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The Broom-Squire

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THE BROOM-SQUIRE

by

S. BARING-GOULD

Author of "Mehalah," "Court Royal," "The Gaverocks,"
"Noemi," "Eve," Etc., Etc.

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THE BROOM-SQUIRE

CHAPTER I.

AT THE SIGN OF THE SHIP.

On a September evening, before the setting of the sun, a man entered the tavern of the Ship in Thursley, with a baby under his arm.

The tavern sign, rudely painted, bore, besides a presentment of a vessel, the inscription on one side of the board:—

"Now before the hill you climb,
Come and drink good ale and wine."

On the other side of the board the legend was different. It ran thus:—

"Now the hill you're safely over,
Drink, your spirits to recover."

The tavern stood on the high-road side between Godalming and Portsmouth; that is to say the main artery of communication between London and Portsmouth.

After rising out of the rich overshadowed weald land, the road had crossed long sandy wastes, where population was sparse, where were no enclosures, no farms, only scattered Scottish firs; and in front rose the stately ridge of sandstone that culminates in Hind Head and Leith Hill. It was to prepare the wayfarer for a scramble to the elevation of a little over nine hundred feet that he was invited

to "drink good ale and wine," or, if he were coming from the opposite direction was called upon to congratulate himself in a similar manner on having over-passed this ridge. The wayfarer with the baby under his arm came from the Godalming side. He looked up at the sign, which appealed at once to his heart, for he was obviously a sailor, no less than did the invitation commend itself to his condition.

He entered, tumbled the baby on to the tavern table that was marked with wet rings from beer cans, and upset a saucer containing fly poison, and said, with a sigh of relief—

"There you are! Blowed and all of a lather!"

He pulled out a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief, mopped his face and shouted, "Beer!"

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the landlady. "Whoever heered afore or saw of a babby lugged about wrong side uppermost. What would you say if I was to bring you your tankard topsy-turvy?"

"I wouldn't pay for it," said the sailor.

"Cos why?" asked the woman, planting herself arms akimbo, in front of the wayfarer.

"Cos it 'ud capsize the ale," he answered.

"Very well, ain't babbies got no in'ards to capsize?" asked the landlady, defiantly. "And chucked in among the pison for killing them dratted flies, too!"

"Never mind about the kid," said the man.

"I do mind about the child," retorted the woman; "look at him there—the innocent—all in the nasty slops. What'll the mother say to the mess and crumple you've made of the clothes?"

The landlady took the infant from the table, on one arm, and proceeded to the bar to draw the beer.

Presently she returned, kissing the child and addressing it in terms of affection. She thrust the pewter full of foaming ale on the table towards the customer, with resentfulness in her action.

"He's a stomachy (sturdy) young chap," she said, patting the babe with the now disengaged hand.

"He ain't a he at all," retorted the man. "He's a she."

"A girl, is it!" exclaimed the hostess; "and how came you by the precious?"

"Best rights of all," answered the man; "'cos I'm the kid's father."

"Her mother ought to be ashamed of herself letting you haul about the poor mite under your arm, just as though she was per-tatoes."

"Her mother can't help it," said the man. "She's dead, and left me wi' this here child a month or six weeks old, and I've been sweating along the way from Lun'non, and she yowlin' enough to tear a fellow's nerves to pieces." This said triumphantly; then in an apologetic tone, "What does the likes o' me know about holdin' babies? I were brought up to seamanship, and not to nussin'. I'd joy to see you, missus, set to manage a thirty-pounder. I warrant you'd be as clumsy wi' a gun as I be wi' a kid."

"D'r say," responded the landlady, "and where be you a-g'win to with this here angel? Takin' her to sea to make a mermaid of her?"

"No, I aren't," said the mariner. "Her mother's dead—in lodgin's down by the Katherine docks, and got no relatives and no friends there. I'm off to sea again when I've dispodged o' this here incumbrance. I'm takin' her down to her mother's sister—that way." He indicated the down road with his thumb.

"It's a wonder you ain't made a crook of her backbone, it is," said the woman. "And if you'd gone and crippled she for life, what would you think o' that?"

"I didn't carry her like that all the road," answered the sailor.

"Part ways I slung her over my back."

"Wonder she's alive. Owdatious strong she must be. Come in, my cherry beam. I'll give you as good as mother's milk. Three parts water and a bit o' shuggar. Little your father thinks o' your wants so long as he gets his ale."

"I let her suck my thumb," said the sailor, timidly.

"Much good she got out o' that," retorted the landlady. "Yes, yes, my syrup. I'll give you something."

"If you can stop her yowling, I'll thank you."

With a contemptuous look at the father, the hostess withdrew.

Then the sailor planted his elbows on the table, drank a long draught of beer, and said, sententiously, "It's an institootion is wimin."

"Woman is the joy of our lives," said a lanky, dark-haired man at the table.

"'Tain't exactly that," answered the sailor, now first observing that there were other men in the room. "'Tis that there's things for everything—there's the capstan for hawlin' up the anchor, and there's the woman for nussin'. They was ordained to it—not men—never, no—not men. Look at my hand." The sailor extended his arm across the table. "It's shakin' like a guitar-string when a nigger's playing—and all along of that kid's yawls. Wimin likes it."

"It's their moosic," said the lanky man.

Then in rushed the landlady with flashing eyes, and holding out both palms before her said, "The child's mouth be that purple or blue—it's fits."

"It's blackberries," answered the seaman. "They was nice and ripe, and plenty of them."

"Blackberries!" almost shrieked the hostess, "and the child not six weeks old! You've killed her! It's upset her blessed little inside."

"I thought I'd done wrong," said the sailor, timidly, "that's why I was a-carryin' of her topsy-turvy. I thought to ha' shooked the blackberries out again."

"If that child dies," exclaimed the landlady, solemnly, "then where will you go to, you unnat'ral parient?"

"I did it wi' the best intention," apologized the man.

"That's what Betsy Chaffers said when she gave wrong change. Oh that heaven should ever a created man. They's terrible monsters."

She disappeared again after the child.

The sailor drank more beer, sighed, wiped his brow, then his upper lip, and looked appealingly about him at the men who were present. Of these there were four and a half. That is to say, four men and a boy. Three of the men were at the table, and of these the lanky sallow man was one.

These three men were strange, unpleasant-looking fellows, dressed up in scraps of incongruous clothing, semi-nautical, semi-agricultural. One was completely enveloped in a great-coat that had belonged to a very tall and stout man, and he was short and thin. Another was incompletely dressed, for what garments he had on were in rags that afforded glimpses between them of tattered lining, of flesh, but of no shirt.

The third man had the unmistakable lower jaw and mouth of an Irishman.

By the fire sat an individual of a different type. He was a young man with heavy brows and a large mouth devoid of lips, set tight as a snapped man-trap. He had keen, restless, watchful eyes. His hair was sandy, thrust forward over his brow, and hanging low behind. On the opposite side of the hearth crouched a boy, a timid, delicately formed lad with a large head and full lustrous eyes.

"Come from far?" asked one of the ragamuffins at the table.

"Didn't yur hear me say from Lun'non town?" answered the sailor. "Lagged that there dratted baby the whole way. I'll have another glass of beer."

"And what distance are you going?" asked the lanky man.

"I shall put into the next port for the night, and tomorrow on to Portsmouth, and stow away the kid with my wife's sister. Lord! I wishes the morrer were well over."

"We're bound for Portsmouth," said the man in tatters. "What say you? shall we keep company and relieve you of the kid? If you'll

pay the shot here and at the other end, and at the other pubs—can't say but what we'll ease you."

"It's a bargain," exclaimed the sailor. "By George! I've had enough of it from Lun'non here. As to money, look here," he put his hand into his trousers pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, gold, silver and copper together. "There is brass for all. Just home, paid off—and find my wife dead—and me saddled with the yowling kid. I'm off to sea again. Don't see no sport wider-erring here all beboth-ered with a baby."

"We are very willing to accompany you," said the tattered man, and turning to the fellow with sallow face and lantern jaws, he said, "What's your opinion, Lonegon?"

"I'm willing, Marshall; what say you, Michael Casey?"

"Begorra—I'm the man to be a wet nuss."

The sailor called for spirits wherewith to treat the men who had offered their assistance.

"This is a mighty relief to me," said he. "I don't think I could ha' got on by myself."

"You've no expayrience, sir," said Casey. "It's I'm the boy for the babbies. Ye must rig up a bottle and fill it with milk, and just a whisk of a drop of the craytur to prevent it curdling, and then stuff the mouth with a rag—and the darlin'll suck, and suck, and be still as the evenin' star as I sees yonder glimmering at the window."

"You'll have to start pretty sharp if you want to get on a stage before dark," said the man by the fire.

"It's a lone road," threw in the boy shyly.

"What's the odds when we are four of us?" asked the man whose name was Lonegon.

"And all of us perpecting the little cherub from ketching cold," threw in Casey.

"We ain't afraid—not we," said the ragged man.

"Not of bogies, at any rate."

"Oh, you need not fear bogies," observed the man at the fire, dryly.

"What is it, then?" asked Michael Casey. "Sure It's not highway-men?"

The man by the fire warmed his palms, laughed, and said: "It would take two to rob you, I guess, one to put the money into your pocket and the second to take it out."

"You're right there," answered the Irishman, laughing. "It's my pockets be that worn to holes wi' the guineas that have been in them, that now they let 'em fall through."

The man by the fire rubbed his palms together and made a remark in a low tone—addressed to the boy. Lonegon turned sharply round on his seat and cried threateningly, "What's that you're hinting agin us? Say it again, and say it aloud, and I'll knock your silly, imperdent head off."

"I say it again," said the young man, turning his cunning head round, like a jackdaw. "I say that if I were going over Hind Head and by the Punch Bowl at night with as much money in my pocket as has that seaman there—I'd choose my companions better. You haven't heard what I said? I'd choose my companions better."

CHAPTER II.

WANDERING SOULS.

The long, lean fellow, Lonegon, leaped to his feet, and struck at the man by the fire.

The latter was prepared for him. He had snatched a brand from the hearth, and without losing the sarcastic laugh on his great mouth, presented it sharply in the way of the descending fist, so as to catch Lonegon's wrist.

The sparks flew about at the clash, and the man who had received the blow uttered a howl of pain, for his wrist was torn by the fire-wood, and his hand burnt by the fire.

With an imprecation and a vow to "do for" "eyes, liver, and lights" of the "clodhopper," he rushed at him blindly. With a mocking laugh, the man assailed thrust forth a leg, and Lonegon, stumbling across it, measured his length on the floor.

The man called Marshall now interfered by snatching the pewter tankard from the sailor, and aiming it at the head of him who had overthrown his mate.

At the same time the boy, terrified, began to scream. "Mother! mother! help! pray! they'll murder Bideabout."

The hostess speedily appeared, set her arms akimbo, planted her feet resolutely on the floor, and said, in commanding tones—

"Now then! No fighting on the premises. Stand up, you rascal. What have you done with the pewter? Ah, crushed out of all shape and use. That's what Molly Luff sed of her new bonnet when she sat down on it—Lawk, a biddy! Who'd ha' thought it?"

Lonegon staggered to his feet, and burst into a torrent of recrimination against the man whom the boy had called Bideabout.

"I don't care where the rights are, or where be the wrongs. An ad-dled egg be nasty eating whether you tackle it one end or 'tother. All I sez is—I won't have it. But what I will have is—I'll be paid for that there tankard. Who threw it?"

"It was he—yonder, in tatters," said the boy.

"You won't get money out o' me," said Marshall; "my pockets—you may turn 'em out and see for yourself—are rich in nothing but holes, and there's in them just about as many of them as there are in the rose o' a watering can."

"I shall be paid," asserted the hostess. "You three are mates, and there'll be money enough among you."

"Look here, mistress," put in the sailor, "I'll stand the damage, on-ly don't let us have a row. Bring me another can of ale, and tell me what it all comes to. Then we'll be on the move."

"The other fellows may clear off, and the sooner the better," said the landlady. "But not you just now, and the baby has dropped off into the sweetest of sleeps. 'Twere a sin to wake her."

"I'm going on to the Huts," said the seaman.

"And we're going with him as a guard to the baby," said the Irish fellow.

"A blackguard set," threw in Bideabout.

"What about the color so long as it is effective?" asked Casey.

By degrees the anger of Lonegon was allayed, and he seated him-self growling at the table, and wiped the blood from his torn wrist on his sleeve, and drawing forth a dirty and tattered red kerchief, bound it round the bruised and wounded joint. The man, Bideabout, did not concern himself with the wrath or the anguish of the man. He rubbed his hands together, and clapped a palm on each knee, and looked into the fire with a smirk on his face, but with an eye on the alert lest his adversary should attempt to steal an ad-vantage on him.

Nor was he unjustified in being on his guard, judging by the ma-lignant glances cast at him by Lonegon.

"Whom may you be?" asked the tattered man.

"I'm Jonas Kink," answered the young fellow at the fire.

"He's Bideabout, the Broom-Squire," explained the landlady. Then with a glimmering of a notion that this variation in names might prove confusing, she added, "leastways that's what we calls him. We don't use the names writ in the Church register here. He's the Broom-Squire—and not the sort o' chap for you ragamuffins to have dealings with—let me tell you."

"I don't kear what he be," said Lonegon, sullenly, "but dang it, I'd like a sup o' ale with your leave," and without further ceremony he took the new tankard from the sailor and quaffed off half its contents.

The hostess looked from the drinker to the seaman and said, "Are you standing tick for they?"

"I'll pay for their drink and they'll help me along the road with the baby," said the sailor.

The landlady shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, and asked, "If

I may be so bold, what's her name?"

"What's whose name?"

"The baby's."

"Ha'n't got none," said the seaman.

"What, ain't she been christened yet?"

"No, I reckon not," answered the father. Then he proceeded to explain. "You see my poor wife she was down in lodgings and hadn't no friends nor relations no'ther nigh her, and she took ill and never got over the birth of this here babe, and so it couldn't be done. But the kid's aunt'll see to all that right enough when I've got her there."

"What! you're trapsing about the country hugging a babe along under your arm and slung over your shoulder and feeding her o' blackberries and chucking her in among fly poison, and not a Christian yet! My! What a world it is!"

"All in good time, missus."

"That's what Betsy Cole said o' her pork and 'ams when the pig wor killed and her hadn't salt nor saltpetre. She'd see to it some day. Meanwhile the maggots came and spiled the lot."

"It shall all be made right in a day or two."

"Ah! but what if it be too late? Then where will you go to some day? How can you say but that the child wi' being hung topsy-turvy and swinging like a pendiddlum may die of the apoplexy, or the blackberries turn sour in her blessed stomach and she go off in convulsions, or that she may ha' put out the end o' her tongue and sucked some o' that there fly paper? Then where will you be?"

"I hope I shall be on board ship just before that comes to pass," said the sailor.

"Do you know what happens if a child dies and ha'n't been christened? It becomes a wanderer."

"What do you mean?"

"It ain't a Christian, so it can't go to heaven. It ain't done no evil, so it can't go to hell; and so the poor spirit wanders about in the wind and never has no rest. You can hear them piping in the trees and sobbin' at the winder. I've heard 'm scores of times. How will you like that when at sea to have your own child sighing and sobbin' up in the rigging of the vessel, eh?"

"I hope it will not come to that," said the sailor.

"That's what Susan Bay said when she put a darnin' needle into the armchair cushion, and I sed, said I, 'twas a ticklesome thing and might do hurt. She did it once too often. Her old man sat down on it."

She brought some more ale at the request of the seaman, and as she set down the tankard said:

"I won't be so bold as to say it's in Scriptur', but it's in the Psalm-book I dare swear. Mother, she were a tip-top tearin' religious woman, and she used to say it to me when I was younger than I be now:—

"They flies in clouds and flap their shrouds
When full the moon doth shine;

In dead of night when lacketh light,
We here 'em pipe and pine.

"And many a soul wi' hoot and howl
Do rattle at the door,
Or rave and rout, and dance about
All on a barren moor."

"And it goes on somehow like this. You can think on it as you go over Hind Head in the dark:

"Or at the winder wail and weep,
Yet never venture nigher;
In snow and sleet, within to creep
To warm 'em at the fire."

The child began to cry in the adjoining room.

"There," said the landlady, "'tis awake she is, poor mite without a name, and not as much Christianity as could make a cat sneeze. If that there child were to die afore you got to Portsmouth and had her baptized, sure as my name is Susanna Verstage, I'd never forgive myself, and I'd hear her for sure and certainty at the winder. I'm a motherly sort of a woman, and there's a lot o' them poor wanderers comes piping about the panes of an evening. But I can do nothing for them."

"Now then, lads, let's be moving," said the mariner.

The three men at the table rose; and when standing exposed more of their raggedness and the incongruity of their apparel than was shown when they were seated.

The landlady reluctantly surrendered the child.

"A babe," said she, "mustn't be shaken after feeding;" then, "a babe mustn't be allowed to get its little feet cold, or gripes comes;" then, "you must mind and carry it with the head to your shoulder, and away from the wind." Presently another item occurred to the good woman, as the men left their places at the table: "You must hold the child on your arm, between the wrist and the elbow-jint."

As they went to the door she called, "And never be without a drop o' dill water: it's comforting to babies."

As they made their exit—"And when nussin', mind, no green meat nor fruit."

When all had departed the landlady turned to the man by the fire, who still wore his sarcastic smirk, and said "Bideabout! What do you think of they?"

"I think," answered the Broom-Squire, "that I never saw three such cut-throat rascals as those who have gone off with the sailor; and as for him—I take he's softish."

"I thought him a bit of a natural."

"He must be so to start on one of the loneliest roads in England, at fall of night, with such a parcel of jailbirds."

"Well, dear life!" exclaimed the good woman. "I hope nothing will hap' to the poor child."

"Mother," said the boy, timidly, "it's not true is it about the spirits of babies in the wind?"

"Of course it is. Where would you have them go? and they baint Christians. Hark! I won't say there be none flying about now. I fancy I hear a sort of a kind o' whistling."

"Your boy Iver, he's coming with me to the Punch-Bowl," said the Broom-Squire; "but I'll not go for half-an-hour, becous I don't want to overtake that lanky, black-jawed chap as they call Loneyon. He ain't got much love for me, and might try to repay that blow on his wrist, and sprawl on the floor I gave him."

"What is Iver going to the Punch-Bowl for?" asked the landlady, and looked at the boy, her son.

"It's a snipe's feather Bideabout has promised me," answered the lad.

"And what do you want a snipe's feather for at this time o' night?"

"Mother, it's to make a paint brush of. Bideabout ain't at home much by day. I've been over the road scores o' times."