Yorkshire Dick

By Quiller-Couch

"See here, you'd best *lose* the bitch—till tomorrow, anyway. She ain't the sight to please a strict man, like your dad, on the Sabbath day. What's more, she won't heal for a fortni't, not to deceive a Croolty-to-Animals Inspector at fifty yards; an' with any man but me she'll take a month."

My friend Yorkshire Dick said this, with that curious gypsy intonation that turns English into a foreign tongue if you forget the words and listen only to the voice. He was squatting in the sunshine, with his back against an oak sapling, a black cutty under his nose, and Meg, my small fox-terrier, between his thighs. In those days, being just fifteen, I had taken a sketch-book and put myself to school under Dick to learn the lore of Things As They Are: and, as part of the course, we had been the death of a badger that morning—Sunday morning.

It was one of those days in autumn when the dews linger in the shade till noon and the blackberry grows too watery for the *connoisseur*. On the ridge where we loafed, the short turf was dry enough, and the sun strong between the sparse saplings; but the paths that zigzagged down the thick coppice to right and left were soft to the foot, and streaked with the slimy tracks of snails. A fine blue mist filled the gulf on either hand, and beneath it mingled the voices of streams and of birds busy beside them. At the mouth of each valley a thicker column of blue smoke curled up like a feather—that to the left rising from the kitchen chimney of my father's cottage, that to the right from the encampment where Dick's bouillon was simmering above a wood fire.

Looking over Dick's shoulder along the ridge I could see, at a point where the two valleys climbed to the upland, a white-washed building, set alone, and backed by an undulating moorland dotted with clay-works. This was Ebenezer Chapel; and my father was its deacon. Its one bell had sounded down the ridge and tinkled in my ear from half-past ten to eleven that morning. Its pastor would walk back and eat roast duck and drink three-star brandy under my father's roof after service. Bell and pastor had spoken in vain, as far as I was concerned; but I knew that all they had to say would be rubbed in with my father's stirrup-leather before nightfall.

" 'Tis pretty sport," said Dick, "but it leaves traces."

Between us the thin red soil of the ridge was heaped in mounds, and its stain streaked our clothes and faces. On one of these mounds lay a spade and two picks, a pair of tongs, an old sack, dyed in its original service of holding sheep's reddle, and, on the sack, the carcase of our badger, its grey hairs messed with blood about the snout. This carcase was a matter of study not only to me, who had my sketch-book out, but to a couple of Dick's terriers tied up to a sapling close by—an ugly mongrel, half fox—half bull-terrier, and a Dandie Dinmont—who were straining to get at it. As for Dick, he never lifted his eyes, but went on handling Meg. He had the gypsy's secret with animals, and the poor little bitch hardly winced under his touch, though her under-lip was torn away, and hung, like a red rag, by half an inch of flesh.

We had dug and listened and dug again for our badger, all the morning. Then Dick sent his mongrel in at the hole, and the mongrel had come forth like a projectile and sat down at a distance, bewailing his lot. After him the Dandie went in and sneaked out again with a fore-paw bitten to the bone. And at last Meg stepped in grimly, and stayed. For a time there was dead silence, and then as we pressed our ears against the turf and the violets, that were just beginning their autumnal flowering, we beard a scuffling underground and began to dig down to it, till the

sweat streamed into our eyes. Now Dick's wife had helped us to bring up the tools, and hung around to watch the sport—an ugly, apathetic woman, with hair like a horse's tail bound in a yellow rag, a man's hips, and a skirt of old sacking. I think there was no love lost between her and Dick, because she had borne him no children. Anyway, while Dick and I were busy, digging like niggers and listening like Indians—for Meg didn't bark, not being trained to the work, and all we could hear was a *thud, thud* now and then, and the hard breathing of the grapple—all of a sudden the old hag spoke, for the first time that day—

"S'trewth, but I've gripped!"

Looking up, I saw her stretched along the side of the turf, with her head resting on the lip of the badger's hole and her right arm inside, up to the arm-pit. Without speaking again, she began to work her body back, like a snake, the muscles swelling and sinking from shoulder to flank in small waves. She had the strength of a horse. Inch by inch she pulled back, while we dug around the mouth of the hole, filling her mouth and eyes with dirt, until her arm came to light, then the tongs she held; and then Dick spat out a mighty oath—

"It's the *dog* she's got!"

So it was. The woman had hold of Meg all the time, and the game little brute had held on to the badger. Also the badger had held her and when at last his hold slipped, she was a gruesome sight. She looked round, reproachfully, shook the earth out of her eyes and went in again without a sound. And Dick picked up a clod and threw it in his wife's face, between the eyes. She cursed him, in a perfunctory way, and walked off, down the wood, to look after her stew.

But now, Meg having pinned her enemy again, we soon dug them out: and I held the sack while Dick took the badger by the tail and dropped him in. His teeth snapped, a bare two inches from my left hand, as he fell. After a short rest, he was despatched. The method need not be described. It was somewhat crude, and in fact turned me not a little sick.

"One o'clock," Dick observed, glancing up at the sun, and resuming his care of Meg. "What're ye trying to do, youngster?"

"Trying to put on paper what a badger's like when he's dead. If only I had colours—"

"My son, there's a kind of man afflicted with an itch to put all lip sees on paper. What's the use? Fifty men might sit down and write what the grey of a badger's like; and they can't, because there's no words for it. All they can say is that 'tis badger's-grey—which means nought to a man that hasn't seen one; and a man that has don't want to be told. Same with your pencils and paints. Cast your head back and look up—how deep can you see into the sky?"

"Miles."

"Ay, and every mile shining to the eye. I've seen pictures in my time, but never one that made a dab of paint look a mile deep. Besides, why draw a thing when you can lie on your back and look up at it?"

I was about to answer when Dick raised his head, with a queer alertness in his eyes. Then he vented a long, low whistle, and went on binding up Meg's jaw.

Immediately after, there was a crackling of boughs to the left and my father's head appeared above the slope, with the red face of the pastor behind it. We were caught.

On the harangue that followed I have no wish to dwell. My father and the pastor pitched it in by turns, while Dick went on with his surgery, his mouth pursed up for a soundless whistle. The prosecution had it all its own way, and I felt uncomfortably sure about the sentence.

But at last, to our amazement, Dick, having finished the bandaging, let Meg go and advanced. He picked up my sketch-book.

“Gentlemen both,” said he, “I’ve been listening respectful to your talk about God and his wrath, and as a poor heathen I’d like to know your idea of him. Here’s a pencil and paper. Will you be kind enough to draw God? that I may see what he’s like.”

The pastor’s jaw dropped. My father went grey with rage. Dick stood a pace back, smiling; and the sun glanced on the gold rings in his ears.

“No, sirs. It ain’t blasphemy. But I know you can’t give me a notion that won’t make him out to be a sort of man, pretty much like yourselves—two eyes, a nose, mouth, and beard perhaps. Now my wife says there’s points about a woman that you don’t reckon into your notion; and my dog says there’s more in a tail than most men estimate—”

“You foul-tongued poacher—” broke out my father.

“Now you’re mixing matters up,” Dick interrupted, blandly; “I poach, and that’s a crime. I’ve shown your boy to-day how men kill badgers, and maybe that’s wrong. But look hero, sir—I’ve taught him some things besides; the ways of birds and beasts, and their calls; how to tell the hour by sun and stars; how to know an ash from a beech, of a pitch-dark night, by the sound of the wind in their tops; what herbs will cure disease and where to seek them; why some birds hop and others run. Sirs, I come of an old race that has outlived books and pictures and meeting-houses: you belong to a new one and a cock-sure, and maybe you’re right. Anyhow, you know precious little of this world, whatever you may of another.”

Ho stopped, pushed a hand through his coarse black hair, and, as if suddenly tired, resumed the old, sidelong gypsy look that he had been straightening with an effort.

“Your boy’ll believe what you tell him: he’s got the strength in his blood. Take him home and don’t beat him too hard.”

He glanced at me with a light nod, untied his dogs, shouldered his tools, and slouched away down the path, to sleep under his accustomed tree that night and be off again, next day, travelling amongst men and watching them with his weary ironical smile.