Saki

The Hounds of Fate

I

n the fading light of a close dull autumn afternoon Martin Stoner plodded his way along muddy lanes and rut-seamed cart tracks that led he knew not exactly whither. Somewhere in front of him, he fancied, lay the sea, and towards the sea his foot-steps seemed persistently turning; why he was struggling wearily forward to that goal he could scarcely have explained, unless he was possessed by the same instinct that turns a hard-pressed stag cliffward in its last extremity. In his case the hounds of Fate were certainly pressing him with unrelenting insistence; hunger, fatigue, and des-pairing hopelessness had numbed his brain, and he could scarcely summon sufficient energy to won-der what underlying impulse was driving him onward. Stoner was one of those unfortunate in-dividuals who seem to have tried everything; a natural slothfulness and improvidence had always intervened to blight any chance of even moderate success, and now he was at the end of his tether, and there was nothing more to try. Desperation had not awakened in him any dormant reserve of energy; on the contrary, a mental torpor grew up round the crisis of his fortunes. With the clothes he stood up in, a halfpenny in his pocket, and no single friend or acquaintance to turn to, with no prospect either of a bed for the night or a meal for the morrow, Martin Stoner trudged stolidly for-ward, between moist hedgerows and beneath dripping trees, his mind almost a blank, except that he was subconsciously aware that somewhere in front of him lay the sea. Another consciousness obtruded itself now and then—the knowledge that he was miserably hungry. Presently he came to a halt by an open gateway that led into a spa-cious and rather neglected farm-garden; there was little sign of life about, and the farm-house at the further end of the garden looked chill and inhospi-table. A drizzling rain, however, was setting in, and Stoner thought that here perhaps he might obtain a few minutes’ shelter and buy a glass of milk with his last remaining coin. He turned slow-ly and wearily into the garden and followed a narrow, flagged path up to a side door. Before he had time to knock the door opened and a bent, withered-looking old man stood aside in the doorway as though to let him pass in.

"Could I come in out of the rain?" Stoner began, but the old man interrupted him.

"Come in, Master Tom. I knew you would come back one of these days."

Stoner lurched across the threshold and stood staring uncomprehendingly at the other.

"Sit down while I put you out a bit of supper," said the old man with quavering eagerness. Ston-er’s legs gave way from very weariness, and he sank inertly into the arm-chair that had been pushed up to him. In another minute he was de-vouring the cold meat, cheese, and bread, that had been placed on the table at his side.

"You’m little changed these four years," went on the old man, in a voice that sounded to Stoner as something in a dream, far away and inconse-quent; "but you’ll find us a deal changed, you will. There’s no one about the place same as when you left; nought but me and your old Aunt. I’ll go and tell her that you’m come—she won’t be seeing you, but she’ll let you stay right enough. She al-ways did say if you was to come back you should stay, but she’d never set eyes on you or speak to you again."

The old man placed a mug of beer on the table in front of Stoner and then hobbled away down a long passage. The drizzle of rain had changed to a furious lashing downpour, which beat violently against door and windows. The wanderer thought with a shudder of what the sea-shore must look like under this drenching rainfall, with night beat-ing down on all sides. He finished the food and beer and sat numbly waiting for the return of his strange host. As the minutes ticked by on the grandfather clock in the corner a new hope began to flicker and grow in the young man’s mind; it was merely the expansion of his former craving for food and a few minutes’ rest into a longing to find a night’s shelter under this seemingly hospi-table roof. A clattering of footsteps down the pas-sage heralded the old farm servant’s return.

"The old Missus won’t see you, Master Tom, but she says you are to stay. ‘Tis right enough, seeing the farm will be yours when she be put un-der earth. I’ve had a fire lit in your room, Master Tom, and the maids has put fresh sheets on to the bed. You’ll find enough changed up there. Maybe you’re tired and would like to go there now."

Without a word Martin Stoner rose heavily to his feet and followed his ministering angel along a passage, up a short creaking stair, along another passage, and into a large room lit with a cheerfully blazing fire. There was but little furniture, plain, old-fashioned, and good of its kind; a stuffed squirrel in a case and a wall-calendar of four years ago were about the only symptoms of decoration. But Stoner had eyes for little else than the bed, and could scarce wait to tear his clothes off him before rolling in a luxury of weariness into its comfortable depths. The hounds of Fate seemed to have checked for a brief moment.

In the cold light of morning Stoner laughed mirthlessly as he slowly realized the position in which he found himself. Perhaps he might snatch a bit of breakfast on the strength of his likeness to this other missing ne’er-do-well, and get safely away before any one discovered the fraud that had been thrust on him. In the room downstairs he found the bent old man ready with a dish of bacon and fried eggs for "Master Tom’s" breakfast, while a hard-faced elderly maid brought in a tea-pot and poured him out a cup of tea. As he sat at the table a small spaniel came up and made friend-ly advances.

"‘Tis old Bowker’s pup," explained the old man, whom the hard- faced maid had addressed as George. "She was main fond of you; never seemed the same after you went away to Australia. She died ‘bout a year agone. ‘Tis her pup."

Stoner found it difficult to regret her decease; as a witness for identification she would have left something to be desired.

"You’ll go for a ride, Master Tom?" was the next startling proposition that came from the old man. "We’ve a nice little roan cob that goes well in saddle. Old Biddy is getting a bit up in years, though ‘er goes well still, but I’ll have the little roan saddled and brought round to door."

"I’ve got no riding things," stammered the cast-away, almost laughing as he looked down at his one suit of well-worn clothes.

"Master Tom," said the old man earnestly, al-most with an offended air, "all your things is just as you left them. A bit of airing before the fire an’ they’ll be all right. ‘Twill be a bit of a distraction like, a little riding and wild-fowling now and again. You’ll find the folk around here has hard and bitter minds towards you. They hasn’t forgot-ten nor forgiven. No one’ll come nigh you, so you’d best get what distraction you can with horse and dog. They’m good company, too."

Old George hobbled away to give his orders, and Stoner, feeling more than ever like one in a dream, went upstairs to inspect "Master Tom’s" wardrobe. A ride was one of the pleasures dearest to his heart, and there was some protection against immediate discovery of his imposture in the thought that none of Tom’s aforetime compan-ions were likely to favor him with a close inspec-tion. As the interloper thrust himself into some tolerably well-fitting riding cords he wondered vaguely what manner of misdeed the genuine Tom had committed to set the whole countryside against him. The thud of quick, eager hoofs on damp earth cut short his speculations. The roan cob had been brought up to the side door.

"Talk of beggars on horseback," thought Stoner to himself, as he trotted rapidly along the muddy lanes where he had tramped yesterday as a down-at-heel outcast; and then he flung reflection indo-lently aside and gave himself up to the pleasure of a smart canter along the turf-grown side of a level stretch of road. At an open gateway he checked his pace to allow two carts to turn into a field. The lads driving the carts found time to give him a prolonged stare, and as he passed on he heard an excited voice call out, "‘Tis Tom Prike! I knowed him at once; showing hisself here again, is he?"

Evidently the likeness which had imposed at close quarters on a doddering old man was good enough to mislead younger eyes at a short dis-tance.

In the course of his ride he met with ample evi-dence to confirm the statement that local folk had neither forgotten nor forgiven the bygone crime which had come to him as a legacy from the absent Tom. Scowling looks, mutterings, and nudgings greeted him whenever he chanced upon human beings; "Bowker’s pup," trotting placidly by his side, seemed the one element of friendliness in a hostile world.

As he dismounted at the side door he caught a fleeting glimpse of a gaunt, elderly woman peer-ing at him from behind the curtain of an upper window. Evidently this was his aunt by adoption.

Over the ample midday meal that stood in readiness for him Stoner was able to review the possibilities of his extraordinary situation. The real Tom, after four years of absence, might suddenly turn up at the farm, or a letter might come from him at any moment. Again, in the character of heir to the farm, the false Tom might be called on to sign documents, which would be an embarrassing predicament. Or a relative might arrive who would not imitate the aunt’s attitude of aloofness. All these things would mean ignominious expo-sure. On the other hand, the alternatives was the open sky and the muddy lanes that led down to the sea. The farm offered him, at any rate, a tem-porary refuge from destitution; farming was one of the many things he had "tried," and he would be able to do a certain amount of work in return for the hospitality to which he was so little enti-tled.

"Will you have cold pork for your supper," asked the hard-faced maid, as she cleared the ta-ble, "or will you have it hotted up?"

"Hot, with onions," said Stoner. It was the only time in his life that he had made a rapid decision. And as he gave the order he knew that he meant to stay.

Stoner kept rigidly to those portions of the house which seemed to have been allotted to him by a tacit treaty of delimitation. When he took part in the farm-work it was as one who worked under orders and never initiated them. Old George, the roan cob, and Bowker’s pup were his sole companions in a world that was otherwise frostily silent and hostile. Of the mistress of the farm he saw nothing. Once, when he knew she had gone forth to church, he made a furtive visit to the farm parlor in an endeavor to glean some fragmentary knowledge of the young man whose place he had usurped, and whose ill-repute he had fastened on himself. There were many photo-graphs hung on the walls, or stuck in prim frames, but the likeness he sought for was not among them. At last, in an album thrust out of sight, he came across what he wanted. There was a whole series, labelled "Tom," a podgy child of three, in a fantastic frock, an awkward boy of about twelve, holding a cricket bat as though he loathed it, a ra-ther good-looking youth of eighteen with very smooth, evenly parted hair, and, finally, a young man with a somewhat surly dare-devil expression. At this last portrait Stoner looked with particular interest; the likeness to himself was unmistakable.

From the lips of old George, who was garru-lous enough on most subjects, he tried again and again to learn something of the nature of the of-fence which shut him off as a creature to be shunned and hated by his fellow-men.

"What do the folk around here say about me?" he asked one day as they were walking home from an outlying field.

The old man shook his head.

"They be bitter again you, mortal bitter. Ay, ‘tis a sad business, a sad business."

And never could he be got to say anything more enlightening.

On a clear frosty evening, a few days before the festival of Christmas, Stoner stood in a corner of the orchard which commanded a wide view of the countryside. Here and there he could see the twinkling dots of lamp or candle glow which told of human homes where the goodwill and jollity of the season held their sway. Behind him lay the grim, silent farm-house, where no one ever laughed, where even a quarrel would have seemed cheerful. As he turned to look at the long grey front of the gloom-shadowed building, a door opened and old George came hurriedly forth. Stoner heard his adopted name called in a tone of strained anxiety. Instantly he knew that something untoward had happened, and with a quick revulsion of outlook his sanctuary became in his eyes a place of peace and contentment, from which he dreaded to be driven.

"Master Tom," said the old man in a hoarse whisper, "you must slip away quiet from here for a few days. Michael Ley is back in the village, an’ he swears to shoot you if he can come across you. He’ll do it, too, there’s murder in the look of him. Get away under cover of night, ‘tis only for a week or so, he won’t be here longer."

"But where am I to go?" stammered Stoner, who had caught the infection of the old man’s ob-vious terror.

"Go right away along the coast to Punchford and keep hid there. When Michael’s safe gone I’ll ride the roan over to the Green Dragon at Punch-ford; when you see the cob stabled at the Green Dragon ‘tis a sign you may come back again."

"But—" began Stoner hesitatingly.

"‘Tis all right for money," said the other; "the old Missus agrees you’d best do as I say, and she’s given me this."

The old man produced three sovereigns and some odd silver.

Stoner felt more of a cheat than ever as he stole away that night from the back gate of the farm with the old woman’s money in his pocket. Old George and Bowker’s pup stood watching him a silent farewell from the yard. He could scarcely fancy that he would ever come back, and he felt a throb of Compunction for those two humble friends who would wait wistfully for his return. Some day perhaps the real Tom would come back, and there would be wild wonderment among those simple farm folks as to the identity of the shadowy guest they had harbored under their roof. For his own fate he felt no immediate anxie-ty; three pounds goes but little way in the world when there is nothing behind it, but to a man who has counted his exchequer in pennies it seems a good starting-point. Fortune had done him a whimsically kind turn when last he trod these lanes as a hopeless adventurer, and there might yet be a chance of his finding some work and mak-ing a fresh start; as he got further from the farm his spirits rose higher. There was a sense of relief in regaining once more his lost identity and ceas-ing to be the uneasy ghost of another. He scarcely bothered to speculate about the implacable enemy who had dropped from nowhere into his life; since that life was now behind him one unreal item the more made little difference. For the first time for many months he began to hum a careless light-hearted refrain. Then there stepped out from the shadow of an overhanging oak tree a man with a gun. There was no need to wonder who he might be; the moonlight falling on his white set face re-vealed a glare of human hate such as Stoner in the ups and downs of his wanderings had never seen before. He sprang aside in a wild effort to break through the hedge that bordered the lane, but the tough branches held him fast. The hounds of Fate had waited for him in those narrow lanes, and this time they were not to be denied.