

WELLCOMBE

"As I entered the Gulph between the Vallies to-day, a Storm leaped from the Sea and rushed at me roaring I recognised a Demon and put Carrow into a gallop and so escaped. But it was perilous work. There once I saw a Brownie; and Thence at Night the Northern Glances Glean. "(p. 440)

A WRECK AND A CORPSE

May 26, 1858 : "What strange events rush in to break the routine of my remote and rural existence. On Monday morning (yesterday) I was on Carrow's Saddle, on my way to visit an aged sick Parishioner, when I met a messenger. 'A Vessel wrecked, Sir, at Marsland Mouth,' my Boundary North towards Devonshire. I turned my Pony's head and rode down. The usual scene was there – the beach strewn with spars and Rigging – Sea casting up pieces of Timber and Sails. The preventive men had arrived by chance on one of their walks. They had picked up the Ship's Register in a tin case. The name was the *Temperance* of Padstow – a Sloop laden with Coals. The Boat also had washed on shore. But no trace of any Sailor alive or dead. I did my usual duty – appointed two or three Men to search the Rocks and Shore, with a promise to them of 10/0 reward for every corpse they should find and preserve from being robbed or stripped. Then home with pain and swollen face – a cold. The Storm all night had been fierce – Not much sleep all night – too much excited for that. This morning, up early and out on the cliffs – the wreck occurred only a mile by the shore from this house. About nine I was called in by a messenger. 'A corpse found!' 'Where ?' 'At Marsland Mouth, washed in just where the wreck came ashore: we have left him, Sir, not touched till you came, as you told us.' Away on Pony. When I arrived it was a singular scene. A bright, calm, joyous Summer or Spring day. The Sea calm. The wind gone down. A cluster of Rocks, with Men seated around, and in their midst on his back as tho' asleep a young man about 18 or 19, a little bruised about the face by the rocks but otherwise a fine calm look. I removed my hat in the presence of the dead, and thanked the men. Then I had a temporary bier prepared of pieces of wood, and Four men took him up, and followed me up from the rocks towards the road, and so home. I preceded them when I approached the house, to prepare the usual place wherein I have laid out and shrouded and coffined now four and twenty dead Sailors. It is not inside my house, but part of the Church premises. Then my next work was to write for the Coroner, who lives about 30 miles off. The policeman takes my letter. And now meanwhile comes the painful part – the shrouding and placing in his house of wood – all which comes to my superintendence, as it has for twenty mournful years." (pp. 307-308)

RIVAL CORONERS

To Mrs Watson, March 10, 1857 : "One of my two parishes, Wellcombe, is in Devon, the other, Morwenstow, is in Cornwall. They and the two counties to which they belong are divided by a small Rivulet or Brook. In an eddy of this stream, and just below a deep, dark Pool, a Man – a Miller – found on Saturday the Body of dead Female Child! He came to me to make known the discovery, and to say that he had brought the little corpse into his own house, which stands on the Morwenstow and Cornish side. He had found it on the Wellcombe Bank, and drawn it there to land. The Constable of Wellcombe had gone off at once to Barnstaple for the Devon Coroner. I directed him to lock up the Child, and allow no one to see it until the Coroner arrived. On Sunday Morning, about Nine o'clock, the Miller came again to say, the Constable had returned with a message from Mr. Toller, the Coroner, to state that as the Body had been laid in a House in Cornwall he could not hold

an inquest upon it, but that it was the Cornish Coroner's office to do so. I sent at once for the Morw. Constable, and wrote as statement of the facts at full length, and at about half past Ten the Constable started for the Cornish Coroner. He lives about 30 miles from hence beyond Launceston. Then I went to Church here, worried not a little with the horror of the thing. Now, the service at Wellcombe is at half past Two. When I arrived I found the People excited and full of rumours. Suspicion however had not fixed on anyone there. After Church the Churchwarden said a person had passed by who said the Devon Coroner had found out after he had sent the Wellcombe Constable away that he had made a mistake – that it was his duty to hold the inquest notwithstanding that the Body lay on the Cornish Side, because it had been drawn to the land on Devonshire Soil. Nay more, that Mr. Toller, the Devon Coroner, had gone on the Morw'w to stay the Night, and to hold the inquest next day. Guess the annoyance added to my usual Sunday's work. Well, Home once more, and at Church at a quarter past Four. When I came out, a messenger waited at the Porch, with a Note from Mr. Toller. He had heard that the Cornish Coroner was sent for, and wished to know what had better be done. So I had to go to the house two miles off – and Mrs. H. was angry that he did not come to me – and to cause him to send off a Man on horseback with a letter, to ride all night, and to get in time to prevent Mr. Goode, Coroner for Cornwall, from starting in the Morning. But it was all in vain. Either the Messenger loitered or went by a different road, for so it was that about midday on Monday the two Coroners met at the Mill. Mr. Toller, the Devon Man, had first bungled through a shallow and fruitless inquest, and the result was the unmeaning verdict of Found Drowned! When Mr. Goode, and Dinham the Surgeon, who was brought to make the post mortem examination, arrived, High words ensued, and it was my difficult task to pacify Mr. Goode. He persists in saying that Mr. Toller had no right to officiate on Cornish Ground, and the dispute is not I fear yet over. Our Coroner states that he must refer it to the Quarter Sessions, and it is my nervous dread that I may be dragged forward as a Witness. And after all this uproar, not a single discovery of the Mother or the Murderer! Mr. Goode, who examined the Child externally, thinks it was brought to the spot dead and cast in. But inasmuch as no lungs were searched, it is not known whether it was born alive. Last Night the Sexton at Wellcombe buried it in the Churchyard." (p. 291)

TOMMY BOX

To Rev. W. Valentine, July 27, 1864 : "We have had rather a filthy business here. While I was absent, my miscreant Tommy Box, having found out that a swarm of Bees had made honey in [Morwenstow] Church Roof, got two or three other rascals to accompany him, and with a Bar of iron broke down a hole in the Roof, lighted a fire to smoke out the bees and stole a great deal of honey. In their wicked work they caught the Roof of the Church on Fire, and being tindery with the long drought and no slate but all wood the miracle is that the Church was not burnt down. They actually returned to the Spot at Night and made three attempts to carry off honey. As soon as I was told of it I ordered Cann to send for Doidge the Policeman, whereupon the only good of all the matter ensued, Master Tommy absconded and I am rid if the rascal altogether. A viler set of wretches was never hanged. But all was not yet over. Howard the Miller, whose boy was one of the party, arrived two days after with my short gun which he found hidden under some wood at West Mill. Tommy had stolen it from my little room and it is supposed sold it to the Miller's boy.

. . . "Doidge has not yet been able to find Master Tommy at home to enquire about the gun. His Mother came up to ask me to forgive him and to take him back. I told her it was God's deliverance from a Scoundrel when he absconded . . ." (p. 488)

AN ENGLISH MAY

To Mrs. Watson, May 20, 1866 : "I have ridden to-day in the loveliest weather of an English May. The Birds in Wellcombe Wood have sung their sweetest Song, and when I tell you that, besides the usual Thrush Blackbird and Finch, I rouse as I pass along Ringdoves Gold and Green Woodpecker the Water Ousel and the Heron you will understand what an Aviary we have here in the Wilds. I thought to-day how you would enjoy a Walk in such a scene." (p. 543)

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THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF R. S. HAWKER
(SOMETIME VICAR OF MORWENSTOW)

BY HIS SON-IN-LAW C. E. BYLES

John Lane : The Bodley Head

1906

*This collection was selected and edited by Angela Williams for the Hawker Society,
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