

THE MONK OF HALDON: A LEGEND OF SOUTH DEVON

by R. H. D. Barham

" Near this town (Dawlish) are the remains of a chapel belonging, as it is said, to the distant parish of Sidmouth. It is built over, or more probably adjacent to, a well of great depth which has been for many years covered over; and from both being dedicated to Our Ladye there has arisen the corrupt term, Lidwell, by which the spot is now known. Marvellous stories of this desecrated well are narrated by the country people."—*Topographical Researches in the County of Devon* (MS. Brit. Mus.).

Kind Reader, if ever your fancy incline
To visit fair Exeter's city and shrine,
Don't baulk her,—but start at a quarter past nine;
You'll get down in time for a stroll ere you dine,
And you'll find at the Clarence some very fair wine.

 When lodged there, I pray,
 Devote one fine day
To a visit to Haldon—it's not far away,
And the view and the air will your trouble repay;
Indeed, if you're hipped, out of spirits, or ill,
Better by pounds than a potion or pill,
Is a summer-day's run upon Haldon Hill.

Never, I ween, has fairer scene—
Sapphire-blue and emerald-green,
With the glow of the red red rock between,
Bathed in a glory of golden sheen,—
Gladdened your heart, or dazzled your een.
There tarry a while, and gaze your fill,
From Berry Head to Portland Bill;
Or turn your face to the north if you will,
Where the Dartmoor range lies gloomy and still,
 And I'll wager a crown
 When you get back to town,
Bright visions will haunt you of Haldon Hill.

 Yes! it's all very fine
 In the blaze of sunshine,
Or 'neath the mild lustre that gilds his decline
(I've to thank Mr. Canning for this latter line),
To lounge upon Haldon, or lie there supine:
 When daylight goes,
 C'est tout autre chose,—
When darkness lowers and night falls chill,
Steer clear, if you're wise, of Haldon Hill.

But supposing you now at the end of your ride,
Leave your horse at the tower—there ask for a guide,
And bid him proceed to the southern hill-side,
Where, hid in a coppice of nut-trees and apple,
The ruin still stands of a quaint little chapel.

 It's not often shown,
 Nor very well known,
And it's not very easy to find it alone:
This I discovered on being despatched to it
As a place with a rather strange story attached to it.

 It stands on a spot
 Quite sheltered, but not,
I should think, in the dog-days unpleasantly hot;
 While the heath and the broom
 Clothe the sides of the combe,
And oppress, as Lord B. says, the air with perfume;
Yet there it is left all deserted to rot,
With not a house near, not a cabin or cot!
Still more, when you gaze on the exquisite view from it,
You'll wonder why folks so completely withdrew from it.

 To the right, under Haldon,
 Lie Teignmouth and Shaldon,
With hamlets, whose names to recount I'm not called on:
Between them the Teign rolls her eddying flood,
The stream looking tinted and turbid with blood;
But it's only the rain that has stirred up the mud!
It's certainly odd that this part of the coast,
While neighbouring Dorset gleams white as a ghost,
Should look like anchovy sauce spread upon toast!
 We need not now pause
 To find out the cause
Of this variation in natural laws;
 But Mr. Pengelly
 Can easily tell ye,—
(I think, by the way, that the gentleman said,
'Twas iron or manganese made it so red).

 Then low at your feet,
 From this airy retreat,
Reaching down where the fresh and the salt water meet,
The roofs may be seen of an old-fashioned street;
Half village—half town, it is—pleasant but smallish,
And known, where it happens to *be* known, as Dawlish;
 A place I'd suggest
 As one of the best

For a man breaking down who needs absolute rest,
Especially too, if he's weak in the chest.

Torquay may be gayer,
But as for the air,
It really can not for a moment compare
With snug little Dawlish—at least, so they say here.

Well, ages ago, as the old people tell,
Was built this rude structure—half chapel, half cell;

And I'm greatly inclined
To think it designed
To serve as a sort of a lighthouse as well.
And here, all the year,
With not a soul near,
(He found it uncommonly dull, I should fear),
In the meanest of robes, on the poorest of cheer,
A monk was deputed from Sidmouth to dwell;
And the good man, 'tis said,
When retiring to bed,
Never blew out his candle, but placed it instead
In the belfry, some ten or twelve feet over head.
And when on the hills fog or thick darkness fell,
'Twas his duty besides to "attend to the bell;"
He knolled and he tolled
All night in the cold,
A guide to belated folks crossing the wold;
And many a traveller warned by the knell,
Blessed the good monk of Saint Mary's Well.

And when a monk died,
His place was supplied
By another, who slept in due time by his side.
So ever anon,
As time wore on,

A monk appeared and a monk was gone:
At length came one who was named Friar John!
Now Friar John was stout and strong,
His figure was rather broad than long;
Some five feet six in his sandals he stood,—
Uncommonly short, but uncommonly good!
But then, to be just,—
Confess it, I must,
His features weren't what I've heard called *uppercrust*,
But were vulgar and coarse—of a colour like rust;
His hair, what he had, and he hadn't got much of it,
If not a pure red, at least had a touch of it.
And some said his eyes,
Unequal in size,

Were like one and sixpence,—'Twas merely surmise;
While other folks yet more maliciously hinted,
The excellent man unmistakably squinted.
I say 'twas *surmise*, for in study profound,
He kept his eyes constantly fixed on the ground;
 Still enough could be seen
 Of his face and his mien
To cause the young ladies a deal of chagrin;
They one and all felt disappointment and pain
That so good a man should be so very plain!

But one thing the neighbours could not understand,—
Not a soul in the parish had seen his right hand!
Whatever the office, when called on to minister,
The hand that he used was always the sinister!
 They came to confess—
 He raised it to bless;
The other was kept close concealed in his dress!
Well, they said it looked odd, and they couldn't say less.
 But one hand or two,
 Not a monk of the crew
Ever made with his bell such a precious ado—
He pulled at the rope all the blessed night through!
And then up aloft in the belfry he fixes,
Not one wretched rushlight, but two pair of " sixes;"
And though when he preached, I fear very few heeded him,
'Twas agreed that in zeal none had ever exceeded him.

'Tis Christmas Eve, and the sun's red ball
Sinks slowly, hid by a sable pall.
In gathering darkness fades the light,
And gloomy day in gloomier night—
Gloomier where than on Haldon height!
And the weather-glass shows a decided fall,
And the sea-weed turns very wet on the wall.
 The darkness increases,
 The rain never ceases,
But comes down in drops big as old penny pieces;
The winds from the west in a hurricane pour,
And the thunder-clouds burst on the Tors of Dartmoor.
The tempest yet heightens, and 'mid the turmoil
A cry strange and fearsome sweeps down through the goyle;
Full well knows the shepherd what sound it may be,
And the shepherd's dog crouches and quakes at his knee.
It comes—it has gone—borne by on the blast,
The dog wags his tail—the dread *wish* hounds are past!

Meantime, while the thunder above him is rolling,

The monk of Saint Mary keeps zealously tolling,—
A work which he's clearly engaged heart and soul in;
 When there falls on his ear
 What he takes for a cheer,
Proceeding distinctly from somebody near;
 Then a voice loud and hoarse,
 Using terms which, if coarse,
Were expressive, demanded admission in-doors,
With a hint, as 'twas rather inclement without, it
Would be quite as well if he looked sharp about it.
 As the monk, at the sound,
 Turning hastily round,
Gives a start, and then jumps to the door at a bound,
 An observer might spy
 A queer light in his eye
(Supposing, of course, an observer were by),
Which he lifts with a glance half triumphant, half sly
(N.B.—It was really a little awry).
He opens—there enters with " Thank ye, my hearty !"
What bagmen and " swells " call a seafaring *party*.

That sailor's bearing is pleasant to see—
Frank and free as a sailor's may be;
His language, perhaps, is a trifle too free,
Abounding in words which begin with a D;
All which I omit, for I don't see the fun of them,
And don't mean to sully my pages with one of them.
 The monk took them coolly,
 Perhaps, thinking truly
The tongues of your sailors are always unruly,
Perhaps he was just a bit deaf in these cases,
Perhaps thought them purely professional phrases;
Nor did it seem greatly his feelings to shock,
When hailed by his guest as " a jolly old cock!"
Friar John, indeed, showed himself vastly polite,
Declared that he'd rung his bell long enough, quite,
Then stepped to the belfry, and brought down the light,
Addressed to the stranger a pressing invite
To make himself happy and snug for the night;
Bade him stir up the fire while he fetched a fresh log in,
As 'twas really not weather to turn out a dog in,
Then brought him a flagon to mix some hot grog in.

'Tis bootless to say
 How the night passed away,—
How the convives, becoming familiar and gay,
Drank out Christmas Eve, and drank in Christmas Day,
 How they finished the flask,

Then went at the cask,
How the monk told his legends of magic and mystery,
While the sailor in turn gave some portions of his story:—
That ten years ago he was kidnapped at Dover,
And sent off to sea with Sir Rupert, the rover;
That after a long spell of bloodshed and pillage,
Sir Rupert attempted to sack a small village,
That the natives took heart, resisted and beat him,
And forthwith proceeded to cook him and eat him;
That he, sailor Jack, with a few of the crew,
Contrived in the melee to cut his way through;
And that after more cruising, at Plymouth he'd landed,
And was now homeward bound by no means empty-handed : —
" There's enough in that sack," Friar John gave a start!
'Twas a little affection, he said, of the heart;
" There's enough of rich gems and red gold," observed Jack,
" To fit out a ship, stowed away in that sack !"
" That sack ?" gasped the monk, and he started again—
(That heart of his caused him a good deal of pain,)
" Gold and gems !—why, my son, grievous perils beset 'em—
But, Good gracious me! where the deuce did you get 'em ?"

Jack stretched out his throat—gave a singular grin,
Drew his finger across it just under the chin,
And replied, it was *that* way he'd " picked up the tin !"
" What! cut people's throats,
Like a sheep's or a goat's,
Or a pig's ! Bless my heart! is the man in his senses,
To think we can wink at such grievous offences!
As every one knows,
I'm the last to impose
Any very extravagant penance on those
Who freely their little transgressions disclose;
And as to the fees,
People pay what they please,
We seldom or never fall out about these;
But murder! why, how do you hope to get clear of it ?
Suppose, my fine fellow, the Pope were to hear of it!"

Poor Jack looked alarmed at the aspect things wore;
It never had struck him in that light before;
He didn't mind taking his chance of a rope,
But really he hadn't once thought of the Pope:
" What's to be done ? There's the booty—let's share it;
Can't we in that manner manage to square it ?"

The monk shook his head—didn't know—was afraid—
'Twas a serious matter that throat-cutting trade—

Well, he'd see—some arrangement perhaps might be made.

" Meanwhile," urges John,

As a *sine qua non*,

" You must dip in the well, and you'd better come on.

It's easily done,—when you've drawn up the bucket,
You've only to bend down your head, and then duck it."

With sombre air and footstep slow,
Passed the monk that portal low;
He crossed the chapel's narrow aisle—
Devoutly crossed himself the while;
Thrice he stirred that chapel bell,
Thrice the pond'rous clapper fell,

As though to toll

For a parting soul;

And Sailor Jack shook in his shoes at the knell,
As it heavily swung o'er the Holy Well.

Jack gazes down that dark profound—
Its depth they have never been able to sound,
It stretches away so far underground.

But what makes him shrink

As he bends to the brink ?

Is it the liquor he's taken to drink ?

Is it the flash of some instinctive thought, or

Is it the unpleasant look of the water ?

Or is it of imminent peril an inkling ?

Whatever it is—he springs up in a twinkling!

He's in time and that's all—not a moment to spare !

For behind stands the monk—his right hand in the air,

And in it a poniard with blade bright and bare !

Down comes the blow—

" No," says Jack, " it's no go,

You don't quite come over a buccanier so!"

And he fastens like death on the throat of his foe.

The monk tries to twist,

By a turn of the wrist,

His arm from the vice of the other's broad fist;

He might have succeeded with " lubbers " or tailors,

It's a different thing when the grip is a sailor's.

With sinew taut, and tough as yew,

Face to face they stand—the two,

Till that of the monk grows alarmingly blue!

It's very distressing

To find one compressing

Your windpipe, which let's the pure air less and less in—

And the monk hadn't breath enough left for a blessing.
Jack tightens his grasp till he feels that he reels,
Then tumbles him into the well neck and heels!
And showing no sort of concern for the body,
Goes quietly back and looks after his toddy.

The story got wind, and the folks far and near,
Assembled one morning with queer-looking gear,
 And descended with ropes,
 And great hooks, in the hopes
Of raising Friar John from his watery bier;
 But after much poking,
 And choking and soaking,
In that dark abyss, it was truly provoking
To find, when they dragged " the defunct" to the brim,
That it wasn't the monk—'twas a great deal too slim,
And did not bear any resemblance to *him* !
So they went down again, and they picked up another,
But this was no more Friar John than the other!

 The monk
 Must have sunk;
But then an embarrassing question arose—
If such was the case, who on earth could be those
Whose presence so strongly affected the nose ?

The matter throughout was with mystery blended,
Some thought that Saint Mary her priest had befriended,
While some for an opposite notion contended;
The " Crouner " looked grave, and the inquest was ended,
With " Drowned but not found—least said soonest mended!"
They dismantled the chapel and melted the bell,
And placed a huge stone on the mouth of the well;
And moving the altar, imagine their wonder,
At finding a hollow receptacle under,
And filled, as Americans term it, with *plunder* !

As for Jack, from that moment an ill-fortune stuck to him—
Nothing he did seemed to bring change of luck to him;
 The results of his cruize
 Went to sharpers and Jews,
So he set sail again to rob, murder, and booze,
And after encount'ring wrecks, tempests, tornadoes,
Was finally lost off the coast of Barbadoes.
Of the well thus defiled, should you search for the site,
I much doubt if success will your trouble requite—
I've known people look for it morning and night.*

 Still by exploring,
 And digging and boring

The spots all around you might hit on the right—
If you wish, you can easily run down and try it;
Yet perhaps on reflection, 'tis better, you'll own,
To leave undisturbed that great slab of lime-stone,
And minding the maxim, to—**let well alone!**

**I fancy at Teignton they show you a curious one,
but it isn't the real well—it's only a spurious one.*

* * * * *

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Notes:

- *Goyle is Devonshire for a ravine.*
- *Wish hounds are a sort of " Old Scratch " pack, which is said to hunt, by night, the country in the neighbourhood of Dartmoor.*