THREE MEN OF BADAJOS

A.T. Quiller–Couch

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I

YOU enter the village of Gantick between two round−houses set one on each side of the high road where it dips steeply towards the valley bottom. On the west of the opposite hill the road passes out between another pair of round−houses. And down in the heart of the village among the elms facing the churchyard lych−gate stands a fifth, alone.

The five, therefore, form an elongated St. Andrew's cross; but nobody can tell for certain who built them, or why. They are all alike; each built of cob, circular, whitewashed, having pointed windows and a conical roof of thatch with a wooden cross on the apex. When I was a boy these thatched roofs used to be pointed out to me as masterpieces; and they still endure. But the race of skilled thatchers, once the peculiar pride of Gantick, has come to an end. What time has eaten modern and clumsy hands have tried to repair; yet a glance will tell you that the old sound work means to outwear the patches.

The last of these famous thatchers lived in the round−house on your right as you leave Gantick by the seaward road. His name was old Nat Ellery, or Thatcher Ellery, and his age (as I remember him) between seventy or eighty. Yet he clung to his work, being one of those lean men upon whom age, exposure, and even drink take a long while to tell. For he drank; not socially at the Ring of Bells, but at home in solitude with a black bottle at his elbow. He lived there alone; his neighbours, even of the round−house across the road, shunned him and were shunned by him: children would run rather than meet him on the road as he came along, striding swiftly for his age (the drink never affected his legs), ready greaved and sometimes gauntleted as if in haste for his job, always muttering to himself; and when he passed us with just a side−glance from his red eyes, we observed that his pale face did not cease to twitch nor his lips to work. We felt something like awe for the courage of Archie Passmore, who followed twenty paces behind with his tools and a bundle of spars or straw−rope, or perhaps at the end of a ladder which the two carried between them. Archie (aged sixteen) used to boast to us that he did not fear the old man a ha'penny; and the old man treated Archie as a Gibeonite, a hewer of wood, a drawer of water, never as an apprentice. Of his craft, except what he picked up by watching, the lad learned nothing.

What made him so vaguely terrible to us was the common rumour in the village that Thatcher Ellery had served once under his Majesty's colours, but had deserted and was still liable to be taken and shot for it. Now this was true and everyone knew it, though why and how he had deserted were questions answered among us only by dark and frightful guesses. He had outlived all risk of the law's revenge; no one, it was certain, would take the trouble to seize and execute justice upon a drunkard of seventy. But we children never thought of this, and for us as we watched him down the road there was always the thrilling chance that over the hedge or around the next corner would pop up a squad of redcoats. Some of us had even seen it, in dreams.

II

This is the story of Thatcher Ellery as it was told to me after his death, which happened one night a few weeks before I came home from school on my first summer holidays.

His father, in the early years of the century, had kept the mill up at Trethake Water, two miles above Gantick. There were two sons, of whom Reub, the elder, succeeded to the mill. Nat had been apprenticed to the thatching. Accident of birth assigned to the two these different walks of life, but by taking thought their parents could not have chosen more wisely, for Nat was born clever, with an ambition to cut a figure in man's eyes and just that sense of finish and the need of it which makes the good workman. Whereas his brother went the daily round at home as contentedly as a horse at a cider press. But Nat made the mistake of lodging under his father's roof, and his mother made the worse mistake of liking her first–born the better and openly showing it. Nat, jealous and sensitive by nature, came to imagine the whole world against him, and Reub, who had no vice beyond a large thick–witted selfishness, seemed to make a habit of treading on his corns. At length came the explosion: a sudden furious assault which sent Reub souse into the paternal mill–leat.

The mother cursed Nat forth from the door, and no doubt said a great deal more than she meant. The boy — he was just seventeen — carried his box down to the Ring of Bells. Next morning as he sat viciously driving in spars astride on a rick ridge, whence he could see far over the Channel, there came into sight round Derryman's Point a ship–of–war, running before the strong easterly breeze with piled canvas, white stun–sails bellying, and a fine froth of white water running off her bluff bows. Another ship followed, and another — at length a squadron of six. Nat watched them from time to time until they trimmed sails and stood in for Falmouth. Then he climbed down from the rick and put on his coat.

Two years later he landed at Portsmouth, heartily sick of the sea and all belonging to it. He drank himself silly that night and for ten nights following, and one morning found himself in the streets without a penny. Portsmouth just then (July, 1808) was filled with troops embarking under Sir John Moore for Portugal. One regiment especially took Nat's eye — the 4th or King's Own, and indeed the whole service contained no finer body of men. He sidled up to a corporal and gave a false name. Varcoe had been his mother's maiden name, and it came handy. The corporal took him to a recruiting sergeant and handed him over with a wink. The recruiting sergeant asked a few convenient questions, and within the hour Nat was a soldier of King George. To his disgust, however, they did not embark him for Portugal, but marched him up the length of England to Lancaster, to learn his drill with the second battalion.

Seventeen months later they marched him back through the length of England — outwardly a made soldier — and shipped him on a transport for Gibraltar. In the meanwhile he had found two friends, the only two real ones he ever found in his life. They were Dave McInnes and Teddy Butson, privates of the 4th Regiment of Foot, 2nd Battalion, C Company. Dave McInnes came from somewhere to the west of Perth and drank like a fish when he had the chance. Teddy Butson came from the Lord knew where, with a tongue that wagged about everything except his own past. It did indeed wag about that, but told nothing but lies which were understood and accepted for lies and by consequence didn't count. These two had christened Nat Ellery "Spuds." He had no secret from them but one.

He was the cleverest of the three, and they admired him for it. He admired them in return for possessing something he lacked. It seemed to him the most important, almost the only important, thing in the world.

For (this was his secret) he believed himself to be a coward. He was not really a coward, though he carried about in his heart the liveliest fear of death and wounds. He was always asking himself how he would behave under fire, and somehow he found the odds heavy against his behaving well. He put roundabout questions to Dave and Teddy with the aim of discovering what they felt about it. They answered in a careless, matter–of–fact way, as men to whom it had never occurred to have any doubt about themselves. Nat was desperately afraid they might guess his reason for asking. Just here, when their friendship might have been helpful, it failed altogether. He felt angry with them for not understanding, while he prayed that they might not understand. He took to observing other men in the regiment, and found them equally cheerful, concerned only with the moment. He became secretly religious after a fashion. He felt that he was the one and only coward in the King's Own, and prayed and planned his behaviour day and night to avoid being found out.

In this state of mind he landed at Gibraltar. When the order came for the 4th to move up to the front, he cheered with the rest, watching their faces.

III

At ten o'clock on the night of April 6th, 1812, our troops were to assault Badajos. It was now a few minutes past nine.

The night had closed in without rain, but cloudy and thick, with river fog. The moon would not rise for another hour or more. After the day's furious bombardment silence had fallen on besieged and besiegers; but now and then a light flitted upon the ramparts, and at intervals the British in the trenches could hear the call of a sentinel proclaiming that all was well in Badajos.

In the trenches a low continuous murmur mingled with the voices of running water. On the right by the Guadiana waited Picton's Third Division, breathing hard as the time drew nearer. Kempt commanded these for the moment. Picton was in camp attending to a hurt, but his men knew that before ten o'clock he would arrive to lead across the Rivillas by the narrow bridge and up to the walls of the Castle frowning over the river at the city's north−east corner.

In the centre and over against the wall to the left of the Castle were assembled Colville's and Barnard's men of the Fourth and Light Divisions. Theirs, according to the General's plan, was to be the main business to−night — to carry the breaches hammered in the Trinidad and Santa Maria bastions and the curtain between; the Fourth told off for the Trinidad and the curtain, the Light Bobs for the Santa Maria — heroes these of Moore's famous rear−guard, tried men of the 52nd Foot and the 95th Rifles, with the 43rd beside them, and destined to pay the heaviest price of all to−night for the glory of such comradeship. But, indeed, Ciudad Rodrigo had given the 43rd a title to stand among the best.

And far away to the left, on the lower slopes of the hills, Leigh's Fifth Division was halted in deep columns. A knoll separated his two brigades, and across the interval of darkness they could hear each other's movements. They were to operate independently; and concerning the task before the brigade on the right there could be no doubt: a dash across the gorge at their feet, and an assault upon the outlying Pardaleras, on the opposite slope. But the business before Walker's brigade, on the left, was by no means so simple. The storming party had been marching light, with two companies of Portuguese to carry their ladders, and stood discussing prospects: for as yet they were well out of earshot of the walls, and the moment for strict silence had not arrived.

"The Vincenty," grumbled Teddy Butson; "and by shot to me if I even know what it's like."

"Like!" McInnes' jaws shut on the word like a steel trap. "The scarp's thirty feet high, and the ditch accordin'. The last on the west side it will be — over by the river. I know it like your face, and its uglier, if that's possible."

"Dick Webster was saying it's mined," put in Nat, commanding a firm voice.

"Eh? The glacis? I shouldn't wonder. Walker will know."

"But what'll we do?"

"Well, now" — Dave seemed to be considering — "it will not be for the likes of me to be telling the brigadier−general. But if Walker comes to me and says, 'Dave, there's a mine hereabouts. What will I be doing?' it's like enough I shall say: 'Your honour knows best; but the usual course is to walk round it.'"

Teddy Butson chuckled, and rubbed the back of his axe approvingly. Nat held his tongue for a minute almost, and then broke out irritably: "To hell with this waiting!"

His nerves were raw. Two minutes later a man on his right kicked awkwardly against his foot. It startled him, and he cursed furiously.

"Hold hard, Spuds, my boy," said the man cheerfully; "you ain't Lord Wellington, nor his next−of−kin, to be makin' all the noise."

Teddy Butson wagged his head solemnly at a light which showed foggily for a moment on the distant ramparts.

"All right," said he, "you — town! Little you know 'tis Teddy's birthday."

"There will be wine," said Dave, dreamily.

"Lashins of it; wine and women, and loot things. I wonder how our boys are feeling on the right? What's that?" — as a light shot up over the ridge to the eastward. "Wish I could see what's doing over there. My belief we're only put up for a feint."

"O hush it, you royal mill−clappers!" This came from the darkness behind — from some man of the 30th, no

doubt.

The voice was tense, with a note of nervousness in it, which Nat recognised at once. He turned with a sudden desire to see the speaker's face. Here was one who felt as he did, one who could understand him, but his eyes sought in vain among the lines of glimmering black shakos.

"Silence in the ranks!" Two officers came forward, talking together and pausing to watch the curious light now rising and sinking and rising again in the sky over the eastern ridges. "They must have caught sight of our fellows — listen, wasn't that a cheer? What time is it?" The officer was Captain Hopkins commanding Nat's Company, but now in charge of the stormers. A voice hailed him, and he ran back. "Yes, sir, I think so decidedly," Nat heard him saying, and he came running clutching his sword sheath. "Silence men — the brigade will advance."

The Portuguese picked up and shouldered their ladders: the orders were given, and the columns began to move down the slope. For a while they could hear the tramp of the other brigade moving parallel with them on the other side of the knoll, then fainter and fainter as it wheeled aside and down the gorge to the right. At the foot of the slope they opened a view up the gorge lit for a moment by a flare burning on the ramparts of the Pardaleras, and saw their comrades moving down and across the bottom like a stream of red lava pouring towards the foot. The flare died down and our brigade struck away to the left over the level country. On this side Badajos remained dark and silent.

They were marching quickly, yet the pace did not satisfy Nat. He wanted to be through with it, to come face to face with the worst and know it. And yet he feared it abominably. For two years he had contrived to hide his secret. He had marched, counter–marched, fed, slept, and fought with his comrades; had dodged with them behind cover, loaded, fired, charged with them; had behaved outwardly like a decent soldier, but almost always with a sickening void in the pit of the stomach. Once or twice in particularly bad moments he had caught himself blubbering, and with a deadly shame. He had not an idea that at least a dozen of his comrades — among them Dave and Teddy — had seen it, and thought nothing of it; still less did he imagine that those had been his most courageous moments. Soldiers fight differently. Teddy Butson, for instance, talked all the time until his tongue swelled, and then he barked like a dog. Dave shut his teeth and groaned. But these symptoms escaped Nat, whose habit was to think all the while of himself. Of one thing he felt sure, that he had never yet been anything but glad to hear the recall sounded.

Well, so far he had escaped. Heaven knew how he had managed it; he only knew that the last two years had been as long as fifty, and he seemed to have been living since the beginning of the world. But here he was, and actually keeping step with a storming party. He kept his eyes on Dave's long lean back immediately in front and trudged on, divided between an insane desire to know of what Dave was thinking, and an equally insane wonder what Dave's body might be worth to him as cover.

What a silly word capering in his head? "Mill–clappers." Why on earth "Mill–clappers?" It put him in mind of home: but he had no silly tender thoughts to waste on home, or the folks there. He had never written to them. If they should happen on the copy of the Gazette — and the chances were hundred to one against it — the name of Nathaniel Varcoe among the killed or wounded would mean nothing to them. He tramped on, chewing his fancy, and extracted this from it: "A man with never a friend at home hasn't even an excuse to be a coward, curse it!"

Suddenly the column halted, in a bank of fog through which his ear caught the lazy ripple of water. He woke up with a start. The fog was all about them.

"What's this?" he demanded aloud; then, with a catch of his breath, "Mines?"

"Eh, be quiet," said Teddy Butson at his elbow; "listen to yonder." And the word was hardly out when an explosion split the sky and was followed by peal after peal of musketry. Nat had a swift vision of a high black wall against a background of flame, and then night came down again as you might close a shutter. But the musketry continued. "That will be at the breaches," Dave flung the words over this left shoulder. Then followed another flash and another explosion. This time, however, the light, though less vivid than the first flash, did not vanish. While he wondered at this Nat saw first of all the rim of the moon through the slant of an embrasure, and then Teddy's pale but cheerful face.

The head of the column had been halted a few yards only from a breastwork, with a stockade above it and a chevaux de frise on top of all. As far as knowledge of his whereabouts went, Nat might have been east, west, north or south of Badajos, or somewhere in another planet. But the past two years had somehow taught him to

divine that behind this ugly obstruction lay a covered way with a guard house. And sure enough the men, keeping dead silence now, could hear the French soldiers chatting in that unseen guard house and laughing.

"Now's the time." Nat heard the word passed back by the young engineer officer who had crept forward to reconnoitre: and then an order given in Portuguese.

"Ay, bring up the ladders, you greasers, and let's put it through." This from Teddy Butson chafing by Nat's side.

The two Portuguese companies came forward with the ladders as the storming party moved up to the gateway. And just at that moment there the sentry let off his alarm shot. It set all within the San Vincente bastion moving and whirring like the works of a mechanical toy; feet came running along the covered way; muskets clinked on the stone parapet; tongues of fire spat forth from the embrasures; and then, as the musketry quickened, a flash and a roar lifted the glacis away behind, to the right of our column, so near that the wind of it drove our men sideways.

"All right, Johnny," Dave grunted, recovering himself as the clods of earth began to fall: "Blaze away, my silly ducks — we're not there!"

But the Portuguese companies as the mine exploded cast down the ladders and ran. Half a dozen came charging back along the column's right flank, and our soldiers cursed and struck at them as they fled. But the curses were as nothing beside those of the Portuguese officers striving to rally their men.

"My word," said Teddy. "Hear them scandalous greasers! It's poor talk, is English."

"On with you, lads," — it was Walker himself who shouted. "Pick up the ladders, and on with you!"

They hardly waited for the word, but, shouldering the ladders, ran forward through the dropping bullets to the gate, cheering and cheered by the rear ranks.

But they flung themselves in vain at the gate. On its iron–bound and iron–studded framework their axes made no impression. A dozen men charged it, using a ladder as a battering ram. "Aisy with that, ye blind ijjits!" yelled an Irish sergeant. "Ye'll be needin' them ladders prisintly!" Our three privates found themselves in the crowd surging towards the breastwork to the right of the gate. "Nip on my shoulders, Teddy lad," grunted McInnes, and Teddy nipped up and began hacking at the chevaux de frise with his axe. "That's av ut, bhoys," yelled the Irish sergeant again. "Lave them spoikes an' go for the stockade. Good for you, little man — whirro!" Nat by this time was on a comrade's back, and using his axe for dear life; one of twenty men hacking, ripping, tearing down the wooden stakes. But it was Teddy who wriggled through first with Dave at his heels. The man beneath Nat gave a heave with his shoulders and shot him through his gap, a splinter tearing his cheek open. He fell head foremost, sprawling down the slippery slope of the ditch.

While he picked himself up and stretched out a hand to recover his axe a bullet struck the blade of it — ping! He caught up the axe and ran his finger over it stupidly. Phut — another bullet spat into the soft earth behind his shoulder. Then he understood. A fellow came tumbling through the gap, pitched exactly where Nat had been sprawling a moment before, rose to his knees, and then with a quiet bubbling sound lay down again.

"Ugh! he would be killed – he must get out of this!" But there was no cover unless he found it across the ditch and close under the high stone curtain. They would be dropping stones, beams, fire barrels; but at least he would be out of the reach of the bullets. He forgot the chance — the certainty — of an enfilading fire from the two bastions. His one desire was to get across and pick some place of shelter.

But by this time the men were pouring in behind and fast filling the ditch. A fire–ball came crashing over the rampart, rolled down the grass slope and lay sputtering, and in the infernal glare he saw all his comrade's faces — every detail of their dress down to the moulded pattern on their buttons. "Fourth! Fourth!" some one shouted, and then voice and vision were caught up and drowned together in a hell of musketry. He must win across or be carried he knew not where by the brute pressure of the crowd. A cry broke from him and he ran, waving his axe, plunged down the slope and across. On the further slope an officer caught him up and scrambled beside him. "Whirro, Spuds! After him, boys!" sang out Teddy Butson. But Spuds did not hear.

He and the officer were at the top of the turf — at the foot of the curtain. "Ladders! Ladders!" He caught hold of the first as it was pushed up and helped — now the centre of a small crowd — to plant it against the wall. Then he fell back, mopping his forehead, and feeling his torn cheek. What the devil were they groaning at? Short? The ladder too short? He stared up foolishly. The wall was thirty feet high perhaps and the ladder ten feet short of that or more. "Heads!" A heavy beam crashed down, snapping the foot of the ladder like a cabbage stump. Away to

the left a group of men were planting another. Half a dozen dropped while he watched them. Why in the world were they dropping like that? He stared beyond and saw the reason. The French marksmen in the bastion were sweeping the face of the curtain with their cross fire — those cursed bullets again! And the ladder did not reach, after all. O, it was foolishness — flinging away men like this for no earthly good! Why not throw up the business and go home? Why didn't somebody stop those silly bugles sounding the Advance?

There they went again! It was enough to drive a man mad!

He turned and ran down the slope a short way. For the moment he held a grip on himself, but it was slackening, and in another half–minute he would have lost it and run in mere blind horror. But in the first group he blundered upon were Dave and Teddy, and a score of the King's Own, with a couple of ladders between them; and better still, they were listening to Captain Hopkins, who waved an arm and pointed to an embrasure to the left. Nat, pulling himself up and staring with the rest, saw that no gun stood in this embrasure, only a gabion. In a moment he was climbing the slope again; if a man must die, there's comfort at least in company. He bore a hand in planting the two ladders; a third was fetched — heaven knew whence or how — and planted beside them, and up the men swarmed, three abreast, Dave leading on the right–hand one, at the foot of which Nat hung back and swayed. He heard Dave's long sigh, the sigh, the sob almost, of desire answered at last. He watched him as he mounted. The ladders were still too short, and the leader on each must climb on the second man's shoulders to get hand–hold on the coping. In that moment he might be clubbed on the head, defenceless. On the middle ladder a young officer of the 30th mounted by Dave's side. Nat turned his head away, and as he did so a rush of men, galled by the fire from the bastion to the right, came on him like a wave, and swept him up the first four rings.

He was in for it now. Go back he could not, and he followed the tall Royal ahead, whose heels scraped against his breast buttons, and once or twice bruised him in the face; followed up, wondering what face of death would meet him at the top, where men were yelling and jabbering in three languages — French, English, and that tongue which belongs equally to men and brutes at close quarters and killing.

Something came sliding down the ladder. The man in front of Nat ducked his head; Nat ducked too; but the body slid sideways before it reached them and dropped plumb — the inert lump which had been Dave McInnes. His shako, spinning straight down the ladder, struck Nat on the shoulder and leaped off it down into darkness.

He saw other men drop; he saw Teddy Butson parallel with him on the far ladder, and mounting with him step for step — now earlier, now later, but level with him most of the time. They would meet at the embrasure; find together whatever waited for them there. Nat was sobbing by this time — sweat and tears together running down the caked blood on his cheek — but he did not know it.

He had almost reached the top when a sudden pressure above forced his feet off the rung and his body over the ladder's side; and there he dangled, hooked by his armpit. Someone grabbed his leg, and, pulling him into place, thrust him up over the shoulders of the tall Royal in front. He saw the leader on the middle ladder go down under a clubbed blow which burst through his japanned shako–cover, and then a hand came down to help him.

"Spuds, O Spuds!"

It was Teddy reaching down from the coping to help him, and he paid for it with his life. The two wriggled into the embrasure together, Nat's head and shoulders under Teddy's right arm. Nat did not see the bayonet thrust given, but heard a low grunt, as he and his friend's corpse toppled over the coping together and into Badajos.

He rose on his knees, caught a man by the leg, flung him, and as the fellow clutched his musket, wrenched the bayonet from it and plunged it into his body. While the Frenchman heaved, he pulled out the weapon for another stab, dropped sprawling on his enemy's chest, and the first wave of the storming party broke over him, beating the breath out of him, and passed on.

Yet he managed to wriggle his body from under this rush of feet, and, by–and–by, to raise himself, still grasping the sidearm. Men of the 4th were pouring thick and fast through the embrasure, and turning to the right in pursuit of the enemy now running along the curve of the ramparts. A few only pressed straight forward to silence the musketry jetting and crackling from the upper windows of two houses facing on the fortifications.

Nat staggered down after them, but turned as soon as he gained the roadway, and, passing to the right, plunged down a black side street. An insane notion possessed him of taking the two houses in the rear, and as he went he shouted to the 4th to follow him. No one paid him the smallest attention, and presently he was alone in the darkness, rolling like a drunkard, shaken by his sobs, but still shouting and brandishing his sidearm. He clattered against a high blank wall.

Still he lurched forward over uneven cobbles. He had forgotten his design upon the two houses, but a light shone at the end of this dark lane, and he made for it, gained it, and found himself in a wider street. And there the enchantment fell on him.

For the street was empty, utterly empty, yet brilliantly illuminated. Not a soul could he see: yet in house after house as he passed lights shone from every window, in the lower floors behind blinds or curtains which hid the inmates. It was if Badajos had arrayed itself for a fête; and still, as he staggered forward a low buzz, a whisper of voices surrounded him, and now and again at the sound of his footstep on the cobbles a lattice would open gently and be as gently re–shut. Hundreds of eyes were peering at him, the one British soldier in a bewitched city; hundreds of unseen eyes, stealthy, expectant. And always ahead of him, faint and distant, sounded the bugles and the yells around the Trinidad and the breaches.

He stood alone in the great square. While he paused at the corner, his eyes following the rows of mysterious lights from house to house, from storey to storey, the regular tramp of feet fell on his ears and a company of Foot marched down into the moonlight patch facing him and grounded arms with a clatter. They were men of his own regiment, and they formed up in the moonlight like a company of ghosts. One or two shots were fired at them, low down, from the sills of the line of doorways to his right; but no citizen showed himself and no one appeared to be hit. And ever from the direction of the Trinidad came the low roar of combat and the high notes of the bugles.

He was creeping along the side of the square towards an outlet at its north–east corner, when the company got into motion again and came towards him. Then he turned up a narrow lane to the left and fled. He was sobbing no longer; the passion had died out of him, and he knew himself to be mad. In the darkness the silent streets began to fill; random shots whistled at every street corner; but he blundered on, taking no account of them. Once he ran against a body of Picton's men — half a score of the 74th Regiment let loose at length from the captured Castle, and burning for loot. One man thrust the muzzle of his musket against his breast before he was recognized. Then two or three shook hands with him.

He was back in the square again and fighting — Heaven knew why — with an officer of the Brunswickers over a birdcage. Whence the birdcage came he had no clear idea, but there was a canary–bird inside, and he wanted it. A random shot smashed his left hand as he gripped the cage, and he dropped it as something with which he had no further concern. As he turned away, hugging his hand, and cursing the marksman, a second shot from another direction took the Brunswicker between the shoulders.

At dawn he found himself on the ramparts by the Trinidad breach, peering curiously among the slain. Across the top of the breach stretched a heavy beam studded with sword blades, and all the bodies on this side of it were French. Right beneath it lay one red–coat whose skull had been battered out of shape as he attempted to wriggle through. All the upper blades were stained, and on one fluttered a strip of flannel shirt. Powder blackened every inch of the rampart hereabouts, and as Nat passed over he saw the bodies piled in scores on the glacis below — some hideously scorched — among beams, gabions, burnt out fire–pots, and the wreckage of ladders. A horrible smell of singed flesh rose on the morning air; and, beyond the stench and the sullen smoke, birds sang in the dewy fields, and the Guadiana flowed between grey olives and green promise of harvest.

Below, a single British officer, wrapped in a dark cape, picked his way among the corpses. Behind, intermittent shots and outcries told of the sack in progress. Save for Nat and the dead, the Trinidad was a desert. Yet he talked incessantly, and, stooping to pat the shoulder of the red–coat beneath the chevaux de frise, spoke to Dave McInnes and Teddy Butson to come and look. He never doubted they were beside him. "Pretty mess they've made of this chap." He touched the man's collar: "48th, a corporal! Ugh, let's get out of this!" In imagination he linked arms with two men already stiffening, one at the foot and the other on the summit of the San Vincent's bastion. "King's Own — all friends in the King's Own!" he babbled as he retraced his way into the town.

He had a firelock in his hands ... he was fumbling with it, very clumsily, by reason of his shattered fingers. He had wandered down a narrow street, and was groping at an iron–studded door. "Won't open," he told the ghosts beside him. "Must try the patent key." He put the muzzle against the lock and fired, flung himself against the door, and as it broke before him, stood swaying, staring across a whisp of smoke into a mean room, where a priest knelt in one corner by a straw pallet, and a girl rose from beside him and slowly confronted the intruder. As she rose she caught at the edge of a deal table, and across the smoke she too seemed to be swaying.

IV

SEVENTEEN years later Nat Ellery walked down the hill into Gantick village, and entered the Ring of the Bells.

"I've come," said he, "to inquire about a chest I left here, one time back along." And he told his name and the date.

The landlord, Joshua Martin — son of old Joshua, who had kept the inn in 1806 — rubbed his double chin. "So you be Nat Ellery? I can just mind'ee as a lad. As for the chest — come to think, father sent it back to Trethake Water. Reckon it went in the sale."

"What sale?"

"Why, don't 'ee know? When Reub sold up. That would be about five years after the old folks died. The mill didn' pay after the war, so Reub sold up and emigrated."

"Ah! What became of him?"

"I did hear he was dead, too," said Joshua Martin, "out in Canady somewhere. But that may be lies," he added cheerfully.

Nat made no further comment, but paid for his gin–and–water, picked up his carpet bag, and went out to seek for a cottage. On his way he eyed the thatched roofs critically. "Old Thatcher Hockady will be dead," he told himself. "There's work for me here." He felt certain of it in Farmer Sprague's rick–yard. Farmer Sprague owned the two round–houses at the seaward end of the village, and wanted a tenant for one of them. Nat applied for it, and declared his calling.

"Us can't afford to pay the old prices these times," said the farmer.

Nat's eyes had wandered off to the ricks. "You'll find you can when you've seen my work," he answered.

Thus he became tenant of the round–house, and lived in it to the day of his death. No one in my day knew when or how the story first spread that he had been in the army and deserted. Perhaps he let slip the secret in his cups; for at first he spent his Saturday evenings at the Ring of Bells, dropping this habit when he found that every soul there disliked him. Perhaps some discharged veteran of the 4th, tramping through Gantick in search of work, had recognised him and let fall a damning hint. Long before I can remember the story had grown up uncontradicted, believed in by everyone. Beneath it the man lived on and deteriorated; but his workmanship never deteriorated, and no man challenged its excellence.

About a month before his death (I have this from the postmistress) he sat down and wrote a letter, and ten days later a visitor arrived at the round–house. This visitor the Jago family (who lived across the road) declare to have been Satan himself; they have assured me so again and again, and I cannot shake their belief. But that is nonsense. The man was a grizzled artizan looking fellow well over fifty; extraordinarily like the old Thatcher, though darker of skin — yellow as a guinea, said Gantick; in fact and beyond doubt, the old man's son. He made no friends, no acquaintances ever, but confined himself to nursing the Thatcher, now tied to his chair by rheumatism. One thing alone gives colour to the Jagos' belief; the Thatcher who had sent for him could not abide the sight of him. The Jago children, who snatched a fearful joy by stealing after dark into the unkempt garden and peering through the uncurtained lattice windows, reported that as the pair sat at table with the black bottle between them, the Thatcher's eyes would be drawn to fix themselves on the other's with a stealthy shrinking terror — or, as they put it, "vicious when he wasna' lookin' and afeared when he was."

They would sit (so the children reported) half an hour, or maybe an hour, at a time, without a word spoken between them; but, indeed, the yellow stranger troubled few with his speech. His only visits were paid to the postmistress, who kept a small grocery store, where he bought arrowroot and other spoon–food for the invalid, and the Ring of Bells, where he went nightly to have the black bottle refilled with rum. On the doctor he never called.

It was on July 12th that the end came. The fine weather, after lasting for six weeks, had broken up two days before into light thunderstorms, which did not clear the air as usual. Ky Jago (short for Caiaphas), across the way, prophesied a big thunderstorm to come, but allowed he might be mistaken when on the morning of the 12th the rain came down in sheets. This torrential rain lasted until two in the afternoon, when the sky cleared and a pleasant northwesterly draught played up the valley. At six o'clock Ky Jago, who, in default of the Thatcher, was making shift to cover up Farmer Sprague's ricks, observed dense clouds massing themselves over the sea and

rolling up slowly against the wind, and decided that the big storm would happen after all. At nine in the evening it broke.

It broke with such fury that the Stranger, with the black bottle under his arm, paused on the threshold as much as to ask his father, "Shall I go?" But the old man was clamouring for drink, and he went. He was half–way down the hill when with a crack the heavens opened and the white jagged lightning fairly hissed at him. Crack followed crack, flash and peal together, or so quick on each other, that no mortal could distinguish the rattle of one discharge from the bursting explosion of the other. No such tempest, he decided, could last for long, and he fled down to the Ring of Bells for shelter until the worst should be over. He waited there perhaps twenty minutes, and still the infernal din grew worse instead of better, until his anxiety for the old man forced him out in the teeth of it and up the hill, where the gutters had overflowed upon the roadway, and the waters raced over his ankles. The first thing he saw at the top in one lurid instant was the entire Jago family gathered by their garden gate — six of them — and all bareheaded under the deluge.

The next flash revealed why they were there. Against the round–house opposite a ladder rested, and above it on the steep roof clung a man — his father. He had clamped his small ladder into the thatch, and as the heaven opened and shut, now silhouetting the round–house, now wrapping it in white flames — they saw him climbing up, and still up, towards the cross at the top.

"Help, there!" shouted the Stranger. "Come down! O help, you! — we must get him down!" The women and children screamed. A fresh explosion drowned shout and screams.

Jago and the Stranger reached the ladder together. The Stranger mounted first; but as he did so, the watchers in one blinding moment saw the old Thatcher's hand go up and grip the cross. The shutters of darkness came to with a roar, but above it rose a shrill, a terribly human cry.

"Dave!" cried the voice. "Ted!"

Silence followed, and then a heavy thud. They waited for the next flash. It came. There was no one on the roof of the round–house, but a broken stump when the cross had been.

V This was the story the yellow Stranger told to the Coroner. And the Coroner listened and asked:

"Can you account for conduct of deceased? Had he been drinking that evening?"

"He had," answered the witness, and for a moment, while the Coroner took a note, it seemed he had said all. Then he seemed to think better of it, and added, "My father suffered from delusions, sir."

"Hey? What sort of delusions?" The Coroner glanced at the jury, who sat impassive.

"Well, sir, my father in his young days had served as a soldier."

Here the jurymen began to show interest suddenly. One of two leaned forward. "He belonged to the 4th Regiment, and was at the siege of Badajos. During the sack of the city he broke into a house, and — and — after that he was missing."

"Go on," said the Coroner, for the witness had paused.

"That was where he first met my mother, sir. It was her house, and she and a priest kept him hidden till the English had left. After that he married her. There were three children — all boys. My brothers came first: they were twins. I was born two years later."

"All born at Badajos?"

"All in Badajos, sir. My brothers will be there still, if they're living."

"But these delusions ——"

"I'm coming to them. My father must have been hurt, somehow hurt in his head. He would have it that my two brothers — twins, sir, if you'll be pleased to mark it — were no sons of his, but of two friends of his, soldiers of the 4th Regiment who had been killed, the both, that evening by the San Vincente bastion. So you see he must have been wrong in his head."

"And you?"

"O, there couldn't be any mistake about me. I was his very image, and — perhaps I ought to say, sir — he hated me for it. When my mother died — she had been a fruit–seller — he handed the business over to my brothers, taking only enough to carry him back to England and me with him. The day after we landed in London he apprenticed me to a brassworker. I was just turned fifteen, and from that day until last Wednesday three weeks we never set eyes on each other."

"Let me see," said the Coroner, turning back a page or two. "At the last moment just before he fell, you say — and the other witnesses confirm it — that he called out twice — uttered two names, I think."

"They were the names by which he used to call my brothers, sir — the names of his two mates in the storming party."