



A Famous Gang of Highwaymen

Written and Illustrated
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LIKE other children, I had a grandfather. When I visited his house at Burford, at certain intervals, my youthful imagination was always fascinated. There were so many legends and so many realities — realities of the fruit garden, realities from the River Windrush, and from that tower of strength, an apple orchard that never failed.

But when beneath the window "Smoker Bennett," the last of the beadles, passed along the drive, in all the glory of a cocked hat and gold-laced cape, my heart stood still, for I fancied

that he must be very nearly related to the Queen of England; and when one afternoon he put upon my tiny wrists the very handcuffs that had once manacled Thomas Dunsdon, I had no room left for doubt.

Recent investigations make me dubious as to Bennett's adhesion to the truth, but he certainly told me that his grandfather had

arrested the robbers, and by this announcement added several cubits to his stature in my romantic eyes. But then they were hospitable in the kitchen, and Bennett became legendary after beer.

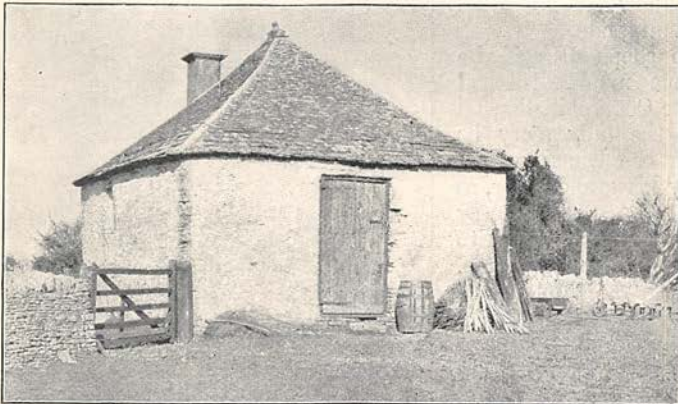
The Forest of Wychwood, the greater part of which lay in Oxfordshire, was, some

centuries back, one of the four great woods of England. Its last remnants were broken up in 1862—when it still numbered some seven thousand acres of forest—and the deer shot down.

What a Paradise this forest was for

an enterprising highwayman, when ten times larger, as it was rather more than one hundred years ago, can be easily understood, for the principal coachroads skirted or went through it.

Outside Burford, perhaps a mile and a half away, is the village of Fullbrook, and here I find the first mention of the name of



THE SUMMER HOUSE AT CAPP'S LODGE.



SMOKER BENNETT.

Dunsdon, in the parish register for 1693. Here, also, is still standing a cottage, with the name of Dunsdon scratched upon the window glass.

The father of the robbers had several sons. Our interest lies with three—Richard, Thomas, and Henry—literally Tom, Dick, and Harry. Richard, the eldest of the trio, was born in 1745. We will leave history now and go to the legends of the countryside.

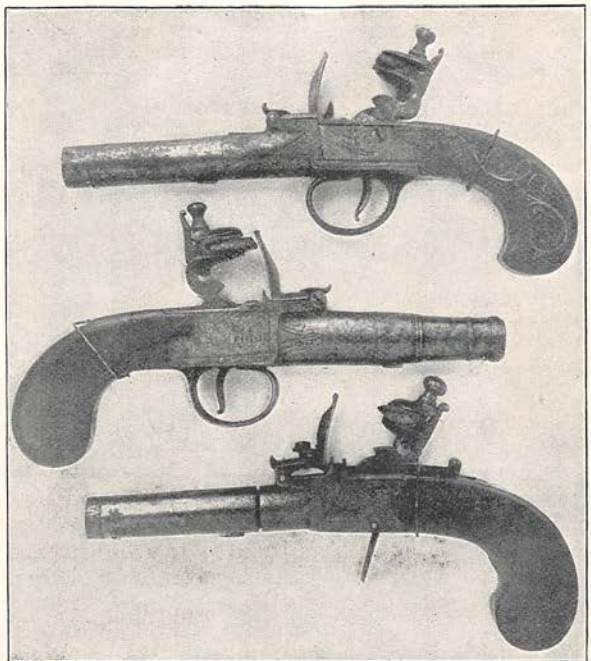
My friend the shepherd said he could not tell me much. He had been born on the Cotswolds, like all his family, and the only story he remembered about the Dunsdons had been told him by his grandfather, as a sort of fairy tale, to while away the long nights when they had to lie out with the ewes at lambing time.

"I suppose they were a queer lot, sir. They came of an old family, for they've a altar tomb at Swinbrook. They wanted money and went the worst way to work to get it. Why, bless your soul, the granfer said as they was such thorough sportsmen, that one snowy night, two of the brothers who had just left Northleach met the other coming from the opposite direction of Frogmill—all bent on *strictly* private business. They set to work firing, just to keep their hands in. Harry Dunsdon's mare had her ear

shot off, and Tom got a bullet in his boot. They was awful pleased about it when they next met, for they was dead certain as every man Jack of 'em knew his business."

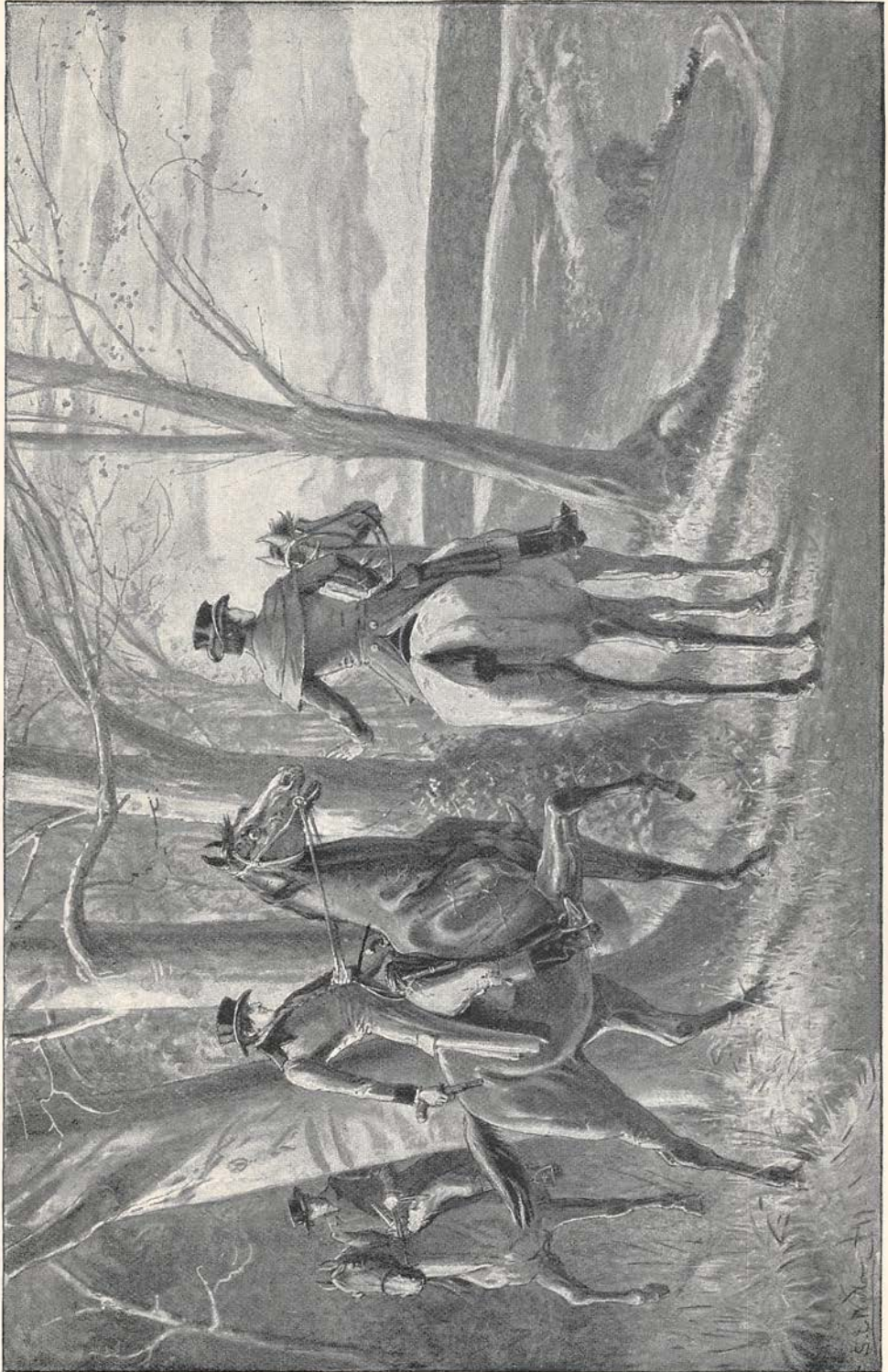
My friend the gamekeeper had another story, handed down, like the shepherd's, by word of mouth. He said that a hedger and ditcher, bound early for his work, about five o'clock one autumn morning, saw two mounted men, with a led horse, a corpse across its saddle. This ghastly procession passed a few hundred yards into the forest, and the men dismounted and threw the body into a shallow grave, which had evidently been dug overnight. The watcher must have made some slight noise—perhaps he trod on a dry stick, for he was seen and was promptly shot and buried with the first victim. The incident was seen by another labourer on his way to work. Terrified, he held his tongue until such time as the Dunsdons were not likely to trouble him in this world.

My friend the parson was more guarded, and limited himself to dry facts. His account was as follows. The brothers began their career by robbing farmers on their way from market, taking stock of all kinds, which they would on occasion hide in the forest. But as trade developed, and the



HENRY DUNSDON'S PISTOLS.

The highwayman pulled them from his pocket, one after the other, until he had shot Harding down.



THE DUNSDONS WAITING FOR THE MAIL.

neighbourhood became too hot to hold them, they would drive off as far as Epping Forest, where a branch of the firm did for some time a very flourishing business. What first brought the Dunsdons into prominence as dangerous malefactors, however, was their stoppage of the Oxford mail, from which they secured nearly £500.

At Capp's Lodge Inn, three miles or so

Dunsdons. They dressed well, probably in clothes that did not belong to them, and seem to have terrorised the country.

On Whit Sunday, 1784, when a village festival was being held, and a distribution of forest venison (which seems to me out of season) was taking place, Henry and Thomas Dunsdon joined a crowd of villagers and sightseers, many of the latter county gentlemen. A move was made later on for Capp's Lodge. The Dunsdons had ridden over from their cave at Tangley Wood, Bennett asserted; and though they were known to the landlord, the whole neighbourhood was in such terror of their name, that that worthy thought it wisest to hold his tongue. Anyhow, the robbers were sufficiently well dressed and had enough money to take a part in the gambling scene in the Summer House, where play was kept up till nearly daybreak. Capp's Lodge Inn has been pulled down, but the Summer House is still standing.

Whether the Dunsdons were unlucky at play on this occasion we know not; but they stayed on, evidently with some purpose, until four o'clock in the morning. A suspicion arose that they had accomplices without, and an effort was at length made to eject them. After some words and blows, William Harding, the tapster, who acted throughout with the greatest courage, closed with Henry Dunsdon. Dunsdon shot him without a word. The shot broke Harding's arm. He still held on, and Dunsdon drew a second pistol, putting the bullets or slugs in Harding's breast. At that moment Perkins, an ostler, ran up and tripped Dunsdon's feet from under him; then, picking up one of the discharged pistols which Henry had thrown on the ground, he turned on Thomas Dunsdon, who had run to his brother's assistance with loaded weapons, and knocked him senseless by a blow on the head. The landlord now joined in the struggle, which lasted some time, but eventually both the men were secured. The pistols here photographed have been ever since in the possession of the landlord's family.

Harding lingered for some months. His



HARDING'S DAUGHTER.

from Burford, a great deal of gambling took place during the Bibury race meeting. Bibury, in fact, was nearly as fashionable as Newmarket or Epsom rather more than one hundred years back.

Between whiles, when their pockets were full, gambling did not come amiss to the



THE GALLOW'S TREE, WITH INITIALS "H. D." AND "T. D." (HENRY AND THOMAS DUNSDON), AND DATE, "1784," CUT INTO THE BARK.

The two Dunsdons were hanged here in chains.

daughter, a young girl, altered the red plush waistcoat which her father wore at Capp's Lodge to suit her own figure. She used to point to the bullet holes in protest against the impotence of the law. There is an old man in Burford now who can remember as a

boy seeing her—an old woman, still wearing the ragged shreds of this peculiar bodice. The robbers were tried, convicted, and executed at Gloucester, and condemned, in addition, to have their bodies gibbeted on the scene of their crimes.

After execution the brothers were hanged in chains on an oak tree in Wychwood Forest. On the bark is cut "H. D.—T. D., 1784," plain for all men to see. The tree does not stand in the forest now, but in a ploughed field; I can remember it, more years ago than I care to think of, standing in a grassy ride. Legend says the tree has not grown since 1784.

The favourite resort of the Dunsdons was the George Inn at Burford. They paid it a last visit. Twenty-four hours after their execution a cart and horses stopped at the inn. The driver wanted a glass of beer. The landlord was more than cordial, and a vociferous crowd ran down the street. Inside the cart—dead, on their backs—lay the Dunsdons, their legs dangling over the tailboard.



THE DUNSDON'S LAST VISIT TO THE "GEORGE."