well acquainted with that portion of the moor, and did not like to venture on it in the dark. It was a mistake, as a direct line ran from the monument on Polden Down to Camelford. However, ill-luck attended us all that day, and I chose to push on over Davidstow Moor, where I knew I should strike the high road in two miles and a half, whereas by the other way I would have no main road at all, and I thought I might get lost among lanes when leaving the open moor.

We paced on for some time cheerily, and a certain failing amount of light enabled me to see that we were skirting Rough Tor; and then I said to my companion:

"Now we must look alive, and mind our steps. We have Scylla on one side and Charybdis on the other, and I do not think there is much choice in rotten apples; I would as soon be engulfed in one as in the other. Look alive, man! By Jove! I am in water."

And so I was. I floundered forward and went in to my middle. Then I threw my gun down, cast myself across it, and drew my legs with a tremendous effort out of the slime that sucked at me, and had indeed, by suction, torn off one of my gaiters.

I called out to Richards to keep away from me, and aim for the lightest spot in the sky; as for me, I would find my way out as best I could.

The only possible way of getting out of these bogs is to aim for some point and work steadily forward towards it, for otherwise one shifts from one tussock of grass or mass of grey moss to another, and loses all knowledge of direction, and very often one travels about in a circle.

But just now it was not easy to take a direction; to the north there was nothing conspicuous at which one could aim; and yet, to the north we had to go. How I cursed my folly in taking this course instead of that from the monument. Lanes, bad though they might be and bewildering, could not swallow one up as would these

bogs, if they got hold of you. Moreover, the cold of the slimy water was intense, and numbed the legs and feet. At last, creeping forward on my breast with the gun athwart me, I reached a hump of drier ground, and seated myself on it to gather breath before proceeding farther, worming my way through the mire. I called to Richards to go forward; I would follow. But I received no answer. I called again and again, but met with no response.

There was still a long tract of morass very similar in nature to that through part of which I had struggled, and I was fain to get through it in the same manner as before, writhing along like a lizard. Then my strength gave way. The strain on my muscles had been too great, and I turned dizzy. What had become of Richards I did not know. I greatly feared that he had been swallowed up. Exhausted, panting, my brow beaded with sweat, yet at the same time conscious of extreme cold from immersion, I tried to gather my senses together. I was still not out of the morass, I did not know in which direction to worm my way. The stench in my nostrils of the decomposing matter sickened me. As I thus lay prostrate, I heard the peal of a horn. A steely light still lingered in the south west, not enough to enable me to distinguish forms at a distance. Moreover, I could not turn my head where I lay and look in the direction whence came the sound. Then I heard the deep-mouthed baying of hounds and another peal of the horn nearer than before. Next moment, to my ineffable surprise, I saw the dark form of a horseman in full gallop pass near me, over the surface of the morass, followed by a pack. As one of the hounds swept by me, touching me, by a sudden impulse I let go my gun, and threw my arms about the body of the dog. In an instant I was whirled from the tussock of grass on which I lay, and carried forward swift as the wind, ploughing through water, coarse grass and moss blinding me, but I held fast desperately, and in a few moments felt that I was on firm ground, whereupon I relaxed my hold and rolled over on one side. Then I saw before me a rude stone house, thatched doubtless with rushes and heather, before which the huntsman had drawn up, and the hounds were barking about the door. There was either no window to the cottage, or that which existed had been so well closed by shutters as to allow no ray of light to appear; a streak, however, issued from below the door.

The horn rang out again. Then the door was thrown open, and in the doorway, against the red light from a peat fire within, appeared the forms of three women. Their faces I could not see, nor was there light sufficient coming from the house to

enable me to distinguish the features of the horseman. But I could make out that he had saddlebags cast over the back of the steed. These, without a word of explanation or salutation, he lifted and cast at the women, who caught them and at once retired within. I could see a table, and on to this the women poured the contents of the bags that glittered, but whether from the reflection of the fire or from phosphoric light in themselves I had no means of judging. Without a word one woman came forth, and threw the empty bags to the huntsman, who caught them dexterously, replaced them over his saddle, sounded another blast, and instantly he, followed by the pack, was off careering over the moor, and the last I saw of him and the hounds was profiled against the dying light in the sky on the shoulder of a tor. The women had shut the door. I had been un-noticed.

I remained where I lay for a few minutes, too exhausted to rise, too perplexed to know what to do. But by degrees I recovered energy and framed resolutions; and, rising to my feet that were stiff and numbed, I went to the door, knocked, and remained awaiting a reply. None came. I knocked again; and then, impatient at the delay, unhasped the door uninvited, and entered.

The spectacle that met my eyes was sufficiently surprising to make me doubt whether I were awake or dreaming. About the table sat the three women, aged, grey and haggard, with long, lean fingers, sorting the contents of the saddlebags heaped upon it. But what that was among which their fingers moved I could not tell. There appeared to be small, flickering lights of various colour, and different degrees of brilliancy; interspersed in the heap were dark particles.

"I am sorry to intrude," said I, as the three women raised their faces and looked at me. They were strangely alike, all much of an age, equally grey, wan and weird, with their hair hanging over their shoulders. All had their sleeves rolled up above their elbows; the nervous arms so lean that their hands at the extremities looked preternaturally large.

"I must apologise," I said. "I sank up to my shoulders in Crowdy Marsh, and I extricated myself with the utmost difficulty, and am so exhausted and so chilled that I am constrained to throw myself on your hospitality, and entreat you to allow me to rest so as to warm myself and get somewhat dry before proceeding on my way."

"You can come in and rest," said one of the sisters.

“Sit by the fire,” said the second.

“Drink from the simmering cauldron,” said the third.

Then without further regarding me, they proceeded with their work. I took them at their word. I drew towards the hearth, and crouched over the fire. My teeth chattered with cold. On the hob stood a mug and ladle. Without more ado I dipped the long-handled ladle into the pot, and poured the liquid it brought tip into the mug and set that to my lips. The draught was fiery; it sent a glow through my arteries and inflamed my brain. It was excellent in flavour and strength, and I felt that it nerved me and enabled me to resist the chill that had invaded my members, and was stealing upon my heart. My garments began to steam. It was not judicious to dry them upon me by the fire, but what else could I do? I felt that I must drive away the numbness, so as to enable me to pursue my course; and the exertion, I trusted, would restore circulation and prevent the ill effects of my immersion in the morass.

I now looked at the sisters—for sisters they certainly were. What could have induced these women to settle on the edge of the ill-savoured and unwholesome marsh? No one with common sense I should have supposed would have done that, but would have selected a habitation on higher ground, above the mists that hung over Crowdy. Possibly the moor-slope was so thickly strewn with granite masses, as to leave only a vacant spot for their hovel and little field near the brim of the morass. This alone could explain their settling in such a spot.

I puzzled my head to make out on what the sisters were engaged.

At one moment I supposed that they were sorting out the crystals that go by the name of Cornish diamonds. At another I conjectured that they were collecting glow-worms; but then, I considered, these insects are not seen in October.

Two of the sisters were gathering what they collected into little heaps at their sides on the board; the third had a pan on the floor at her feet, and I noticed that she picked out and raked together only such particles as showed no light, and these she dropped into the pan.

As my chill passed off; my interest in what proceeded under my eyes increased. I could restrain my curiosity no longer, and, drawing my stool to the table, asked: “Would you mind informing me what those articles are which you are

selecting so carefully?"

"Faculties," replied the woman who sat nearest to me.

"Gifts," said the second.

"Talents," said the third.

"I am in no degree enlightened," said I. "Who was the rider who came to your door and surrendered to you his saddlebags?"

"Dewer, the great master," answered the first.

"He gathers up the neglected, the unused, and the misused faculties," explained the second.

"In Nature nothing is lost," said the third.

"Everyone," continued the first, "is given faculties. Such as have been received and by stress of circumstances have not been brought to perfection go into my heap."

"I select all such faculties as are wilfully neglected," said the second. "They go into my heap."

"All such as are misused, turned to evil, I cast into the pan," said the third. "Look yonder where they lie, like slugs sodden in salt water."

"Mine are for redistribution," said the first. "The same with mine," said the second.

"Mine go into Crowdy Marsh," said the third.

She stooped, lifted a trap-door, and shot the contents of her pan into the hole beneath the floor.

"That is the sewer discharging into the morass, and they run down into Crowdy, where they rot and stink."

"Dewer," said the first, "rides over the world, and collects human faculties from the souls of men and women—faculties implanted in them when they come into the world, that have been unused, neglected, or ill-used. In Nature, there is no waste."

"We sort them out for redistribution," said the second.

"Save such as have been ill-used; they go to feed Crowdy," added the third.

I was not much the wiser for their explanation.

"Excuse me," I said, "generalities are beyond my powers of comprehension; come to particulars, and then I get hold of the sense. What, for instance, is that?"

I pointed to a sparklet that the first was handling. It was luminous with a steady ray.

"That," said she, "is the faculty of the strategist. It was implanted in a man, and had circumstances been propitious he would have made a great general—a Wellington, or a Napoleon. Had he been in Parliament he would have been in the Ministry before long, and have been a marvellous man for organising and holding his party together. But circumstances were unfavourable. He was to the end of his days a coalheaver. He is in no degree blameworthy. He had not the chance."

She took up a luminous drop that diffused a soft, sweet radiance.

"This," she said, "is the maternal faculty. It was disposed of to a woman who never had the offer of a man's hand, and died, sorely against her will, as an old maid. She never had the chance."

Then I turned to the other sister.

"Excuse my freedom," said I, "if I say to you what I did to your sister. Do not give me generalities, but particular instances. What is that star you hold between your finger and thumb that has in it all the prismatic colours?"

"That," said she, "is the artist's faculty. He in whom it was lodged as a child showed marked aptitude with his pencil. He could catch a likeness in a moment, and with him every stroke told. His father, like a reasonable man, saw what was the bent of his son's genius, and directed his education in conformity with his taste for art. He sent him to the Royal Academy."

"Which killed the artistic faculty in him," I interrupted.

"No; that was not so. His father died early and left him a competence; he was not rich, but in easy circumstances. He laid aside his brush and palette, and spent his time in golf, cricket, billiards, bridge and poker; in a word, became a loafer and

pleasure seeker, and did nothing with the talent that was in him, and which he knew was there, but was too lazy to develop. He had the chance and threw it away. He goes to my heap."

"And that," said I, pointing to another drop.

"It is the modelling faculty," said the second sister. "It was bestowed on a woman."

"What, to make a sculptor of her?"

"No; the moulding of character. She married a very rich man, and had many children—ten in all. She might have shaped their minds and characters. But she was inert. She left them to nurses and governesses, and became a great society lady, neglecting her domestic duties and the direction of her children's future. She had ten chances and threw them all away. This goes into my heap."

"See," exclaimed the third sister; "here is a pile of talents that have been, not neglected, but misused; that have been dedicated to evil only. This," taking up what looked like a dead slug, "this—"

"Stay," I interrupted. "Faculties, talents, turned to bad ends are manifest enough in the world. I have come across many of them, to my cost. I need no special examples; I have seen too many of them already."

Suddenly the sisters cried out: "Throw yourselves down. He comes! He comes! As you value your eyesight do not look up."

I saw the three hags cover up their eyes and drop their faces upon the table. I obeyed, and cast myself down.

Then I heard a rushing sound, and a brilliant light filled the room; so brilliant was it, that although my face was covered, It dazzled me through my fingers and eyelids. I could not have looked up. I should have been blinded.

In a moment the light was gone; the sound had passed away. I rose and resumed my place at the table.

"He has passed through," said one sister.

"Who?" I inquired.

"The Angel of Redistribution," answered the first. "See, my pile has gone. His right hand gathered it up."

"And his left hand took up mine," said the second.

"Of mine he has taken nothing," said the third sister; "all mine goes down the drain into the slough of rottenness."

Then the sisters rose to their feet.

"The moon has risen," said the first. "It is time, stranger, for you to go."

"Keep to the right above the marsh," advised the second.

"They have come out in quest of you," said the third.

I also had risen. I was no more to remain in the cottage. That was obvious. I made my way to the door, but, standing there, I turned for the purpose of thanking the sisters; but instantly the door was slammed in my face and I was shut out.

Presently I heard my name called. I saw lights. Then I was grasped by the hand, and Richards exclaimed:

"By the living Jingo! I thought never to see you again. How did you manage to escape?"

"I escaped in a strange fashion," I replied. "But of that on a future occasion. Hark!"

I heard the blast of the horn and the baying of hounds.

"Look," I cried, as I saw the Wild Hunt sweep over the moonlit side of a tor in mad career.

"I hear nothing and see nothing," said Richards.

"You must see—look yonder. Do you not see them?"

"See what?"

"Dewer and his pack."

"I see nothing but the broken shadows of clouds flying over the face of the moon. On my word, friend! Immersion in Crowdy Mire seems to have quickened

your faculties to see and to hear what are unperceived by other eyes and ears”

“It may be so—it must be so,” I said meditatively. “I have had strange experiences this night, such as are not given to other men.”