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**With Marlborough to Malplaquet
A Story of the Reign of Queen
Anne**

Herbert Strang

Imprint

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A mounted officer came galloping up.
[See CHAPTER X.]

NOTE

The object of this series is to encourage a taste for history among boys and girls up to thirteen or fourteen years of age. An attempt has been made to bring home to the young reader the principal events and movements of the periods covered by the several volumes.

If in these little stories historical fact treads somewhat closely upon the heels of fiction, the authors would plead the excellence of their intentions and the limitations of their space.

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CHAPTER I

A BOUT AT SINGLESTICK

"Get thee down, laddie, I tell thee."

This injunction, given for the third time, and in a broad north-country dialect, came from the guard of the York and Newcastle coach, a strange new thing in England. A wonderful vehicle the York and Newcastle coach, covering the eighty-six long miles between the two towns in the space of two-and-thirty hours, and as yet an object of delight, and almost of awe, to the rustics of the villages and small towns on that portion of the Great North Road.

It was the darkening of a stinging day in the latter part of December, in the year 1701—it wanted but forty-eight hours to Christmas Eve—when the coach pulled up at the principal inn of the then quiet little country town of Darlington, a place which roused itself from its general sleepiness only on market and fair days, or now, since the mail-coach had begun to run, on the arrival or departure of the marvellous conveyance, whose rattle over the cobble-stones drew every inhabitant of the main street to the door.

No reply coming from the boy on the roof, the guard went on, "Eh, but the lad must be frozen stark," and swinging himself up to the top of the coach, he seized the dilatory passenger by the arm, saying, "Now, my hearty, come your ways down; we gang na further to-day. Ye are as stiff as a frozen poker."

"And no wonder," came a voice from below; "'tis not a day fit for man or dog to be out a minute longer than necessary. Bring the bairn in, Charley." The invitation came from a kindly and portly dame, the hostess, who had come to the door to welcome such passengers as might be disposed to put up for the night at the inn.

"I don't think I can stir," the boy replied; "I'm about frozen."

He spoke in low tones and as if but half awake. He was, in fact, just dropping into a doze.

"Here, mates, catch hold," the guard cried, and without more ado the lad was lowered down to the little group of loafers who had come to see the sight and to pick up any stray penny that might be

available. A minute later George Fairburn was rapidly thawing before the rousing fire in the inn's best parlour, and was gulping down the cup of hot mulled ale the good-natured landlady had put into his trembling hands.

"I'm all right, ma'am, now, and I'll go. Thank you and good night, ma'am."

"Go, Fairburn?" cried another boy of about his own age, who sat comfortably in the arm-chair by the cosy chimney corner. "Surely you are not going to turn out again this bitter night?"

"Indeed I am," was the somewhat ungracious reply; "my father is not a rich man, and I'm not going to put him to needless expense."

The other boy blushed, but the next moment his face resumed its usual pallor. He was tall for his fourteen years, but evidently not particularly strong. He had, in truth, somewhat of a bookish look, and his rounded shoulders already told of much poring over a student's tasks. Fairburn, on the other hand, though less tall, carried in his face and form all the evidence of robust good health.

"I've relatives somewhere in Darlington, Blackett," George explained, in a rather pleasanter tone, as if ashamed of his former surly speech, "and I'm going to hunt them up."

"Look here, Fairburn," said the other, springing from his seat and placing a patronizing hand on his companion's shoulder, "just make yourself comfortable here with me for the night, and I'll settle the bill for both of us in the morning." He spoke rather grandly, jingling the coins in his pocket the while.

"I can settle my own bills, thank you," answered Fairburn, a proud hot flush overspreading his face. And, seizing his little bag, the lad strode from the room and out of the inn, shivering as the chill northeasterly breeze caught him in the now dark and almost deserted street.

"Confound the fellow with his purse-proud patronage!" he muttered as he hurried along.

"Bless me, why is he so touchy?" Blackett was asking himself at the same moment. "We seem fated to quarrel, Fairburn's family and ours. Whose is the pride now, I wonder! Fairburn thinks a deal of

his independence, as he calls it; I should call it simply pride, myself. But I might have known that he wouldn't accept my offer after his refusal of an inside place with me this morning, and after riding all those miles from York to-day in the bitter cold. Heigh-ho, the quarrel won't be of my seeking anyhow."

These two lads were both sons of colliery owners, and both pupils of the ancient school of St. Peter of York, the most notable foundation north of the Humber. But there the likeness ended. Matthew Blackett's father was a rich man and descended from generations of rich men. He owned a large colliery and employed many men and not a few ships. He was, moreover, a county magnate, and held his head high on Tyneside. In politics he was a strong supporter of the Tory party, and had never been easy under the rule of Dutch William. He was proud and somewhat arrogant, yet not wanting his good points. George Fairburn, on the other hand, was the son of a much smaller man, of one, in truth, who had by his energy and thrift become the proprietor of a small pit, of which he himself acted as manager. The elder Fairburn was of a sturdy independent character, his independence, however, sometimes asserting itself at the expense of his manners; that at least was the way Mr. Blackett put it. Fairburn had been thrown much in his boyhood among the Quakers, of which new sect there were several little groups in the northern counties. He was a firm Whig, and as firm a hater of the exiled James II. He had made some sacrifice to send his boy to a good school, being a great believer in education, at a time when men of his class were little disposed to set much store by book learning.

After breakfast by candlelight next morning the passengers for the coach assembled at the door of the inn. Blackett was already comfortably seated among his many and ample rugs and wraps when George Fairburn appeared, accompanied by a woman who made an odd figure in an ancient cloak many sizes too big for her, covering her from head to foot. It had, in fact, originally been a soldier's cloak, and had seen much hard service in the continental campaigns under William III. The good dame was very demonstrative in her affection, and kissed George again and again on both cheeks, with good sounding smacks, ere she would let him mount to the roof of the coach. Then she stood by the window and talked volubly in a rich northern brogue till the vehicle started, and even

after, for George could see her gesticulations when he was far out of earshot.

"It is bitter cold, bairn," she had said for the third or fourth time, "and I doubt thou wilt be more dead than alive when thy father sees thee at Newcastle. But don't forget that pasty; 'tis good, for I made it myself. And there's the sup of summat comforting in the little bottle; don't forget that."

"Good-bye, aunt, and thank you over and over again," George called from the top of the coach. "Don't stay any longer in the freezing cold. I'm all right."

But the talkative and kindly old dame would not budge, and Blackett could not help smiling quietly in his corner. "What a curious old rustic!" he said to himself, "and she's the aunt, it appears." As for George himself, he was thinking much the same thing. "A good soul," he murmured to himself, "but, oh, so countrified!"

Fairburn's limbs were pretty stiff by the time the grand old cathedral and the castle of Durham standing proudly on their cliff above the river came in sight. There was an unwonted stir in the streets of the picturesque little city. My lord the bishop with a very great train was coming for the Christmas high services.

"Our bishop is a prince," explained the guard, who had had not a little talk with George on the way. "There are squires and baronets and lords in his train, and as for his servants and horses, why —" the good fellow spread out his hands in his sheer inability to describe the magnificence of the bishops of Durham.

"Yes," Fairburn made answer, "and I've heard or read that when a new bishop first comes to the see he is met at Croft bridge by all the big men of the county, who do homage to him as if he were a king."

The guard stared at a youngster, an outside and therefore a poor passenger too, who appeared so well informed, and then applied himself vigorously to his horn.

The afternoon was fast waning when the coach brought to its passengers the first glimpse of the blackened old fortress of Newcastle and the lantern tower of St. Nicholas. Fairburn, almost as helpless as

on the previous afternoon, was speedily lifted down from his lofty perch by the strong arms of his father.

"Ah, my dear lad," the elder cried as he hugged George to his breast, "the mother has a store of good things ready for her bairn and for Christmas. And here is old Dapper ready to jog back with us and to his own Christmas Eve supper. How do you do, sir?"

These last words were addressed to a gentleman who had just driven up in a well-appointed family equipage.

"I hope I see young Mr. Blackett well," Fairburn continued.

"Ah! 'tis you, Mr. Fairburn," said the great man condescendingly. "This is your boy? Looks a trifle cold, don't you think? 'Tis bitter weather for travelling outside."

And with the curtest possible nod to the father, and no recognition whatever of the son, Mr. Blackett linked his arm in Matthew's and strode away to his carriage.

George flushed, his father looked annoyed; then his face cleared.

"Come, lad," he said, "let us get along home."

Thursday, Christmas Day, and the Friday following passed quietly but happily in the little Fairburn family. The father was in excellent spirits, and he had much to tell his son of the prosperity that was at last coming. Orders were being booked faster than the modest staff of the colliery could execute them. Best of all, Fairburn had secured several important contracts with London merchants; this, too, against the competition of the great Blackett pit.

"The truth is," the elder explained, "Mr. Blackett is too big a man, and too easy-going to attend to his business as he should. But I suppose he's rich enough and can afford to be a trifle slack."

"Whereas my dad has energy and to spare," George put in with a smile, "and by that energy is taking the business out of the hands of the bigger man. The Blacketts won't be exactly pleased with us, eh?"

"They are not. And, more, I hear the Blackett pit is working only short time; it is more than likely that several of the men will have to be discharged soon, and then will come more soreness."

"We can't help that, dad," the boy commented, "it's a sort of war, this business competition, it seems to me, and all is fair in love and war, as the saying goes."

"True, my lad; yet I'm a peaceable man, and would fain enter into no quarrels."

On the Saturday afternoon a neighbour brought word up to the house that there was some sort of a squabble going on down at the river side.

"Better run along and see what is the matter, George," said the mother. "Father's gone to the town and won't be back till supper time."

So the boy pulled on his cap, twisted a big scarf about his neck, and made off to the Tyne, nearly a mile away.

He found a tremendous hubbub on the wharf, men pulling and struggling and cursing and fighting in vigorous fashion. What might be the right or the wrong of the quarrel, George did not know, and he had not time to inquire before he too was mixed up in the fray. The first thing that met his eye, in truth, was one of the crew of the Fairburn collier brig lying helpless on his back and at the mercy of a fellow who was showing him no favour, but was pounding away at the upturned face with one of his fists, whilst with the other hand he held a firm grip of his prostrate foeman.

"Let him get up, coward!" the lad shouted as he rushed to the spot. "Let him get up, I tell you, and fight it out fair and square."

The fellow was by no means disposed to give up the advantage he had obtained, however, and redoubled the vigour of his blows.

He was a strong thickset collier, not an easy man to tackle; but without more ado George flung himself at the bully, and toppled him over, the side of his head coming into violent collision with the rough planks of the landing-stage.

"Up with you, Jack!" George cried, and, seizing the hand of the prostrate sailor, he jerked him to his feet. Jack, however, was of little more use when he had been helped up, and staggered about in a dazed and aimless sort of way. He was, in truth, almost blind, his

eyes scarce visible at all, so severe had been his punishment, while his face streamed with blood.

Meanwhile his antagonist had jumped to his feet, his face black with coaldust and distorted with fury.

"Two on ye!" he yelled with an oath, "then I must fend for myself," and he seized a broken broom handle that was lying near.

"A game of singlestick is it?" George replied gleefully, as he made a successful grab at another stick a couple of yards away. It was the handle of a shovel; there were several broken tools lying about the quay.

"Come on," said the boy, brandishing his short but heavy weapon, "this is quite in my line, I can tell you!"

It was a curious sight as the two rushed upon each other, so unequal did the antagonists seem. Bill, the collier, was tall as well as strongly built, and in the very prime of life; while George, though a sturdy lad for his age, was many inches shorter, and appeared at first sight an absurdly inadequate foeman.

In a moment the sticks were clattering merrily together, the lad hesitating not a whit, for he felt sure that he was at least a match for the other. George Fairburn had ever been an adept at all school games, and had spent many a leisure hour at singlestick. In vain did Bill endeavour to bring down his stick with furious whack upon the youngster's scalp; his blow was unfailingly parried. It was soon evident to the man that the boy was playing with him, and when twice or thrice he received a rap on his shoulder, his arm, his knuckles even, his fury got quite beyond his control, and he struck out blindly and viciously, forcing the lad backwards towards the edge of the wharf.

But Fairburn was not to be taken in that style. Slipping agilely out of the way, he planted another blow, this time on his opponent's head. In a trice Bill threw down his cudgel and, raising his heavy boot, endeavoured to administer a vicious kick. It was time to take to more effective tactics, and while the man's leg was poised in the air, George put in a thwack that made his skull resound, and threw him quite off his already unstable balance. Bill fell to the ground and lay there stunned, a roar of laughter hailing the exploit, with

shouts of, "Thrashed by a lad; that's a grand come off for Bill Hutchinson!"

George now had time to look about him. He found that the enemy, whoever they might be, had been beaten off, and the crew of the Fairburn brig was in possession of the landing-stage.

"What is it all about, Jack?" he inquired of the man to whose rescue he had come.

"Why," returned Jack, "they are some of Blackett's men. They tried to shove us from our berth here, after we had made fast, and bring in their big schooner over there. Some of 'em are vexed, 'cos 'tis said there'll be no work for 'em soon. Your father's taking a lot of Blackett's trade, you see."

"Did they begin, Jack, or did you?"

"Begin? Why, it was a kind of mixed-up job, I reckon. We'd both had a drop of Christmas ale, you see—a drop extra, I mean—and—why, there it was."

"Well, you'll be sailing for London in a day or two," said George. "See that you keep out of the way of Blackett's men, or you'll find yourself in the lock-up and lose your place."

Then he walked away.

Mr. Fairburn was annoyed when he heard of the incident.

"I don't like it, George," he said. "There's no reason why there should be bad blood between Blackett's men and mine; but if they are going to make disturbances like this I shall have to take serious steps, and the coolness between Blackett and me will become an open enmity. 'As much as lieth in *you*,' says the Apostle, 'live peaceably with all men;' but there's a limit, and if Mr. Blackett can't keep his men in order, it will come to a fight between us."

The brig started in a couple of days for London, in fulfilment of an important contract that had for years fallen to Mr. Blackett, but now had been placed in the hands of his humbler but more energetic rival. Its departure was hailed by the shouts and threats of a gang of pitmen from the Blackett colliery, but nothing like another fight occurred, thanks to the vigilance of Fairburn the elder.

CHAPTER II

THE ATTACK ON THE COLLIERY

Not often has Europe been in a greater state of unrest than it was at the time this story opens. James II, the exiled King of England, had lately died in his French home, and his son, afterwards famous as the Old Pretender, had been acknowledged as the new English king by Louis XIV of France, to the joy of the many Jacobites England still contained, but to the dismay of the majority of Englishmen. There was likely to be dire trouble also respecting the vacant throne of Spain. There had been originally three candidates for the throne of the weakling Charles, not long dead—Philip of Anjou, whose claims had the powerful support of his grandfather, the ambitious Louis; Charles, the second son of the Emperor Leopold of Austria; and Joseph, the Electoral Prince of Bavaria. But the last mentioned had died, leaving the contest to Philip and Charles, the French and Austrian claimants. The rest of Europe was naturally in alarm when the already too-powerful Louis actually placed his grandson on the Spanish throne. Practically the step amounted on the part of France to an annexation of the once predominant kingdom of Spain with all its appanages. And when the Grand Monarque, as his flatterers called him, proceeded further to garrison the strongholds of the Netherlands, then a Spanish province, with his own troops, it was clear that Louis considered himself King both of France and Spain. As for the Protestants of Europe, their very existence seemed to be threatened by the designs of the French sovereign.

Who was there, then, to withstand the ambitious and arrogant Louis? There was but one great and effective opponent, William of Orange, King of England. He had spent his life in thwarting the ambitious policy of the French monarch, and so long as William lived Louis was sure of a vigorous and powerful antagonist. And William was preparing, in both his English and his Dutch dominions, for yet another conflict. War was indeed imminent; the sole question being when it would actually break out, and who would be ruler over England when it did. For William III was in feeble health; his death might occur any day, and his crown pass to his