

# A Braw Day

By R. B. Cunninghame Graham

NEVER before, in the long years that he had passed in the old place, had it appeared so much a part of his whole being, as on the day on which he signed the deed of sale.

Times had been bad for years, and a great load of debt had made the fight a foregone ending from the first. Still he felt like a murderer, as judges well may feel when they pronounce death sentences. Perhaps they feel it more than the prisoner, for things we do through fate, and by the virtue of the circumstances that hedge our lives about with chains, often affect us more than actions which we perform impelled by no one but ourselves.

The long, white Georgian house, with its two flanking wings, set in its wide expanse of gravel, which, like a sea, flowed to a grassy, rising slope, looked dignified and sad. An air, as of belonging to a family of fallen fortunes, hung about the place. The long, dark avenue of beeches, underneath one of which stood the old gallows stone, looked as if no one ever used it, and on its sides the grassy edges had long ago all turned to moss, a moss so thick and velvety, you might have swept it with a broom.

The beech mast crackled underneath your feet as you passed up the natural cathedral aisle, and on the tops of the old trees the wind played dirges in the cold autumn nights, and murmured softly in the glad season "when that shaws are green."

The formal terraces were roughly mown and honeycombed by rabbits, the whinstone steps were grown with moss, and here and there were forced apart by a strong growing fern that pushed out to the light.

The seats about the garden were all blistered with the sun and rain, and the old-fashioned coach-roofed greenhouse looked like a refrigerator, with its panes frosted by the damp. Under the arch, which led into the stable yard, stood two dilapidated dog kennels, disused, but with some links of rusty chain still

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hanging to them, as if they waited for the return of shadowy dogs, dead years ago.

The cedars on the slope below the terraces stretched out their long and human-looking branches, as they were fingers seeking to restrain and hold those whom they knew and loved.

All was serene and beautiful, with the enthralling beauty of decay. The fences were unmended, and slugging wires in places had been dragged by cattle into the middle of the fields ; most of the gates were off their hinges, and weeds had covered up the gravel of the walks.

Nettles grew rankly in the grass, and clumps of dock with woody stems and feathery heads, stood up like bulrushes about the edges of a pond. Even at noonday, a light mist still clung about the lower fields below the house, marking out clearly where old " peat hags " had been reclaimed.

Such was the place at noonday ; melancholy as regards the lack of care that want of means had brought about ; but bright and sunny as it lay facing to the south, sheltered by groups of secular sycamores and beech.

At night a feeling as if one had been marooned upon some island, far away from men, grew on the inmates of the house.

Owls fabulated from the tree tops, their long, quavering call seeming to jar the air and make it quiver, so still was everything.

The roes' metallic belling sounded below the windows, and the sharp chirping of the rabbits never ceased during summer nights, as they played in the grass.

When the long shadows, in the moonlight, crept across the lawn, it seemed as if they beckoned to the shadows of the dead, in the old eerie house. Those who had gone before had set their seal so firmly upon everything, planting the trees, and adding here a wing and there a staircase, that those who now possessed the house, dwelt in it, as it were, by the permission of the dead.

One day remained to him whose ancestors had built the house ; who had lived in the old ruined castle, in the grounds, and who had fought, and plundered, rugged and reived after the fashion of their kind. All had been done that falls to a man's lot to do at such a time. The house stood gaunt and empty. By degrees, the familiar objects that time and sentiment make almost sacred and as if portions of ourselves, had been packed up, and on the walls, the pictures taken down, had left blank spaces that recalled each one, as perfectly as if it had been there.

Steps sounded hollow, in the emptiness and desolation

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on the stairs, and bits of straw and marks of hob-nailed boots showed where the workmen had been busy at their task.

Here and there marks of paint and varnish on a door showed where a heavy piece of furniture had touched in passing, as sometimes after a funeral you see the dent made by the coffin in the plaster of the passage, as it was carried to the hearse.

A desolating smell of straw was everywhere. It permeated everything, even to the food, which an old servant cooked in the great, ungarnished kitchen, just as a tramp might cook his victuals at the corner of a road.

The polished staircase, which from their childhood had been a kind of fetish to the children of the house, shielded from vulgar footsteps by a thick drugget and a protecting strip of Holland, but bleached a snowy white, was now all scratched and dirtied, as if it were no better than the steps which led to the back-yard.

The owner and his wife, after their years of struggle, had felt at first as if their ship had got into a port; and then as days went by, and by degrees the house which they had cared for more than their own lives, grew empty and more empty, till it was left a shell, now found their port had vanished, and they were left without an anchorage.

Still, there was one more day to pass. What then to do with it? The house was empty, the few old servants that remained, tearful and wandering to and fro, pleased to be idle and yet not knowing what to do with unaccustomed leisure, jostled each other on the stairs.

The horses had been sold, all but one little old black pony; the dogs all sent away to friends.

Standing at the hall door, looking out on the sweep of gravel all cut up by carts, the owners stood a little while, dazed and not able to take in that twenty years had flown. It seemed but yesterday that they had driven up to the same door, young, full of expectation and of hope.

Now they were middle-aged and grey. The fight had gone against them; but still they had the recollection of the struggle, for all except the baser sort of men fight not to win, but simply for the fight.

Some call it duty, but the fight's the thing, for those who strive to win, become self-impressed, and that way lies the road to commonplace. Verily, they have their reward; but the reward soon overwhelms them, whilst the true fighters still fight on, with sinews unrelaxed.

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At last, after having looked about in vain for sticks, but without finding one, for they had all been packed or given away as keepsakes, they walked out to the sundial in the great gravel sweep before the door. Though they had sat and smoked upon its steps a thousand times, watching the squirrels play at noon, the bats flit past at sundown, it yet seemed new to them, and strange. With interest they saw that it was half-past three in China, eight in the evening in New Orleans, and midnight at La Paz.

Somehow it seemed that they had never seen all this before, and that in future, time would be all the same the whole world over, or at least that it would not be marked by little brazen gnomons on a weather-beaten slab of slate. The garden, with the gardeners gone, and the gate open, seemed as strange as all the rest. The flowers that they had planted, and forgotten they had planted, in the course of time had come to be considered in the same way as the old castle just outside the garden walls, as things that had existed from the beginning of the world.

Weeds choked the gravel in the lower walk, bounded by a long hedge of laurel cut into castles at due intervals. They both agreed next week they should be hoed, and then stopped, smiled, and looked away, fearing to meet each other's eyes. The sun beat on the old stone wall, ripening the magnum bonum plums, for it was in September, and both thought, they will be ripe in a few days, but feared to tell each other what they thought.

The tangled, terraced beds, where once had stood old vineries, all had been planted with herbaceous plants, which, from the want of care, had grown into a jungle; but a jungle unutterably beautiful, in which the taller plants, the coreopsis, bocconias, Japanese anemones, and larkspurs stood up starkly, as palm trees rear themselves out of a wilderness of dwarf palmettoes, and of grass.

Over the garden gate, marauding ivy had run across the stone on which the arms of the decaying family were cut in hard grey whinstone, with the date 1666 in high relief, flanked by a monogram.

Upon a bench, from which the view stretched over the great moss that marked the limits of an ancient sea, and out of which a wooded hill rose like an island, the only thing that broke the level plain between the garden and the distant hills, they sat and let the sun beat on them, for the last

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time, as it had often done during their years of struggle and of fight.

Descending through a gate, which slugged a little on its hinges, and grated on the stone lintel as it opened after a heavy push, they passed into the curious long strip of extra garden, taken in as it were by afterthought, in the old Scottish fashion, which never seemed to have enough of garden laid about a house. They bade goodbye to the long line of *arbor vitæ* clipped into cones which cast their shadows on the path, so clearly that you were half inclined to lift your feet to clear them, they looked so firm and round.

The curious moon-dial, with its niches coloured blue and red, the burial ground hidden away amongst the trees, and with a long, grass walk, mossy and damp, leading up to its old grey walls, they visited but did not see, as they were so familiar, that they had become impossible to look at, but as parts and parcels of themselves.

The day seemed never ending, and in the afternoon, to pass the time, seeing a water conduit underneath a road choked up with leaves, the departing owner of the place set about working hard to clear it, and having done so, congratulated himself on a good piece of work. To bid goodbye to buildings and familiar scenes seemed natural, as life is but a long farewell, but to look for the last time on the trees—trees that his ancestors had planted, and by which he himself recognised the seasons, as for example by the turning yellow of the horse-chestnuts, which he saw from his bedroom windows, or the first pinkish blush upon the broken larch, whose broken top was cased in lead—that seemed a treason to them, for they had always been so faithful, putting out their leaves in spring, standing out stark and rigid in the winter and murmuring in the breeze.

The whispering amongst their branches and the melodious tinkle of a little burn that crossed the avenue, were sounds which, on that last day, pervaded all the air and filled the soul with that deep-seated feeling of amazement that looks out, hopeless and heart-rending, from the eyes of dying animals.

The interminable day came to an end at last. The sun set, red and beautiful, over the low, flat moss, and disappeared behind the hills. The owls called shrilly from the trees, and the accustomed air of ghostliness, intensified a thousandfold by solitude, pervaded all the house.

The mysterious footstep which in the course of years had

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grown familiar, even in winter nights, as it passed up the corridor and stopped with a loud knock on the end bedroom door, again grew terrifying as it had been on the first night that they had heard it years ago.

From out the spaces where the pictures once had hung, the well-known faces seemed to peer, but unfamiliar-looking, with an air as of reproach.

The smallest footfall sounded as loud as if it were the trampling of a horse ; and candles, stuck in bottles here and there, gave a dim, flickering light, casting dark shadows on the floor.

Long did the owners gaze into the night, watching the stars come out in their familiar places. The Bear hung right across the cedars, almost due north, for it was in November, Alphecca close to the horizon, the Square of Pegasus quite horizontal, and Fomalhaut in the south-west, athwart the corner of the Easter Hill.

A light, white frost turned all to silver, and the lake in the east middle distance lay like a sheet of burnished silver under the moon, its islands mirrored dimly and as if floating in the air. No leaf was stirring, and as they sat around a fire of logs, talking of were-wolves, fairies, and superstitions of another land, with their old Spanish friend and servant, the night wore on so rapidly that it was daylight almost, as it appeared, before the sun went down.

Short preparations serve for those about to go, and when a few old servants and retainers took their leave, and a black pony slowly took their trunks down to the station, looking forlorn in the immensity of the beech avenue, they closed the door upon their house.

Quickly the trees rushed past, the pond with its tall islands looking like ships, the giant silver firs, the castle, which they beheld as in a dream, all floated by. Just at the cross roads which led into the park, beside the gate, a man stood waiting for them.

He carried in his hand a hedgebill, and stood there waiting, as he had waited for the past twenty years, for orders for the day.

Now, he held out his hand, opened his mouth, but said nothing, and then, looking up with the air of one well learned in weather lore, said, "Laird, it looks like a brow day."