

english version

SCARBOROUGH FAIR

DENIS VOIGNIER



dv éditions

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translated from French by Cecily A. Norris

The reward is at the end of the road...

PART ONE / WILLIAM

A gusty wind, gold coloured trees bending in the squall, while sheets of rain beat down on the already soaked earth. Some flashes of lightning streak across the sky and the crash of thunder rolls from valley to valley.

I move forward, my back bent, struggling against the elements. It is a very long time now that my thick woollen greatcoat has no longer been protecting me from the water nor the cold. I have to find shelter quickly. I spot a group of rocks in the undergrowth. So, I leave the soaked path and climb up to these blocks of granite which will perhaps serve as a temporary refuge for me. In fact, one of them looks like an overhang which I can slip under. Fortunately, the ground, at this spot, is almost dry and that makes me feel a little better. If only I could light a fire...

It is mid-afternoon and yet, the sky is so dark that you would think night has fallen. I am going to bear my misfortune patiently; this rain will finally stop.

From under my greatcoat, I pull out of my knapsack some pieces of dried meat bought at the Kirby market. I must say that I have eaten nothing since that last stop, in other words since morning.

While I munch the lightly salted pork, it seems to me that the rain is abating. The wind is calming down, and the tops of the beech trees are less agitated. Perhaps I could reach a more decent shelter before dusk. This is crucial, because I am not too keen on spending the night on these muddy roads. Finally, the clouds are breaking up, and a few glimmers of sun shed some light on the hill opposite; I feel that it is time to take advantage of it before the elements, perhaps, break loose again. I reach the path and resume heading towards the east. In my estimation, there must remain three to four leagues to cover. I can therefore arrive in time...

The beech woods have given way to green valleys. Grasslands, bordered by hedgerows, come one after the other, and I notice, on my right, some peaceful sheep lying under flowerless sweetbriers. I quicken my pace; I can't wait to get there.

Suddenly, from a slope of brambles, three individuals with threatening appearances emerge. Dressed in woollen overcoats, wearing broad-brimmed hats, I can hardly make out their faces. They are holding rough wooden forks that could nevertheless turn out to be dangerous.

“Hey, villain! Stop!”

I am very astonished by this welcome, but out of prudence I am inclined to obey. These three men seem determined. However, they do not look like bandits.

They are probably peasants from the region.

“Well, gentlemen, that’s some welcome! Is this how good people are treated in this region?”

The men look at one another questioningly. Perhaps my vocabulary surprises them.

“Let’s see!”

“Money? You want money, that’s it?”

“No, let’s see. Open this coat and show us your chest.”

I then understand their fears. I will quickly reassure them. I comply without delay. Observation of my chest should satisfy them.

“Raise your arms!”

One man comes close and also examines my neck.

“It’s all right,” he says.

And his companions lower their forks while I close back my soaked overcoat.

“Are you satisfied, gentlemen?”

“Yes, sir; you understand, with...”

The radical change in my status makes me smile. No doubt the sight of the dagger that I carry in my belt and my cambric shirt has impressed them.

“I understand. Do you have any cases here?”

“Not yet. That is why we are very cautious. People who are affected must not enter the region.”

Their faces, which I can make out a little better, now, become less hostile.

“So, where are you going then, sir?”

“I’m making my way to Scarborough. I would like to be there before night-time.”

One of the peasants looks at the sky, towards the west.

“That’s not wise; the storm is going to resume shortly.”

I have confidence in these native people. They have a knack for and perfect knowledge of the weather conditions of their region. The direction of the wind, the appearance of the clouds, the flight of a bird and that’s it, they have the information.

I give them a questioning look. Do they have a solution to propose to me? There is a silence; the men retreat and confer a few steps away from me. One of them, the one who had examined me more closely, approaches.

“If you want, sir, come and spend the night in our humble abode. You will get supper and you will be able to dry your clothes.”

“That is very kind, gentlemen. I accept gladly. I will pay what is necessary, of course.”

I accepted immediately because the idea of a warm place and a meal is very tempting. I quickly abandoned the idea that it may be a trap. Isn't it said that under the guise of coming to the aid of persons in difficulty, bands of pillagers hold up travellers in this way? But these peasants seemed to me to be honest and sincere.

We climb the bank to get up to a slight grassy slope. A path looms a little higher up and my three companions take it, signalling me to follow them. Once again, doubt overwhelms me. Am I doing the right thing following them like this? Aren't they going to kill me the moment they consider it convenient to relieve me of the little money I have? The sight of a cottage cheers me up. A modest shack, of grey stone, with a thick thatched roof. A chimney emits dense smoke which smells like pine. While I am still hesitant, the door of the house opens and a woman, rather plump, appears on the threshold. Her reddish face and smile reassure me.

“There you are, with company, it seems!” she began, addressing the three men.

“A traveller drenched to the skin. Have we done the right thing?”

“Of course! Let him come in and dry himself, poor devil.”

I go into a large room with a dirt floor. Some logs are crackling in the hearth and a gentle warmth pervades the room. Simple rustic furniture occupies the centre of the room. An oak table and two benches, two chests, and some planks on the walls serve as shelves. A wide smooth stone, located at the side of the fireplace accommodates various pots, of earthenware and metal, a pan and some wooden cups. As I hesitate a moment, the woman calls out to me:

“Come in, come in then. Don't be afraid. Here, sit there on this bench. You have to get dry before you catch your death.”

She is right, this good woman. I am not fragile by nature, but this is not the time to catch a bad cold.

“And you others,” she says, turning towards the men, “don't just stand around there. Look for something to drink and put some wood on the fire.”

The men comply. One of them goes towards the back of the room, parts a curtain and disappears. I just have time to see a goat and the smell coming from the place leaves me thinking that pigs are not very far off.

“Come on, young man, take off all this for me so we can get your clothes dry.”

And so my overcoat, my cambric shirt and my hose are hung above the hearth. The clothes are steaming, being so water-logged. I am handed a sort of thick cloth robe to cover myself.

“I don’t know how to thank you... after all, yes, I know. I will pay you for all this.”

“Well, young man, don’t worry about that.”

“But, Ellyn,” one of the men then intervened, “a few coins...”

His two companions nod in agreement. Ellyn does not reply, but I am very certain that she would not be averse to compensation.

She places in front of me a wooden bowl filled with steaming soup. Undoubtedly peas and some pieces of bacon – the pigs whose presence I suspect. The brew warms up my soul as much as my body. These people are really nice. For their part, they serve themselves bowls of soup and eat with me. One of the men, with a long knife, cuts some big slices of grey bread which he shares out to everyone.

“Did these louts at least introduce themselves?” Ellyn asks me.

“Yes, with some forks.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. And to think that I have to feed these good-for-nothings.”

The men laugh heartily; they are no doubt accustomed to this kind of remark. So, I learn that their names are respectively Blaize, Gobind and Vincent, that the first two are Ellyn’s brothers, and that the third is a distant cousin whom they have taken in.

I therefore introduce myself in turn.

“William Robertson. I live in York. I am headed to Scarborough; I have to meet a cousin there to do some business.

“Business?” asks Vincent, curious.

“Yes, I run a small printing firm and this cousin might need my services. And then, the big fair and market, don’t they begin in a few days?”

Ellyn then intervenes.

“You feel better, sir?”

“This soup is excellent and has done me a lot of good. I am very happy that I met you on my way.”

“We keep watch over the path that you took. The news from the south is not very good lately and we don’t want the epidemic to reach our region.”

“I understand. However, the disease is losing ground; the known cases, and the deaths, are less numerous these last two weeks.”

“Are you very sure about that?”

“This is rather reliable information.”

“So, you are coming from York. On foot?”

“Yes, on foot. I actually had a horse, but it died, struck down by the disease. Others as well and the survivors have been requisitioned to draw the carts transporting the corpses. And the stagecoach service is suspended.”

“Well, young man,” Ellyn intervenes, “that is a really sad story. It’s true, around here, we have been spared. For the time being.”

I see the shadow of fear pass across her eyes. The reports that are circulating are revealing and disturbing. I understand her anguish.

“Set your mind at rest, Ellyn, this will pass. It can’t be otherwise.”

I try to reassure her, but I am not myself totally convinced of it. And what if the areas spared up to then happened to be struck by this terrible plague? But perhaps the towns, the health conditions of which turn out to be rather deplorable, are more favourable than the countryside for the development of the disease? Here, the air is fresh and invigorating, the inhabitants do not live in unpleasant proximity, far from it; they probably have a very healthy diet and seem more robust.

“Heaven grant it, heaven grant it,” Ellyn then mutters.

Night has fallen. Through the only window looking towards the west I see a less stormy sky. I go closer and confirm that the sky is opening up, stars are appearing in places as if by magic.

“Don’t be afraid, sir, the weather will be good tomorrow morning. You will be able to get to Scarborough safely.”

I have confidence in Blaize; he seems to know what he is talking about.

The men leave the main room. I suppose they are going to check the compound before going to sleep. I gathered that this family, apart from the goat and three quite fat pigs, also owns a few fowls and geese. Completing this list is an ox, a very useful animal for ploughing and pulling a cart. With an adjoining vegetable garden, I quite understand how these people, without living in wealth, have no shortage of food.

Gobind is back, looking satisfied.

“Come, sir, I am going to show you where you’ll spend the night. Here, we don’t have enough room, but in the shed, we have available a place that is well-sheltered and equipped with good, very dry straw. You will be comfortable there.”

“Thank you, Gobind; that will suit me perfectly.”

“We are going to feed the fire properly,” adds Ellyn. “Tomorrow, your clothes will be perfectly dry.”

“Thanks again.”

I follow in the footsteps of Gobind who leads me to the shed. It is a shack located at the side of the house and which I did not notice before. It adjoins one of the walls of the building and in a corner, protected from the wind and out of sight, is a site of beaten earth covered with straw.

“You will be fine here, sir. Sleep soundly; the area is very peaceful. Until tomorrow, at daybreak.”

“Agreed, at daybreak.”

And Gobind moves away with his heavy tread after giving me a friendly wave. How lucky I was to have come across them! Without them I would have been numbed by cold and perhaps would have picked up a bad cough. These people are really helpful and have done me a great favour. Stretched out on my back, inhaling the delightful smell of the damp earth, mingled with that of the straw and hay, I close my eyes and fall asleep peacefully.

It is a furtive noise that drags me from my sleep and my dreams. I raise myself on my elbows. The night is almost pitch black. I scrutinize the surroundings. A moving shadow is a few steps away from me, visibly in front of the enclosure serving as a fowl-house. A fox! He is coming to look for food and will perhaps succeed in getting into the enclosure. This animal is cunning and clever. I quickly get up to scare it off. The animal, surprised, dashes off without further ado. The danger, for that night, is averted.

The door of the house has opened. In the rectangle of light provided by the hearth, I observe three shadows. My peasant friends. I am astonished by such a night outing because it seems to me that it is already late in the night. Perhaps they are keeping watch over their domain, because predators are doubtless more prevalent than I imagine. I get ready to join them when, thanks to the light, I make out, in their hands, some long, pointed blades. They are moving, quietly, towards the shed. Good heavens! I very quickly realize the purpose of the manoeuvre. I don't delay. As they reach the shelter, I rush into the main room. Luckily, Ellyn is not there. I retrieve my hose, my shirt, my greatcoat and my dagger. I leave the premises just as quickly and head in the opposite direction, running into the grass. When, after a mad dash, I figure that I have sufficiently put some distance between my attackers and myself, I sit down at the foot of a tree. It is at this moment that fear rises in me and makes me tremble nervously.

I put back on my clothes, dry, it is true. I also have my purse, rather full, I must admit. I am still reeling with astonishment. So, my initial hesitation was not unfounded. These practices, of which I have frequently heard, are rather common. I had a narrow escape. If that fox had not woken me up, it would have been all over for me. Those three villains would not have hesitated to stab me in my sleep to deprive me of my purse. They would also have got a high-quality overcoat, a fine shirt and a valuable dagger.

I listen carefully. No suspicious noises, except those from local fauna stirring in the night. I don't think they are pursuing me; I am now on my guard and I could, in case of confrontation, kill one of them. They certainly do not want that. As for reporting them, that is utopian. I have not one bit of proof of what I might affirm; undoubtedly, no one would believe me. It is better to forget this episode; I will certainly not hear about these people any more. But that occurrence is surely going to increase my suspicion in respect of persons I might meet in the future.

I decide nevertheless not to hang around in the area.

I therefore continue heading for Scarborough. The sky is turning blue toward the east; dawn is not far off. It is a magical moment. Nature is awakening, light is being reborn; my lungs expand with fresh air which makes life sparkle in me. This life that I nearly lost a while ago. The sky is washed clean by the storms of the previous day. Only a few high clouds are fraying out still and reflect the light, now rosy, of the first rays of sun. It will be a beautiful day; it bodes well for my arrival in Scarborough.

There only remain three or four leagues to travel; I should reach the town by the middle of the day. This prospect makes me quicken my step, but I curb my enthusiasm. I have not eaten since the previous night and I have nothing to sink my teeth into; so I must conserve my strength.

The road takes a long curve going down between two pale green valleys. Magnificent scenery that delights me. Coming out of the curve, I spot a cart, partly overturned on the bank. Two persons seem to be moving around the vehicle.

I hesitate for a moment; I am inclined towards caution by the events of the previous day. But even so, must I see evil everywhere? This accident is not a trap, or else I am cursed...

"Good people, troubles?" I ask as I approach. The individuals turn towards me. A man of about fifty years old, with short grey hair, looking despondent,

who is panting and seems exhausted. His eyes, deep-set in their sockets, reflect a sort of hopelessness to me. The young woman with him, his daughter perhaps, seems less despondent. If she is in despair, it is perhaps more because of her father than because of the current situation, at least that is what I feel.

“As you can observe, young man. This confounded mud drove us into this bank. No way to get out of it. But perhaps with your help...”

I glance at the front of the covered cart.

“Perhaps it would be better to unfasten the animal?”

“You think so?”

“Yes, certainly. We will have more freedom of movement. And if this cart happens to overturn completely, it could carry off your animal and seriously damage it.”

“Jane, do what’s needed.”

“Yes, father.”

I am not wrong. She has the same straight forehead and the same aquiline nose as her father. On the other hand, her eyes, almond-shaped, very pale green, must be those of her mother. Her hair also, which is very long and a mix of red and auburn. For a short moment I have some difficulty taking my eyes off this sweet face. After the devils of the night I seem to be getting a glimpse of an angel. Jane knows what she is doing. She does not take much time to unfasten the bay horse.

“Come Titus, come here,” she whispers to him, stroking his neck.

The horse snorts, shakes his long mane and allows himself to be led towards a young beech-tree nearby. The young woman wraps the tether around the trunk.

“You’ll be fine there. You even have plenty to fill your stomach.”

Then, as she comes back towards us.

“It’s done, father.”

“Very well, my dear. But thinking about it, who am I dealing with here?”

“William Robertson, from York. I am on my way to Scarborough.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir. I am Walter Pending and this is my daughter Jane. We are also heading for Scarborough. For the market.”

“I see, the cart.”

“That’s right”

“If I’m not prying too much, what are you transporting? I say this because if your merchandise has significant weight, we could perhaps offload your cart.”

“In fact, that’s an excellent idea. In this cart there are countless numbers of objects, also different from one another and which are necessary for my ... our

business.”

I look at the man, awaiting further details.

“I am a magician and Jane masters the art of medicinal herbs. She also very often achieves things that would seem impossible to most people.”

I was thinking I was in the presence of merchants, but lo and behold, these two individuals have a rather astonishing and less common business.

“Very well, Mr Pending, let’s see.”

Lifting the canvas tarpaulin, Mr Pending shows me the interior of the cart. There are chests and boxes of all sizes here, phials, hats, knives, mirrors, a rattan chair and rolls of fabric.

“I think that we could perhaps take out some of them. The heaviest items, to start with?”

“Of course.”

Within a quarter of an hour, we empty the cart of half its contents. We place the objects along the road.

I inspect the front of the vehicle, where the wheels are stuck in the mud. I check the angle between the platform and the ground.

“Some stones, and some hefty sticks. That’s what we need. Do you have a good cutlass?”

Pending begins to laugh heartily.

“Sorry,” I respond. “Of course.”

There is no shortage of knives, clearly. Pending has a whole set of them.

“Find some stones, to put on the right side; I am going to cut a stick.”

While Pending and his daughter begin to look for stones, I spot a dogwood. Its wood, very ligneous, will undoubtedly be solid enough for what I want to use it for. After a few minutes of exertion, I succeed in cutting off a branch an inch and a half in diameter.

“Here’s what will do the trick. And for your part?”

Father and daughter have prepared an impressive heap of stones.

“Let’s put some chocks in front of each wheel, except the front right.”

They do it and I decide to try a risky process. I put my stick under the right wheel and, exerting all my strength, I prise. The cart rises slightly.

“Push! Now!”

Pending and his daughter give a rather strong and sudden push. The vehicle moves back a few inches, then falls on the ground again.

“The chocks! The chocks!”

My two drudges put back the stones. Everyone is sweating profusely; it is a rather strenuous effort.

“This will do it, father?” Jane asks.

“Yes, my girl; this will work. Do we have any choice?”

We repeat the process five times, until the cart, extricated from the bank, was almost horizontal again.

“This is it,” declares the father. “Without you... how can I thank you?”

“Can you take me with you? I mean, for the rest of the journey.”

“Of course. But before that, let’s have a drink.”

As if by magic, a bottle of whisky appears.

3

I settle myself in the back of the cart, the tarpaulin having been turned up. Jane is sitting next to me, her legs swinging above the road.

Her father has taken the reins and, perched on a kind of seat located at the front, he drives the cart. Titus moves along easily; he has recovered his strength and above all he is stuffed with some very succulent and nourishing grass.

While we admire the scenery which passes behind us, not daring to say a word, a small animal, agile and swift, leaps on to my shoulder. Surprised at first, I discover a small white cat which purrs as it rubs against me.

“Oh, that’s Snow, don’t be afraid. He is adorable. He must have hidden himself all this time. He is still young; he loves to have fun.”

Indeed, the cat jumps on my knees, then grabs the tarpaulin, and slips away again into the cart to hide under some thick woollen blankets.

“We found him on the road. My father thinks that he can get him to participate in his tricks, but frankly, I doubt it. Training a cat is near impossible.”

“Then that could be right up your street, according to your father.”

Jane looks at me mischievously.

“Maybe.”

The rest of the trip passes smoothly. The sky has cleared up; the countryside is bathed in a lovely golden light. As we approach the town, we now meet other people, on foot. They are going in the same direction and we slowly overtake them. Mr Pending greets them with some grand gestures. He is probably preparing his future customers, because no doubt about it, these people are making their way to the Scarborough fair.

Jane is not very talkative, neither am I. But she seems curious all the same.

“You have family in Scarborough?” she asks me.

“A cousin, Perdy Warren. I don’t know him so well. He sent me a letter and wants me to let him use my services.”

“Your services?”

“Yes, I am a printer. Oh, it’s quite a small printery. My cousin is an enthusiast for legends and strange stories. All that he can glean, he has written down, by hand. His wish is to have his productions printed. I must admit that I am very interested in it.”

Jane seems captivated by my explanations. Her bright eyes sparkle.

“Indeed, that must be fascinating. Legends...”

I then come back to the imminent market event.

“And you, furthermore you and your father, how do you deal with setting up?”

“It is the burgomaster who deals with all these matters. Scarborough is one of the most important fairs in the country. The Dutch also come, as well as the Flemish, Norwegians and some French people.”

“They will perhaps be in the majority this year, with this terrible epidemic.”

“Yes, some of our friends and colleagues have defected. Others, unfortunately, are dead, struck down by the plague.”

Evoking this issue brings us back to silence.

During this short exchange we have got close to the town.

“There it is!” shouts Mr Pending, from his driver’s seat.

We jump down from the cart and go to the front.

From the top of a slight hill, we make out the village, nestled in the heart of a setting of greenery. It is a rather significant group of houses which extends to the south of a sort of rocky spur projecting into the sea. I gaze, awestruck.

“This is the first time that you are coming here?” asks Jane, who is walking beside me.

“I came when I was a child, but I hardly have any recollections of it.”

“Look up there, at that magnificent castle.”

Perched on the cliff, a fortress overlooks the sea, dominates the town, and protects the area. Made of grey stones, it stands out against the blue of the sky. Its rampart is imposing and towers, at regular intervals, stand out on the surrounding wall.

Now that we are getting closer, the crowd is thicker. Mr Pending is very cautious with Titus because the onlookers or other merchants do not seem to be concerned with the cart. The road now descends, as far as the first houses. Pending brings the cart to a halt.

“Here we are,” he says to me. “Without you, we would still be on the muddy bank or slaughtered by highwaymen.”

I smile for a moment, thinking again about my encounter with my so-called peasants.

“So, where are you going in this town?” he continues.

“In the area around St Mary’s Church. My cousin Perdy lives in that neighbourhood, on Wool Lane, I think.”

“Oh, very well. So, it’s not complicated; you just need to head for the church.”

From our location, we can see the two stately towers of the edifice. I even make out the square public garden and the cemetery adjacent to it.

I bow to Mr Pending and give a little wave to Jane before moving off. Snow runs near me for a moment, then goes back to her mistress.

“We will see each other again no doubt, at the market,” Jane calls out to me.

I really hope so.

Mr Pending does not move off the cart again. I gathered that he had to await the inspection by the burgomaster’s agents who have to check the contents of the cart and collect the requisite tax to be able to enter the town as a participant in the market. In fact, I come across two horsemen dressed in blue, carrying swords and wearing belts of gold flannel.

For my part, I am a mere visitor; these administrative worries do not concern me. I get on to the main street. Some men, up on tall ladders, are stretching ropes across the streets and hanging small flags of all colours on them. On the balconies of half-timbered houses are brightly coloured fabrics and planters with multi-coloured flowers. The doors of the houses are also decorated; people are sweeping up in front of their homes. Joyful children are running and singing; the fair is coming soon.

Here a cordial atmosphere prevails. These people I come across, clearly busy with the preparation for the festivities, seem happy to me. It must be said that this festival, which will last six weeks, will enrich the town and its inhabitants. A child who is crossing the street bumps into my legs.

“Sorry, sir.”

“It’s all right, lad. You didn’t hurt yourself, at least?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you point out Wool Lane for me? I have to go there.”

“Of course, sir. I can even take you there. It’s just around the corner.”

And here I am, provided with a knee-high guide who surely knows the town inside out.

We make our way towards St Mary's Church, then turn left into some partly paved lanes. Here, there is little rubbish or horse dung. The inhabitants are making their village shine. Two crossroads, a sloping alley and the boy stops, with a look of satisfaction.

"It's here, sir."

"Thank you, my boy. So, what is your name?"

"Jack, Jack the Menace. At your service."

"Well, Jack, thank you for your help. Perhaps we'll meet again?"

"Maybe, sir."

"This is for your trouble."

I hand him a small coin. The child's eyes light up with happiness.

"Thank you, sir."

And he moves off, whistling.

In Wool Lane, I rather quickly spot my cousin Perdy's house. His letter mentioned a modest building with mud walls with a door of polished wood. On the left of the door is a bronze bell which is activated by a string.

I hardly have time to get close when the door opens, allowing two very stout persons to pass through. They both have faces covered with thick beards; broad hats tipped forward do not allow much of their faces to be made out. I step aside because obviously these two men would have ended up shoving me.

But the door remains open and I make out a more slender silhouette. A young man, with a doll-like face framed by a blonde, curly head of hair, is staring at me.

"William!"

"Perdy! It's been a while."