

CHAPTER III

TALES GRANDFATHER TOLD

During the early part of the nineteenth century, after the French wars, such importance was placed on measures in Parliament aimed toward the improvement of commerce, manufacture and other means to strengthen the economy of Great Britain, service the crushing public debt and maintain the position of primacy which the victories of Nelson and Wellington had won for the Empire. Elections to Parliament were serious affairs and candidates electioneered vigorously. One of the many devices to get out the vote and to pledge it in advance was to offer a free dinner at some inn or tavern near the voting place. Naturally those partaking of such a meal were expected to vote for the candidate who furnished it. The first experience of some of these farmers in meeting men of affairs conducting a campaign for themselves, or for a friend, was something to relate when they got home. Naturally, too, such tales grow with the telling. Grandfather was fond of repeating anecdotes of 'h'ol' h'uncle Jan Horrell". I assumed that he was a real character, but others have suggested that he was a mere Legend, like Paul Bunyan or Mike Fink.

According to the tale, at the beginning of one such election dinner, some one proposed a toast to the candidate, the Marquis of Tavistock. In the brogue of the place, as he raised his glass he offered "'Ere's to the Markess of Tavistock". Uncle Jan repeated, "'Ere's to the markets of Tavistock", and gulped his drink. As Tavistock was a not-distant market town, the toast was one farmer Jan could offer in good faith. But the politicians proceeded to correct him; "No, no, they said, "the Markess not the markets". "Very well", agreed uncle Jan; "vill me glass and I'll try un again". So they filled his glass and as he raised it he repeated, "'Ere's to the mar-mar markets of Tavistock" downing his ale quickly as he had seen the others do. "No, no", they cried again the Markess, the Markess, not the markets". "H'I's a bit deeve" offered uncle Jan humbly "Naphap thee'l gie me anither try?" So, uncle Jan got three glasses of ale for one toast.

As the first course of the meal, soup was served, uncle Jan found something in the soup that was not to his liking and grumbled to himself about it. One of the waitresses over-heard him and asked "W'at be 'ee mumbling about? W'at's amiss?" "A little zoap, I reckon", he explained. (Probably he was eating at the second or third service). "Oh, let me 'ave the plate; h'I'll change un" she offered eagerly. "Never mind, my dear, never mind" replied uncle Jan "h'it may do gude arter h'it's down". And he hung on to his plate -- and gave a watchword to a later generation.

As the meal progressed, cucumbers were offered on a plate passed by the waitress. "W'ot be this?" queried uncle Jan. "Cowcubers" explained the waitress. With this uncle Jan speared a piece with his fork and thrust it under the table, at the same time calling his dog's name. The dog lifted his head, sniffed the offering and laid down again without touching it. "Pritty trade to gie a man, daug von't tech un" remarked uncle Jan and went on with his meat pie.

But the waitresses couldn't refrain from an attempt to badger this country bumpkin a bit. So, one of the suggested "W'y dunt 'ee talk, Uncle Jan? The gentlemen talk." "H'every time h'I say a word I lose a champ, dun't h'I?" retorted uncle Jan, chewing his meat pie as he answered.

Thus uncle Jan Horrell became a sort of rural hero who could hold his own with the politicians and with city girls.

But, of course, he had his weaker side and could not come off entirely scatheless. He had sniffed the perfume that one of the maids wore and was much taken by it. So, before mounting for the return ride, he walked in to an apothecary shop and asked for "swate smellin trade to slock the maidens wi'". The clerk would not forbear his joke and so offered him a bottle of vanilla extract. This pleased uncle Jan; he bought the bottle and put it in his hip pocket. On the way home, his horse stumbled and in keeping his balance in the saddle, a blow was dealt hard enough to break the bottle. The contents spread over his posterior, the alcohol burned the skin and the riding motion in the saddle soon produced a blister which broke and left a raw spot. Uncle Jan had to get off and walk, and arriving home long after dark, he came to the conclusion that after all country farmers had better stick to things they know about rather than seek city adventures.

Then there was the story of "Janny" Battrell. Janny came home rather late one night after a rather heavy session with the boys down at the "pub". He and Aunt Grace slept in the loft and in the course of undressing Jenny knocked his hand against the rafters. It did not anger him for he was in that stage of inebriated amiability. Instead it suggested to him alcoholic power, and so seizing a rafter in each hand he shouted "W'y mother, I could tear these yere rafters right h'out o' this yere 'ouse." Aunt Grace knew her man, so she didn't argue; she agreed "h'I knew thee's greivous strong Jan, but don't tear un deown". And in another moment Janny was in bed asleep and snoring. Many of us have often quoted "Aunt Crase" in reply to minor boasting within the family.

Devonshire is advertised as the "Lorna Doone" country. During grandfather's life time I was in entire ignorance of the Blackmore novel by that name. Yet I remember grandfather telling of a fishing expedition along "Badgery watter" (Bagworthy water) which he followed until he was well into "Badgery yood" (Bagworthy Forest). Although the Doones had been cleared out two hundred years before, their tradition remained, and when he realized where he was, with bated breath he retraced his steps until he was out into sunny fields. He told me something also of the "girt Jan Reed" who had killed the most ferocious Doone by "pullin' h'out the harm of un." Some ten years later when I read the book, I remembered a little of grandfather's story.