

*Lost Upon Dartmoor*

by Thomas Waters

THE thickly-scribbled pages of my note-book record no more pleasant reminiscence than that which I am now about to transcribe.

I was spending a few days in delightful Devonshire for the recruitment of my health, when, being something of a botanist, the fancy seized me of visiting Dartmoor, and passing a few hours in the examination of its peculiar Flora. I did pass a very pleasant day there, and scarcely felt the fatigue, the exhaustion, which eager rambling here and there during seven or eight hours must have caused; forgetting, too, that the far-stretching wilderness was unknown to me; that, except in broad daylight, the faint foot-tracks which cross it leading to and from the habitations of man could not be discerned. The summer day had, moreover, been unusually warm, and at about five in the evening I—having eaten heartily, drunk a quart of strong bottled ale—felt, and no wonder, as I lay upon the grass, an irresistible drowsiness steal over me. Ah, well, there would be at that season of the year four hours of daylight; I might indulge, therefore, in a short nap, just half-an-hour; I should awake at the mentally-determined time, as I had done in scores of instances before; and, refreshed with sleep, should reach home in three hours at the most. Man proposes, God disposes; and I sometimes think—I confess to being somewhat superstitious (who that has gone to and fro upon the face of the earth, and witnessed the moral marvels constantly occurring in its daily life, is not more or less so?)—I sometimes think—that the want of caution on my part, in permitting myself to go to sleep on a wild, trackless moor at five in the evening, after a day of such exhaustive, however pleasurable, exertion, was supernaturally inspired. That may be a foolish fancy. The unquestionable fact was, that the half-hour I had allowed myself expanded to at least ten half-hours; and that when I awoke and recognised, not without difficulty, where I was and how I came there, it was pitch-dark, and a damp, raw air, the wind having no doubt changed, was, though the month was August, chilling the genial current of my blood. I roused myself resolutely, got up, felt, instead of rested very much stiffened by slumber, and thought of the three hours' walk before me with something like dismay, especially when conscious, as I presently was, that a cold, drizzling rain had set in, and that, owing to the darkness, I knew no more in what direction to proceed than if I had been a blind man suddenly abandoned in a strange place. I had heard often of persons having been lost upon Dartmoor, and who had perished there; but they were feeble creatures, mostly women and children—and the season was winter. Snow-storms obliterating the pathways would render it almost impossible for strangers to find their way across the bleak moor, untenanted save by sheep, with here and there a shepherd snowed up in his miserable hut. I was in no such peril. Still to pass six or seven night hours beneath that chill and faster, faster, falling rain would be exceedingly unpleasant, and remembering that a river always runs towards the abode of men, I sought to find the banks of the Dart. It is wonderful how sound deceives as to the direction from which it reaches you. I am told that for that reason alarm-bells intended to warn the crews of vessels that they are running upon rocks have been long since discontinued. However that may be, this I know, that although after about an hour's wanderings, I managed to get within hearing of the ripple of the Dart, I could not for the life of me gain its bank. It was here, it was there; and, at last, after long, fruitless exertion, I ran my angry head against a shepherd's hut. The blow was rather a severe one, for I was pursuing that dodging, rascally river as if it were a felon striving to avoid my clutch, and gifted

with ventriloquist power, by the aid of which, in the darkness, he mockingly baffled my efforts. Very stupid, no doubt; but a miserable man, benighted in a drenching rain upon an unescapable moor, may be forgiven a little foggy bewilderment. A very thirsty man moreover, and getting hungry. True there was water everywhere; never were drunkards' brains so soaked with liquid as were my habiliments, but not a drop to drink, though I held my wide-opened mouth up to catch the rain. The mouth was a part of the animal economy which it passed slantingly by. I was intensely savage. There was another quart bottle of prime Devonshire ale somewhere upon that confounded moor, also delicious sandwiches; but where? That was the question, not resolvable by me; though scarcely five minutes after I woke and started off home, as I thought, it occurred to me that the possession of the bottle of ale, the sandwiches did not so much signify, would be very desirable. I turned to find it. Find it! find a needle in a truss of hay as easily. The devil fly away with Dartmoor. It was the first time and would be the last time that I went botanising thereon. The reader can now in some degree realize to him or herself the sweet temper I was in when my head butted against the shepherd's hut.

The blow was, in a certain sense, a sobering one. Would it not, I reflected, be wiser to get and keep under shelter till day dawned, instead of blundering about, now this, now that way, as I had been doing. Of course it would. So I felt along the wooden paling of the hut, till I came to the opening, called, I suppose, the doorway, though door there was none, and never had been. It proved to be one of the better sort of huts, having two rooms; the inner one used as a bedchamber. There was a wooden partition dividing the two, through a wide crevice in which faintly streamed the light of a lamp or candle. Groping my way onward, I presently found myself in the inner room. It was untenanted; the light was that of a rush candle nearly burnt out; and in one corner was a heap of straw, upon which was spread a coarse coverlet. There was a rude settle or stool, upon which I sat down, thankful to be under cover, and decided to stay there till day-dawn. I looked at my watch by the flickering rushlight, and saw that it was ten minutes past eleven. A quarter of an hour passed, the rushlight expired, and I, though miserably damp and uncomfortable, was dozing off, when the sound of approaching steps and voices awakened me. I listened attentively, perhaps in some degree anxiously, the place being so solitary, and it being well known that prisoners confined in Dartmoor prison, the very worst class of criminals, not unfrequently escaped, and in two well-established instances had murdered shepherds—not perhaps solely to possess themselves of such scanty sustenance as the huts contained, but to avoid the possibility of information of their escape being given to the authorities in time to commence successful pursuit.

The approaching voices were gruff, stern—three men's voices, at least; one was that of a woman; and I heard, or fancied that I did, the wailing sobs of a child. I felt for my pistols, which from habit I never was without; ascertained that the oilskin sheathing protecting the powder from wet had not slipped off; and watchfully waited the coming in of the party.

I had not many minutes to wait. Four men, a woman, and a girl, entered the hut; and, by the strong light of a lantern carried by one of the men, I was enabled to view their features distinctly, through the crevice in the partition.

'Scape-gallows ruffians were three, if not all four of the men; brawny, powerful fellows too. The woman was as evidently a brazen, somewhat showy-looking harlot, about thirty years of age.

The girl—one of the prettiest, most interesting I have ever seen, who could not have been at the most more than twelve summers—was as certainly the child of luxury; her frock, and dress generally were of the finest material, and made up in the newest fashion for young ladies of her age. How piteously pale she was! what a world of terror fluttered in those suffused, sweet, supplicating, soft blue eyes! Instinctively my hand crept as it were to the handle of one of my pistols, and slipped off its oil casing. I had four barrels; each, unless my nerve failed me, carried a life. There was, would be, work to be done—work for me to do; and by heaven I would do it!

Let not the reader imagine that it required any amount of Rinaldo courage to arrive at such a determination. There is scarcely a police-officer in the kingdom who would not have so resolved without thinking for a moment that he was preparing to perform any highly heroic action. The truth is, that the abiding consciousness of having the “law” on your side, together with the indifference to danger which familiarity with it engenders, begets a kind of mechanical courage—perhaps mechanical is not exactly the proper word, but I cannot for the moment think of one more appropriate—engenders, begets, I was saying, a sort of mechanical courage, which quails not before any ordinary—no, nor extraordinary—peril.

“Here we be, then,” growled a bullet-headed ruffian, he who carried the lantern; “and now, after a sup and a bite, we’ll go to business. The night’s wearing on, and there’s no time, not a precious moment, to be lost. The candle’s out, I see, in your room. Don’t keep on whimpering, Miss Dalton,” he added, darting a ferocious look at the terrified, dumb-stricken young girl. “We shan’t hurt ye, if we can make sure as you will never give tongue against us; but if not—why then, *why* not?”

“You ain’t going, Bill Waters, to harm the young lady,” said the woman. “I’ll see your coffin walk before you hurt the hair of her head. That was the bargain, and you shall stick to it.”

“Shut that tater-trap,” replied Bill Waters; “nobody wants to hurt the gal, if so be there’s no ‘casion for it. Now, then, get out the stuff.”

“Get out the stuff yourselves. I shall light a fire to warm Miss Dalton, and dry her things.”

So speaking, the woman took shavings and wood from a corner cupboard, and made haste to kindle a fire. The men at the same time took the “stuff” (brandy) and cold meat and bread from the same receptacle, and set to work voraciously.

What could be the true significance of that strange scene? Who were those men? Why had they brought that fair girl to such a lonely, desolate place? To murder her? That could hardly be their intention—their primary intention, at all events. It would have been easy enough to have disposed of her on the wild, desert moor. Perhaps I should learn when their hunger and thirst were appeased. Meanwhile, I held a half-cocked double-barreled pistol in each of my hands. Long practice had enabled me to shoot almost as truly with the left as the right; and any attempt to harm her would, swift as lightning, bring a champion to the rescue, though she knew it not. I felt very proud at that moment, I well remember, and totally forgot I was wet through to the skin.

The woman had kindled a good fire, and had drawn a stool close to it, upon which she placed Miss Dalton, rubbed her hands, and strove by soothing words to comfort the trembling captive. She strove in vain. The unfortunate girl did not appear to hear what she said; but sat motionless, the incarnation of helpless, hopeless dismay and horror.

It was hard to resist that silent, piteous appeal; to refrain from rushing upon the ruffians as they sat swilling and stuffing, and so end the affair at once. Yes; but to so end it I must use my pistols—send a bullet through the heads of two of the men, at least—and that would hardly be justifiable till a murderous intent became more positively apparent.

Ha! they begin to talk; their tongues, loosened by drink, wag freely, though in undertones. I listen with both my ears, and heard a story which, in its seeming unreality, resembled the fictions of the *Family Herald*. There are many gaps in the narrative; but the main facts piece themselves out with sufficient clearness.

Madame Dalton, as they called the lady, was a wealthy widow, who resided at the Willows, a noble mansion—which I had seen—situate about three miles from Exeter. She had one child, Rosalind,—the fair girl cowering there in speechless terror—and the mother's idol. A Mr. Framley or Frampton (I could not catch the name distinctly, but that was of no consequence)—a Mr. Frampton or Framley having wooed the widow unsuccessfully, had hit on the cruel device of kidnapping the child, and retaining possession of her till Mrs. Dalton should not only consent to, but actually become his wife. The people there were his agents. The reward promised was a large one; and by the wiles of the woman, who seemed, however, to have some compunctious visitings, the young lady was secretly carried off. This had been effected early the previous evening,—by what precise mode was not mentioned. I did not quite understand either how Mr. Frampton or Framley meant to play out his game; nor did the villains in his pay. They appeared to entertain a suspicion that he really meant they should rid him forever of the rich widow's daughter, he having children of his own. And the suborned rascals had a game of *their* own. The woman—"Nance," they called her—would not, they seemed to be convinced, permit any violence to be done to the child; and, Frampton once married to Mrs. Dalton, they feared the promised reward might not be forthcoming unless they completed their work. Would it not be better, therefore, to open negotiations on their own account with Mrs. Dalton?

As they talked and talked, I fancied, was indeed sure, that I heard the sounds of a horse's hoofs approaching the hut. One of the men evidently thought so too; he pricked up his ears, hearkened eagerly, and the sounds ceasing, stepped forth and peered into the thick night. Only darkness there. This was the man whom Nance called Bill Waters. He appeared to be the leading ruffian.

"I thought I heard his horse's hoofs," said Bill Waters; "but I suppose it must have been the pattering of the rain. He wont be here tonight. Well, I hardly thought he would. He's a slippery cove, he is, depend upon it; and desperate hard-up, I'm told. Yes, mates, we shall do better by treating with the lady ourselves."

They then resumed the interrupted conversation, and discussed quite loudly the likeliest mode of turning the possession of the stolen girl to the best account for themselves. Frampton should, it was finally determined, be flung overboard. Worse than that. Terms made with the wealthy

widow, they would squeeze him as dry as a biscuit; make him shell out every sovereign he could rake together by hook or crook, as the price of their silence anent his share in the abduction of the young lady—who had, meanwhile, overcome with fatigue, and soothed perhaps by the crooning, low-voiced lullabies of Nance (Ann Thomas was her name), fallen fast asleep in the woman's arms.

There was not anything more of importance to be learned by continuing to listen to their conversation, and strongly suspecting that Frampton had really arrived—that those were his horse's hoofs which I had heard striking dully upon the rain-softened moor-turf—I crept softly out, by an aperture opening upon the bleak waste, from the inner room. It still rained hard; but the night was lighter. A few stars, now seen, now gone—for the wind had risen—showed themselves; and my eyes, presently accustomed to the gloom, could discover the outline of large objects at a considerable distance off. By Jove! I was right. A horse was fastened by the bridle to a corner-post connected with the hut itself by a horizontally-placed pole—forming one side of a quadrangle, intended, perhaps, to be one day cultivated by the shepherd-tenant. Where then was Frampton hiding himself? I had no doubt it was *his* horse. It was full half-an-hour since he had arrived. I would see where he was; so down I went upon all fours, and crawled cautiously towards the front opening, where I surmised he was to be found listening to the very interesting conversation going on within the hut. Right again! A tall man, wearing a riding-cloak, was listening just without the door-way; that man, it could not be doubted, was Frampton. There would be a scene presently. It were well that I crept quietly back—kept myself ready for any part I might have to play therein.

There was a long lull in the men's conversation; they had exhausted the topic in which they felt so much interested, but not the "stuff"—which had already so muddled their brains that they would all four be soon heavily asleep. Were it not for the man watching without, and that I could not find my way across the moor, the rescue of Julia Dalton might have been easily, noiselessly effected.

The young girl still slept; though I was sure, from her frequent nervous starts, that affrighting images pursued her in that sleep.

But a short time passed; and then ostentatious, heavy steps approached the entrance, and in came Mr. Frampton, with a heavy riding-whip in his hand.

"Hillo! you drunken rascals! Fast asleep, eh? or nearly so!"

Bill Waters jumped up, and muttered something to the effect that they had given up expecting him; but that "it was all right," pointing, as he said so, to the sleeping child.

"Of course it's all right! How could it be otherwise than right, after the instructions I gave you, unless you were the most blundering blockheads that ever breathed? But we wont talk business just now. I shall choose a soft plank (the hut—a very unusual thing—was boarded), and sleep here. It's an infernal night to be out in. Is there any place where I can put my horse under shelter?"

Bill Waters said there was; and shaking himself fully awake, volunteered to put the animal up. He did so, and presently came back.

“I shall not have more than a couple of hours’ snooze. The mare can find her way blindfold out of the moor, which is lucky. “Come,” he gaily added, shaking the large liquor-jar, “here’s plenty here yet. Fill me a pannikin (they were drinking out of tin cups)—fill me a pannikin, and replenish for yourselves.”

The recommendation was cheerfully acquiesced in, and the drinking went on. I noticed that the woman “Nance” obstinately refused to drink, though repeatedly pressed to do so by Frampton. She continued to rock the fitfully slumbering girl; and would, I felt sure, have done fierce battle on her behalf, had occasion required her to do so.

I saw, too, or my eyes deceived me (which is not generally the case), that Frampton, or Framley, dropped something liquid into the men’s pannikins. It was very cleverly done, very; and the effect was soon apparent, decided.

The fellows’ heads dropped like lumps of lead upon the table. Frampton had hocused them. Most likely it was laudanum he had administered. There was no necessity for doing so; it would not have been long before the brandy would have itself sealed their senses in forgetfulness.

However, the thing was done. The four men were for a time helpless—dead as logs of wood. Mr. Frampton, assured of that, rose suddenly to his feet, drew a pistol from his pocket, stepped up to “Nance,” pointed the weapon at her head, and said, “Silence; not one word, or I blow your brains out. Make no outcry, no resistance, and you are safe. I have overheard the discourse of those sleeping scoundrels. They mean to betray me. I expected as much: but they will find their match. This girl goes with me; and now—. Dare to scream or resist,” he added fiercely, as the woman half-rose, “and you die upon the spot. I am a ruined, desperate man. That girl in my power, I shall be able to make my own terms. Her mother would give her life, more than her life, to embrace her. You understand then, that for my own sake, I shall not harm her. But she must go with me. You can tell those sodden scoundrels, when they recover from their drunken debauch, that if they hold their tongues, though I don’t greatly care whether they do or don’t, I shall keep word with them. Now, young lady, let this woman wrap you up closely, for it rains hard, and it will not be long before you are in your mother’s arms. Now, Nance, quick! There must be no delay, and no nonsense!”

Julia Dalton, rudely awakened and still under the influence of paralyzing terror, appeared scarcely to comprehend what was passing. The woman was terrified into submission, and wrapped her charge round about in her own cloak and shawl. I stole quietly round to the front entrance.

“Now, Miss Dalton,” said Framley, “let us begone. Come—come—no screaming! No harm is intended you: but you are in my power, and must submit to my will. In a short time you will call me father. We must ride double; but that will not be for long. Come! Silly fool, *must* I use force? Submit quietly, or by—Ha!”

The pistol was struck out of his hand, and, disarmed, shaking in every joint of his body, the caitiff confronted me. Never was man more startled—scared!

“Who the devil may you be?” he presently exclaimed, at the same time kicking Bill Waters’ shins, in the hope of awakening him.

“I am one Clarke, a detective officer. Will that description suffice? Miss Dalton, you will go home with me. The rain has nearly ceased, and within an hour I shall be able to procure you a more fitting conveyance than this baffled felon’s horse. If you, Frampton, want the mare, which I was glad to hear you say could find her way blindfold out of this miserable moor, you will find her at the Willows. Whether, however, you call there or not, I shall be very angry with myself if I have not you by the heels before many hours have passed. Well thought of. I will take the liberty of helping myself, with your leave, to a nip of brandy; and let me persuade you, Miss Dalton, to take a little diluted spirit. You need it sadly. Ah! I understand. You are not sure that I may be trusted. Fortunately, I can remove your doubts. You must be acquainted with Lady Nugent of the Grange? Her residence is not far from the Willows.”

“Yes; oh yes!” faintly responded the sweet, tremulous lips.

“This note then, addressed to me at Exeter, where someone had informed her ladyship I was staying for a time, will satisfy you as to who I really am.”

First swallowing a spoonful of brandy-and-water, Julia Dalton glanced at the note. Her eyes brightened immediately, and she held out her hand with artless, winning, infantine confidence.

“I remember all about it, and your name now. You will save me from these cruel men? Let us go.”

Meanwhile Frampton had been glaring at us both with speechless rage. Not one moment, though speaking to Miss Dalton, had I taken my eye off the villain. He understood that look, and dared not stir.

“We will be off immediately, Miss Dalton; but I must first deprive this amiable gentleman of the means of mischief. The pistol on the floor I take with me of course. You have its fellow about your person, and I must have *that!* Turn out your pockets.”

A ferocious gleam shot from the fellow’s eyes, and he thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat.

“Don’t try that game, Mr. Frampton,” I exclaimed. “You wont have time: indeed you wont. This is a hair trigger which my finger so nearly touches. Withdraw that hand of yours, and permit me to insert my own. Ah! the fellow-pistol. I thought so. Permit me, moreover, to feel your other pockets. All right. Now, young lady, please to accept my arm. Good-night, Mr. Frampton, or Framley. I shall have the pleasure of again making your acquaintance before long.”

The horse was nowhere to be seen—had, no doubt, broken loose. This was terrible. The rain had ceased, but it was still dark as a wolf's mouth, and day would not break for at least four dreary hours; the ruffians before that time had expired might be awakened, and if not beyond their reach, I should have fearful odds to contend with. Well, not such great odds. They had no firearms, neither gun nor pistol, I was pretty sure; and supposing us to be overtaken, or in imminent danger of being overtaken, the very deuce was in it if I could not place myself in a position of vantage which would make the scoundrels think more than twice before they attacked me. Away then with good courage: we should pull through.

Extinguishing the lantern I had borrowed, I, tightly clutching the trembling girl by the arm, again addressed myself to the task of finding the river. For a long, long time I was unsuccessful as before, but at length I was unmistakeably upon the shelving bank of the Dart. It was time, for Julia Dalton had become almost insensible with fatigue and fear. It was still dark as ever, and I lay down to stretch forth my hand into the stream to feel which way it was running, so that, keeping on the bank, we might follow its course. That point was soon settled; and speaking cheerfully to the jaded, worn-out maiden, I got her slowly along for perhaps half a mile. By then she was utterly exhausted—could go no further. Her stomach rejected the brandy, and there was nothing for it but to sit down on the wet moor and wait for day. And would day bring relief? I feared not, till too late! The next two hours seemed forty, so slowly did they limp away. The sweet, dear child, seated on my knees, moaned brokenly in feverish unrest; and I myself was shivering with cold and wet when the new day, pencilling itself upon the north-east horizon, gave me back strength, courage, life! Whilst Julia Dalton slept, if physical and mental prostration could be called sleep, I had contrived to pour a little brandy down her throat, and I was in hopes she would soon be sufficiently restored to go on.

The day was broadening. Very soon I should be able to discern foot-tracks across the desolate moor; and I was speaking words of comfort to the sweet maiden, who clung to me so confidingly, when loud shouts struck my ear. Frampton, mounted on horseback, and accompanied by his filthy ruffians, had descried us, and counted upon an easy recapture. Fools!

On they came, shouting, gesticulating fiercely. "Give up that girl, you scoundrel," exclaimed Frampton, stopping short when within about twenty paces, "and your rascally self may go free."

"I don't exactly hear, Mr. Frampton. What do you propose? I shan't stand very stiffly out if you promise not to harm the young lady."

"No one ever meant to harm her. Go away," went on Frampton, coming several paces nearer; "leave her in our hands, and afterwards do your worst. Your answer. Quick!"

"You have it," said I, raising a pistol, and firing at the instant. The fellow tumbled off his horse with a scream of agony. He was not, however, which I was glad of, killed. The bullet had struck and broken his right jaw, nothing more.

The men stood silently staring at me and each other, their brains still muddled, cloudy with the drugged drink they had swallowed. What, after all, *could they* have done? Rushed upon me? Yes,



but two at least in that case would have been sent to kingdom come, and which two being doubtful, was disheartening[.]

“I don’t want to shoot you,” I exclaimed, “though I easily could. Catch and hold the mare.”

Bill Waters caught at, and secured the bridle. “Bring her here; I shall not harm you. The others must stand further off. Help me to place the young lady in the saddle.”

The man obeyed, and Miss Dalton was soon comfortably secured in her seat. “That will do; now look to your own yet unhangd employer. Good morning,” and on we went at a smartish pace, I jog-trotting alongside the mare.

We were soon quit of the moor; medical ministrations were obtained for Julia Dalton, and when I left the village at which we had rested, the restored child was soundly asleep, watched over with beaming eyes by her devoutly-rejoicing, grateful mother. There were no steps taken to bring Frampton to justice, which vexed me.

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *Autobiography of a London Detective*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864