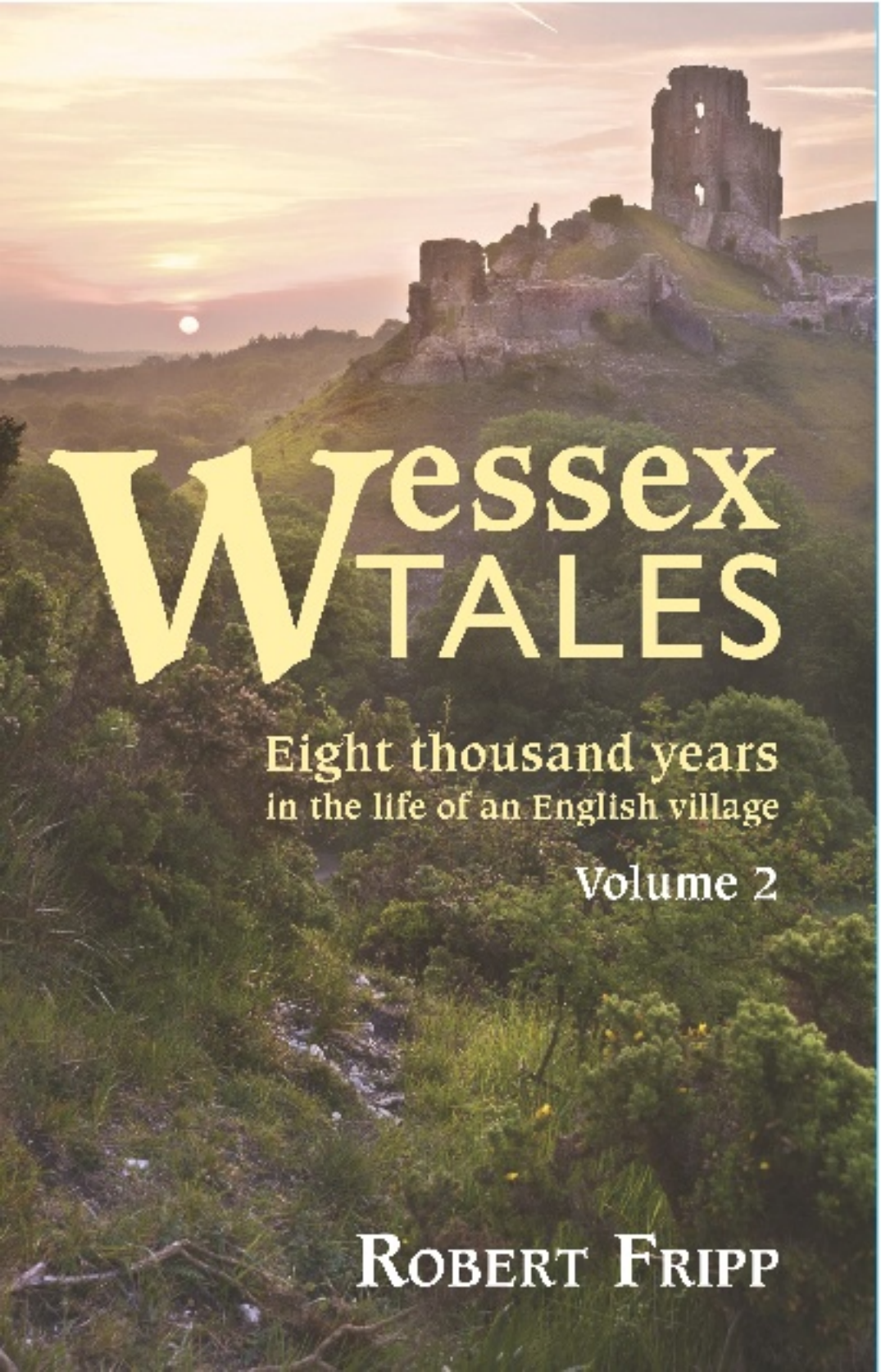
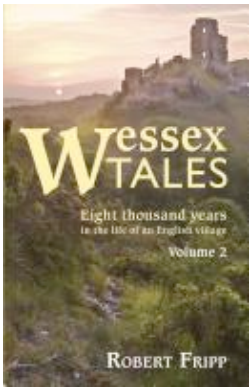

Wessex
TALES
Eight thousand years
in the life of an English village
Volume 2
Robert Fripp



This is Volume 2 of Wessex Tales, 'Eight thousand years in the life of an English village.' Travel Stone Age woods, the Blackmore Vale, and ramparts of Iron Age hill forts defended by slingers with fist-sized stones. Dorset's land is magical, mystical, down-to-earth. Our characters toil, poach game, reap crops, and venture as soldiers, carters and smugglers. Life perseveres, from the Stone Age to the stresses of the First World War.

Wessex Tales
Volume 2

Wessex Tales

Eight thousand years in the life of an English village

VOLUME 2 of 2

Robert Fripp

Shillingstone Press

***Wessex Tales*:**

Eight thousand years in the life of an English village

Forty short stories set in the County of Dorset

By Robert Fripp

Published in two volumes. This is Volume 2

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This book combines British punctuation and U.S. spelling.

Canadian compromise moderates both.

Half a Dozen Ponies

Circa 1795

'*The smuggling traders in these parts are grown to such a head that they bidd defiance to all law and government.*' (1718)

Bold as they were, smugglers did not 'bidd defiance' by taking unnecessary risks against the revenue men. Instead:

'*It is the constant practice of smugglers to carry their goods off the coast as soon as possible after landing, as Blackmore Vale is the most disaffected part of the county abounding in a great number of rogues…*' (1719)

Philip Taylor,
The Collector of Customs at Weymouth, Dorset.
From Taylor's reports for 1718 and 1719.

THE BOY COULDN'T BE SURE why he turned at that moment, in time to catch a hint of movement far behind him on the road. Leaning into the neck of his leading pack-pony, Tolly steered him onto a patch of common land abutting the road. The thunk of muffled hooves on hard-packed chalk and flint gave way to fetlocks hissing through long grass.

'Whoa, Sam!' Reassured by the sound of his own voice, the boy patted the pony's neck. 'Wait there.' Leaving the animals, he returned to the track, exposing just enough of himself to stare long and hard back the way he had come. Fifty yards off, the dark form of a weasel, a *veäre*, broke across the moon-pale stillness, loping athirt the ruts of the carriageway into the opposite hedge. Beyond that, a first-quarter moon betrayed no trace of movement. The road lay in partial moonlight between high hedges: the eastern bank, bright as the moon allowed; the western, dark in the shade of its hedge.

The boy heaved a sigh of relief. At this point, a stiff climb out of Blandford, the Roman Mile travelled straight and as far along the edge of the downs as its name implied. High hedges allowed few points of escape from the long, straight way, but not so much as a leaf was stirring back along the road. The boy returned to the broken bank where the ponies grazed; he looked again, concealed

now by the end of the hedge. Still nothing. Wiping his palms on his jacket, Tolly returned to his file of ponies. Clicking his tongue, he coaxed the leader to a fast walk. 'Come, Sam! Oats for you when we get this lot off Okeford Hill.' Half a dozen ponies, their pack-saddles collectively laden with ten barrels and two large bales, resumed their trek. If all went well they would soon be off the Roman Mile, travel by wooded paths around Turnworth and be down the Maerridge spur of Okeford Hill and home to Fitzpaine Mill before break of day.

A QUARTER OF A MILE BEHIND, the officer had seen Tolly lead his pack train off the road, guessed his purpose, and halted his file of dragoons on the dark, western side of the lane. There they waited, motionless, bent over their horses' necks lest stray moonlight betray them with a flash from buckle or badge. Trained cavalry horses stood stock still, awaiting orders.

The captain waited some minutes after the boy and his pack train disappeared round the end of the Roman Mile. Then he turned in his saddle and beckoned: 'Sergeant Lisle.'

'Sir.' The sergeant spurred to join his officer, his shadow emerging dark against the opposite, moonlit bank.

'No fool, that boy, Sergeant.'

'No, sir.'

'I'll wager he's a poacher born and bred. Stay in file, three lengths apart. Hug the shadow.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And be ready to stop on a moment, Sergeant. We've bigger game to snare than this one lad.'

The captain urged his horse ahead. Turning in his saddle, the sergeant beckoned, and six men of the Fourteenth Light Dragoons came forward, moving like ghosts in the shade beneath the bank. Falling back, the sergeant passed the order to the first man: 'File. Three lengths. Keep in shadow.' Then he nudged his horse forward to keep station behind his officer. Each man in turn fell back, passed the order, and nudged his horse ahead. No noise. No messy to and fro. If British regiments had learned anything from the American wars, it was passed on piecemeal by officers like Captain Burgess who, in earlier days, had raided deep into rebel colonies

with John Graves Simcoe's light infantry, the Queen's Rangers—a unit known to his men as Simcoe's Rangers.

THE HAPPY STATE OF AFFAIRS that sustained smuggling as the southwest counties' major industry had endured for a century. Well-led and organised, smuggling syndicates enjoyed popular support. By contrast, customs collectors enjoyed neither support not the wherewithal to quash the trade.

This thriving commerce had been set in motion back in 1693, when the government borrowed £1 million at ten percent to wage King William's war against the Stuart rump, coining in the process the term 'national debt'. The government borrowed another £1 million the following year from a syndicate of London merchants. To administer this fund the syndicate set up a corporation styled the Bank of England.

So it went. Folly chased folly and war pursued war, resulting in extortionate duties on every item of value entering British ports: brandy, rum, Geneva liquor; bohea tea, green tea, coffee berries; tobacco, pepper, spices from the Indies, East and West; silk, velvet, ribbons, ruffles and frills of Valenciennes lace. Not that British governments were wholly to blame. For nearly a century the crown had spent a fortune safeguarding American colonists against the might of France and Spain. However, when such threats were safely behind them, the colonies staged a revolution rather than repay any fraction of that debt.

One way or another, it all came back to the Excise: the higher the duties, the more profitable smuggling became. Take Tolly, now. He was the fourth generation to serve the Gentlemen, and if he survived to sire them, his sons and grandsons might follow, too. For now, though, his only thought was to reach safe haven before cockcrow, handing over responsibility for his barrels and bales. In the grand scheme of things, Tolly was a stripling spoke in an enormous wheel. He had been given to understand that he was shifting one-tenth of a major consignment—nearly sixty packhorses' worth—which had been off-loaded at Poole Harbour and trekked inland to a parish near Blandford ten days before.

The bulk of this cargo had been lodged, as usual, in the tower of a church, being trundled in during bell-ringing practice to cover

the noise. Bills of lading and receipts in hand were safe in the vestry, salted among ancient pages of parish records.

Now, the custom in this particular parish called for the tenor bell to toll before Matins and Evensong. This made for a complication because in Dorset, when custom prevails, superstition needs ride alongside. The superstition in this case held that, when the tenor bell tolled leaden and heavy, some poor soul would take leave of this life in the next seven days. As it happened, this made more than a trace of sense. With fogs as thick as sodden rags blanketing the Stour valley for days, inevitably some ancient would be carried off by a rheum in the lungs—and the wake-bell tolled flat in the fog-heavy air.

Not unnaturally, a belfry stuffed with bales of tea gave the bells a consumptive clap. This provoked a powerful chattering that came to the ears of the vicar. A soft-faced, newly minted innocent, the vicar asked the warden, Walter Badgeley, to look in on the bells. Badgeley and his church had served as a way station for Isaac Gulliver's night-borne cargos for almost twenty years. There wasn't a slab in the nave or a table-tomb in the churchyard where the aroma of tea or the bouquet of brandy hadn't battled the odour of mould and decay. Why, with the belfry full of tea, Badgeley had had to accommodate six firkins of Geneva under the altar. Hence the syndicate's need to move part of the present consignment, and quickly.

GLANCING AT THE MOON, Tolly reckoned it an hour since they had left the Roman Mile. Nearing the tollhouse above Durweston on the road to Stickland, he had departed the high road in favour of a mesh of tracks running through the spur of wooded country above Turnworth. Here was forest, pollarded in medieval times—a sure guarantee of longevity for noble trees—and never felled in living memory. Beneath an overhang of oaks and beeches, fern- and gorse-lined bridleways criss-crossed an understory of holly, hazel and thorn. Rabbit-cropped turf muffled the ponies' leather-padded shoes to near-silence. The loudest sounds, ponies breathing and the slosh of liquid in barrels, interspersed with the calls of nightingales. Tolly had never heard barrels of spirit slosh before:

they came filled up to the bung. But the Gentlemen had a simple rule: Ask no questions, hear no lies.

The boy steered their way through the woods by following the alley of light overhead, for the oaks and beeches blocked out direct moonlight altogether. Cockchafers buzzed in the oaks. Occasional fireflies flitted like wraiths among trees.

They reached a place where bracken grew thick on both sides of the track. Tolly halted the ponies, took a look back, saw nothing, and turned his attention to the way ahead. He heard what he feared to hear: *churr*, *churr*, *churr*, *churr*, coming from the side of the track some distance off. Older men had warned him about this; and they had been careful to harness the most excitable pony, Betty, behind the placid leader, Sam. Tolly moved back from Sam to Betty, patting her mane while placing his body close to her head to obscure her vision. Suddenly a threat was upon them. A white smile in a black object the size of a cannon ball hurled through the air in an erratic zigzag, emitting as it came a loud metallic rattle, like a chain's end pulled down stone steps one at a time. Wings swept the air, all the way up—*crak*, *crak*, *crak*—as they slapped together above the beast's head, then all the way down, beneath its belly.

Tolly's right hand held Betty's bridle close to the headstall fastening her bit, keeping her head low, his left hand patting her mane while he spoke and clicked his tongue to cover strange sounds. The smile with wings kept circling above them noisily.

'Ouch!' Betty's hoof stamped Tolly's right foot. He cursed. Fortunately the pony was wearing muffled shoes. Nothing broken, he hoped, but bad bruises for a fortnight.

Tolly had kept control. Now, presence of mind kept him talking to his pony. ''Tweren't nothing, Betty. Easy, girl. Easy. 'Tweren't nothing but a goatsucker catching bugs at night.'

By this time the male nightjar had flown off, his dark shape swallowed into night. Tolly waited; this drama had one more step to take. For several seconds nothing happened. Then the female resumed her tranquil *churr*, *churr*, *churr*. The incident was closed.

AT LAST TOLLY FELT, RATHER THAN SAW, the edge of the wood, for it ended at the break of slope above the Blackmore Vale. There was always an up rush of air across this slope.

In open country again, Tolly descended the Maerridge track with care. The gradient fell steeply, straining the laden beasts and the limping boy. Heavy barrels shifted, needed retying. Half an hour later, near the bottom of the slope, the pack-train turned hard right and dropped into the dark holloway with its overhang of trees and a hazel thicket that formed the western approach to Okeford Fitzpaine.

Fitzpaine was a village neither of the Vale nor of the downs. It grew from a line of cottages rammed into the foot of Okeford Hill to take advantage of a spring emerging from the chalk. Where the cottages were jammed tight along the source of the spring, some had been built with wide, arched passages running between them, so that villagers could move livestock to and from crofts behind the houses. Closed by double doors at the street end, such passages were more common in coaching inns. This design proved convenient for the Gentlemen and their night-borne cargoes. Ideal, too, was Fitz Paine's mill, anciently built and rebuilt, and now for several generations operated by the Ridout family. The present miller, Master Ridout, was as famous in the local trade as Isaac Gulliver.

The drongs, or sunken way, down which Tolly led his ponies, was a veritable tunnel, its surface eight to twelve feet lower than the land on either side. An overhang of hazel bushes and high trees surmounted the path. An aperture of night sky lit their passage from behind, but ahead of them the village end was black as Satan's well. The ponies had found their way home in worse. It was Sam who led his human leader, picking his way with care.

Young Tolly was clutching Sam's head-rein and feeling his way when a man's voice boomed out of the dark, 'A good first run, boy!' The surprise struck Tolly like a physical blow. From his shoulders to his temples, his hackles rose. Sheer terror stopped him in his tracks. The ponies would have trampled him, except that Sam had the presence of mind to stop, snorting to those behind.

The man's voice again: 'That's my boy, Sam. You d'know your way 'omen, don' ee?'

Tolly blurted out, 'George?'

'Ay, Toll. Cousin George. Who else?' George Otter slid open a dark lantern's flap and made sweeping passes of light toward the village. 'Reckon I gived ee a proper turn, eh?' A flash of light came back in answer. 'Now get thik team a-moving. Oh, John Rigout's away to busyness tonight. Jack Thatcher's in charge down there.' Otter put his hand on Tolly's shoulder: 'Next time, mind how you do go! I seen you come around thik corner clear as a steeple against the sky.' The quarter-moon lit the end of the drong behind them as an oval of ghostly grey. 'Always bide the hedge, even when you d'think 'tis dark. Don't never forget your shade,' George concluded ominously.

Tolly moved on with the ponies. George Otter turned away, straining to read the oval of light at the upper end of the drong. Minutes passed. Nothing stirred. At length the silhouette of a horse's head broke into the ring of pale light. Then it was gone. Shielding the lantern with his body, the lookout quickly slid up the flap and signalled, up and down this time, to the unseen village. Then he smothered the wick and, climbing the bank, concealed himself high on the wall of the drong.

Captain Burgess cursed. Too late he had noticed the lie of the land. Thirty years a soldier, he knew very well how silhouettes betray. Backing his horse, he dismounted and stared down the drong from the turn of the hedge. He thought he could make out the pack-train, but nothing else stirred. Mounting again he turned the corner, snug to the hedge. His file of dragoons followed suit. But they hadn't gone more than fifty paces before the captain reined his horse and sniffed the air as deliberately as a hound. Turning, he asked, 'What do you smell, Sergeant Lisle?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Nothing! Tell me, do you take a pipe or two?'

'Tobacco, sir? Yes, of an evening.'

Burgess clicked his tongue. 'It kills the nose, Sergeant. Try again.'

Surprised, the sergeant noticed that the captain no longer bothered to whisper. 'I can't smell a thing, sir.'

'You best learn to, Sergeant. It may save your life some day! Tobacco smoke. Tobacco smoke *and* lamp oil. Someone snuffed a pipe and a lantern under our noses a minute ago.'

Ten feet up, concealed high on the bank, George Otter could hear every word.

'The boy never had a lamp, sir.'

'But his people do. I'd say we have arrived, Sergeant.'

THE CAPTAIN STOPPED STILL, staring down the holloway, but his mind was an ocean and several forced marches away. A hot summer night in the Colonies. He had been thirty miles and more up Hudson's River, north of New York. Some moon, like now, but you could pick out a trail among trees by the swarms of lightning bugs. Foxfire, the colonists called it. Away from the trail, the trees blocked their light. And the din was extraordinary. Massed choirs of cicadas in the maples, oaks and tulip trees kicked up a din to drill a man's ears.

Long before, Captain Burgess had been leading a cavalry platoon pursuing a rebel supply train along an old moccasin trail that had served generations of farmers—and Indians before them—west of Hudson's River. Settlers had graced this old trail with a name: South Mountain Road. An hour's march south of Stony Point it ran east to the Hudson through a maze of woods and basalt boulders soon to be named Rockland County, New York. Burgess would never forget.

They had picked up the trail of rebel wagons near an apple orchard called Conklin's Farm and followed it east. The wagons were bound for the Hudson near Haverstraw; that was clear. For much of its length, South Mountain Road was an Indian moccasin's compromise with Nature's harshness: originally wide enough for a travois, settlers had opened it to wagons. A hemlock- and maple-clad crag of basalt rose behind a verge of poison-ivy to the north; and wetlands that could mire an army bordered the verge of poison-ivy to the south. In summer, copperhead snakes slithered out of the mountain and over the road to reach water. Trees loomed all around, any one of which might hide a man whose musket threw twice the range at thrice the accuracy of a service-issue Brown Bess. With cicadas to the north and peepers

and crickets to the south, the din of life was deafening. Rebels might move regiments and never make a sound.

Officers like Captain Burgess and his onetime commander, Colonel John Graves Simcoe, had learned their woodcraft from Indians, and from Major Robert Rogers' 'Rules of Ranging', a guerrilla warfare guide. There was nothing of such matters in the British Army's books.

It had been nearly dark when Captain Burgess's cavalry approached a place where South Mountain Road turned sharply to the right to skirt a basalt spur. The place stank of ambush—perhaps because the odour of tobacco lingered, too. Burgess surmised that a lookout had left his post minutes before to warn comrades. There was nothing for it but to give the appearance of making camp for the night at this unlikely spot. Then, under cover of darkness, Burgess and his men moved forward on foot, climbed the spur, and attacked down the far side, stumbling among the poison-ivy and the boulders. Troops and rebels fired at muzzle flashes and bayoneted shouts and screams among a din of frogs and cicadas, while ghostly foxfire from a myriad lightning bugs flashed on and off across the scene.

THAT HAD BEEN ONE SMALL ACTION, years ago and far away. Now, the holloway approach to Fitzpaine loomed, a black maw, yawning its anticlimax.

In his most matter-of-fact tone Captain Burgess raised his voice, 'They know we're here. Sergeant Lisle, make best speed to follow me!'

Tolly, meanwhile, was not even sure whether he was still in the drong or walking between the first of Fitzpaine's houses until a half-door opened between two cottages, exposing the croft beyond awash with light.

'In here, boy! Bring 'em quick.' The extraordinary figure of a blacksmith, Jack Thatcher, blocked the portal, his splayed legs supporting a trunk like an oak. 'Bring 'em in!' Thatcher clapped the boy on the shoulder as he passed.

Surely, thought Tolly, old Jack must have the baldest pate atop the fullest beard in England.

Now lanterns were opening and jiggling like fireflies, men's voices coming from darkness behind them. 'Easy, Sam.' 'Good first run, young Tolly.' 'Get them packs off, Ned.'

Tolly had hoped to impress the miller himself. 'Where's Mr Ridout?' he asked.

'Don' ee ask questions, lad,' came one reply. 'Away to business,' said another.

Somebody called to the blacksmith, 'Shut thik door, Jack!'

But Jack Thatcher called back, 'Now, that would be right unmannerly. Look lively, lads. We have King's officers to entertain!'

Tongues fell silent. Heads turned in shock as the company watched a horseman bend to pass beneath the portal, then spur his way into the croft. Lantern shutters flicked down and solid bodies began to melt into the dark.

The smith's voice registered no hint of surprise. 'Good morning, captain.'

'A good morning for some, perhaps, but not, I think, for you.' By now the dragoons were through the portal. 'I place all persons present under an arrest, in the King's name, on suspicion of evading the Excise.'

Soldiers and villagers were stumbling about in the near dark when the smith called again, 'Open some lanterns, there. The sooner we get light, the sooner we can show his worship the error of his way.' But only the smith was in position to act on his own advice. The light he cast on the scene showed four men and Tolly in custody. Half a dozen others had crashed through the hedge at the back of the croft and melted into meadows beyond. The boy, in shock, still held Sam's rein. He was close to shitting himself. His palms sweated fear.

'Well,' said the smith, 'we can settle this matter right speedly. If your men would open some of them lanterns, Captain …'

'What's your name, man?'

'Jack Thatcher, blacksmith, sir.'

'Well, Thatcher, likely it's the navy or Van Diemen's Land for you.'

The smith clicked his tongue, disapprovingly. 'While your men are looking high and low for somat as slipped the Excise, I fancy

you might want to join me in a brandy, sir.' Confident as an actor who knows that his predicament stops at the end of the play, the smith shone his lantern at a keg supported on a trestle against a stable wall. 'All duty paid on that, sir, and there's the King's broad arrow stamp burned on to prove it.'

'I'll drink no liquor with a smuggler. Stand over there with the others, if you please.'

Thatcher came to stand with Tolly and the others, while the captain—'Sergeant, chalk those casks!'—instructed Sergeant Lisle to chalk his name and the date on the barrels.

Tolly whispered, 'The others got away, Jack.'

Looking around in mock surprise, the smith winked down at him. 'Bless my soul, boy, so they did, but then, they weren't to know.'

'Know what?'

'Questions again. Tut, tut!' But, seeing the boy's real fear, he added, 'You were the stale!' He used the dialect word for decoy, and not a soldier within earshot was the wiser. Neither was Tolly, for that matter.

Turning back to the captain, the smith politely asked, 'And what is it you think you've caught, sir?'

The captain gestured at the pack-train. 'Six ponies wearing muffled shoes, ten kegs of liquor plain as my hand, and we shall soon discover what's hiding in those bales.'

'Why, sir, the shoes are so's we won't wake Christians from their sleep …'

'Twixt here and Blandford?' The captain snorted derision.

'… and I'd be doing nothing less than asking for our rights when I demand that you confront us with your evidence.'

'Time enough for that at Dorchester Assizes.'

'For all you d'know, sir, there may be lamp oil in them kegs.'

Mounted, the officer's face was lost in darkness above the ring of lantern light. Still, when he spoke again, his voice was less confident. 'Sergeant Lisle, inspect the bales!'

The sergeant unlatched a buckle and reached into a great gunny sack. 'It feels like wool, sir.'

'Bought at Sheep Market Hill in Blandford market Thursday last,' Jack Thatcher informed them. 'There'll be a bill of sale in one

them sacks, I fancy.' The officer's hands fidgeted with his reins. 'You'll be needing a spigot and bung-mallet, sir,' the smith went on in a matter-of-fact way. 'Over there on the trestle, wi' the brandy.'

The sergeant fetched up a spigot, a mallet and an earthen cup rather larger—truth be told—than he needed for tasting a sample. Driving the spigot through the bung, he turned the tap and let liquid flow.

'That's enough,' the captain ordered peevishly.

The sergeant raised the cup to his lips.

The captain asked, 'Well?'

'It tastes like water, sir.'

The silence was profound.

Captain Burgess had survived thirty years of soldiering through shot and shell, death all around, winters in Quebec, disease in France, army surgeons, weevils in biscuits and ambuscade. Beneath his tricorn hat, the stubble of his hair was white as his powdered wig. Seasoned in battle, seasoned in peace, seasoned moreover in human nature, his orbit of experience encompassed a great deal more than most men of his time.

Besides which, after three decades in the saddle his arse was a fire of saddle sores.

It was now that Captain Burgess proved his mettle.

Dismounting, he approached the smith, noting the extra-ordinary, hairy face, ruddy with days of fire and nights of ale. 'Master Thatcher, isn't it?'

'That's right, sir.'

The captain put his hand on the big man's shoulder. 'Well, blacksmith, it seems you and yours are innocent as babes at Christening. I'll count it an honour to take a glass with an honest man. You offered us a stirrup-cup of brandy from that firkin with the King's broad arrow over there.'

Midwinter Mummers

About 1830

'*About the time of the Crimean War, the Mummers still came round at Christmas-Time and acted their curious plays. Wearing tight-fitting garments of red and white and high mitre-like head-dresses, they stood stiffly in a row and slew one another like marionettes with their white wands. Their heroic declamations, delivered in the broadest Dorset, would have been well-nigh unintelligible to anyone not familiar with the local vernacular.*'

The Reverend J. H. Cooke DD, 1921

SNOW HAD BEEN FALLING A WHILE by the time six strangely attired men emerged self-consciously from a cottage near the market cross and turned down Church Lane. One of them, the 'Doctor', wore sepulchral black, topped by a monstrous periwig of a style fashionable in the salons of London and Bath half a century back. On top of the wig perched a tiny three-cornered hat. Under his arm this vision carried a small barrel, recognisable by its shape as having supplied horse-lineament to the coaching trade. The ends were roughly chalked with the word 'Pills'. The man's eyes were masked, like a highwayman's.

The other five had to duck more than usual as they emerged from the door, for they wore tall, mitre-like hats like those of eighteenth century infantry regiments. There was nothing of military bearing about these mummers, though. Their faces were blacked, and, anticipating their imminent public appearance they were well lubricated. They would be further rewarded afterwards.

Emerging into evening, the six set an unsteady course down Church Lane to the rectory barn, their rolling gait exaggerated on frost-hard ruts made treacherous by snow cover. Ahead, lanterns bobbed as the last villagers straggled into the barn to watch their performance. The mummers themselves resembled nothing so much as a bunch of ragamuffins set loose from a work house on a Sunday afternoon, weaving along—the effects of nerves and drink—declaiming lines they remembered effortlessly most of the year, only to forget them in the stage-fright leading up to their annual performance in the barn on Midwinter's Eve.

'Make room, make room, my hearties, room!'

'Gallants, Fred, 'tis gallants!' Charlie Paine prompted.

'Gallants! Bain't a mote of difference, mind.'

'If'n 'tis worth doing, Fred, 'tis best to do 'en well.'

'Garn wi' thee!' Father Christmas was in a difficult mood. Rising from table he'd smashed his head on a beam that hadn't been there when he sat down and, apart from headache, his red and white felt mitre, which had started the evening stiff with starch, now hung at half-mast, its tip drooping over his nose.

Behind them, the Saracen mumbled to Slasher the Valiant Soldier, 'We'm best hold 'en steady wi' a broom-stick up his coat.'

Turning roundly on the pair of them, Fred Newcombe bawled, 'I were Father Christmas on Midwinter's night avorn you two were born!' Tripping on a rut he stumbled into his brother-in-law, Charlie Paine, alias Saint George.

'Hold up there, Fred.'

'Unlicked whelps, the pair on 'en!'

'There's as may be,' Saint George returned, 'but folk be waiting on thee to lead us in.'

'He'll be all right when we d' start,' the Doctor pronounced.

The Turkish Knight began to laugh. ''Twould be a curiosity if we did 'ave to take 'en in. Just think, old Father Christmas, stiff on a plank like a corpus!'

Saint George cut him off. 'Ssh! Keep't to yourself, eh, Ted.'

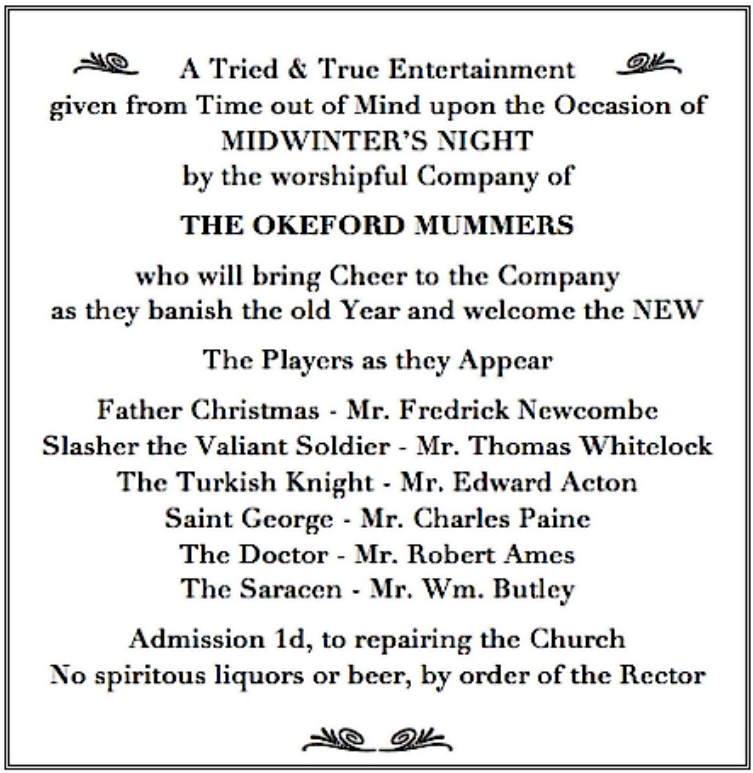
'Come down, lads, come on down!' The Saracen moved to put his body as well as words between Saint George and the Turkish Knight. 'Bain't no time for fisticuffs!'

The Saracen regretted he had raised the issue. Charlie Paine (Saint George) and Edward Acton (Turkish Knight) had been friends since they were mommets, only turning rivals since last June. The bother had started during haymaking, when the Turkish Knight made inroads into a Miss Sally Bere's affection for Saint George, the latter having the misfortune to be working with a different crew. Ah, those haying noon-times, when men and women had time to lie beneath elms and stare at the vastness of the future and the sky, to think of life and love—and rivalry.

By the end of summer Paine and Acton had traded punches. Mistress Sally, both flattered and distressed, withdrew in confusion

from their company. Since summer, the men had seen as little of each other as possible, lest a meeting end in blows.

THE MUMMERS' AUDIENCE, meanwhile, consisted of just about every villager who could hobble, walk or ride—even if they'd seen the self-same play a dozen times before. Most had. Single men propped themselves around the walls of the rectory barn while family groups and women sat on benches. The audience had come through a wagon door still open to the snow and chill. A small crowd stood around, admiring the sight of friends' and neighbours' names in print on an old playbill. 'Old', because the bill was tacked up and taken down year after year. The rain-smeared ink still managed to convey its message. The players hadn't changed in a while; and the play hadn't changed in living memory.


A Tried & True Entertainment
given from Time out of Mind upon the Occasion of
MIDWINTER'S NIGHT
by the worshipful Company of
THE OKEFORD MUMMERS
who will bring Cheer to the Company
as they banish the old Year and welcome the NEW
The Players as they Appear
Father Christmas - Mr. Fredrick Newcombe
Slasher the Valiant Soldier - Mr. Thomas Whitelock
The Turkish Knight - Mr. Edward Acton
Saint George - Mr. Charles Paine
The Doctor - Mr. Robert Ames
The Saracen - Mr. Wm. Butley
Admission 1d, to repairing the Church
No spiritous liquors or beer, by order of the Rector

The air in the rectory barn was thick with odours of winter: drying hay, smoke-cured clothing, lye soap, the lack of it, and the aromas of extinguished oil and candle lamps. No smell of spirits, though, except a lingering on the breath. Vicar tolerated much in the interests of this strange, relic tradition, but never strong drink. The rectory barn, he said, was to be treated with the same respect as if it were the church.

The old barn was as cold as a belfry despite the press of bodies and a brazier emitting sulphurous warmth and too much smoke in the middle of the floor. Nevertheless, it served as a damp-dispelling magnet near which the crowd was thickest. Nor was there much other illumination. Lighting consisted of a few carefully placed coaching-lamps directed at the stage. There must be no risk of setting fire to the hay.

BY NOW THE CAST WAS within fifty yards of the barn and beginning to think about falling into line. Okeford's sexton, doing duty as admission-taker, started to close the wagon door; all who were going to attend were surely in already, and the cast would make its entrance from the 'green room' through a narrow door beside the makeshift trestle stage. Peering through dusk and snow, the sexton saw the troupe line up. To his surprise, there seemed to be some pushing and shoving among them, and the one in front, Father Christmas, was having trouble standing straight. It was as well that the cast was 'rehearsing' out of earshot.

''Nif thee do push I again, Charlie Paine, I'll black yr bleeding eyes!' the Turkish Knight told Saint George.

'I'll settle wi' thee after, Ned. 'Sides, 'tweren't I pushed thee, but—Hold up, Fred!—old Fred what stumbled on a rut.'

'Bear a rein on thyself, Ned,' the Saracen still tried to arbitrate. 'Leave 'en bide!'

Saint George couldn't resist adding, 'A rein, an' a bridle besides! Ned's dafter than a mule.'

This prompted the Turkish Knight to plough a firm right hander in the direction of Saint George's head. The latter ducked; the blow connected with Father Christmas's shoulder.

Newcombe yelled 'Gawd!' His vision blocked by his buckled mitre, he lost his balance and his bearings and fell flat in the snow on the road.

Slasher the Valiant Soldier grabbed onto Saint George with a carter's strength while the Saracen wrestled the Turk to the opposite side of Church Lane. 'God help me, Ned, if thee dost start on him again, I'll black thy lights myself.'

'All right, all right, Bill. Leave I bide.'

In the closing door the sexton smiled. The play would be better than usual this year; they were doing offstage rehearsal for a change.

Out in the snow, with order restored, the troupe put aside differences long enough to line up outside the stage door, ready to enter.

'Hold, there,' called the Doctor from near the back. 'Here, Fred, turn thik hat arsy-varsy.' With a little help, Father Christmas turned his mitre round until the damaged portion trailed down the back instead of flapping in his face.

'Lawk, I can see!'

With that, Slasher opened the little door beside the stage, pushed Father Christmas into the barn ahead of them, and the company of mummers filed in.

During the players' impromptu rehearsal in the lane, Mistress Sally Bere, accompanied by two friends, tried to find a seat on a bench near the back, but, village lads being what they are, the young lady was passed forward by an army of strong young arms until, accompanied by a chorus of hoots and whistles, the three girls found themselves front and centre, not quite an arm's length from the stage.

With the brazier warming her back and her cheeks burning red as a rose, young Sally felt herself the hot and blushing focus of all eyes. She wished the disused threshing floor might swallow her whole. With both her suitors on the stage, the audience began to feel—as the sexton had already done—that the entertainment might improve on tradition this year.

Nan Walter asked Sally's left ear, 'What'll tha do, 'an, Sal?'

'I shall stare at my feet. You'll see, I won't even peep at the play!'

Seated on Sally's right, Meg Sturdy offered, 'What dost thee think Charlie'll say?'

'I shan't mind what any of 'en do say. Not Charlie Paine, and nor Ned Acton, neither.'

Nan Walter commented, 'Oh Sal, how I d'envy you. This six month past, you're the talk of Okeford.'

'I'm not walking forth with Charlie nor Ned again, neither!'

This declarative statement was her last, for on the moment a small door at the side of the stage threw open and Fred Newcombe stumbled in. Tripping on the trestle's edge, he arrived centre-stage to a rousing ovation from the house, if a bellow of hoots, whistles and a shower of hazelnut shells can be described as an ovation. Other members of the company entered behind him in order of first lines. The Saracen, better known as Will Butley, brought up the rear. Forgetting to close the door he went back to do it.

'Thee cassen go just yet, 'an, Bill!' came a shout from the back of the hall.

More shells rained down.

Slasher the Valiant Soldier kicked Father Christmas on the shin. 'We'm in, Fred, speak your line!'

'Wassat, Tom?'

From a wag near the back: 'He forgot th' first line.'

Another voice: 'Gi' 'en the spurs again, 'an, Tom. Gi' 'en the spurs!'

'Make room, make room…' the Valiant Soldier hissed.

'Tha'st room enough!' Father Christmas replied.

''Tis thy line do start us, Fred. For Lawk's sake, speak!'

Prompted to action, Father Christmas took a deep breath in and a long step forward. Then, with the stage presence of a sheep-trader at Blandford market, he bawled to the back of the hall:

> 'Make room, make room, my gallants, room! /
> and give us space to rhyme…'

The house roared approval while Father Christmas kept shouting. The lads at the back loved it.

> 'We've come…'

From the lads: 'You was *pushed*!'

'…We've come to show Saint George's play…'

At the mention of Saint George, wags in the gallery started to whistle and hoot, pointing up front to Sally Bere, sitting on the front bench closely examining her shoes.

The thing could have gotten out of hand before it started, but legitimate theatre-goers started to 'Ssh!' the lads at the back and the vicar got to his feet and glared at the rowdies as if to cast them to instant damnation. The racket died to a dull roar.

Father Christmas persisted:

'…upon Midwinter time.'

Father Christmas was glad to finish his lines. He needed a drink. He'd have to wait.

Slasher the Valiant Soldier stepped forward smartly on cue, every bit his part:

'Here I come the Valiant Soldier, /
Slasher is my name, /
With sword and buckler by my side, /
I hope to win the game. /
If any dares to give me battle, /
He shall strive in vain, /
For I shall fight with any foe upon this British plain.'

Slasher brandished his white willow rod at the audience like a sword as if expecting trouble from that quarter. But the vicar had routed the rowdies. The audience was resigned to following the less than scintillating drama on the stage.

Predictably the Turkish Knight took up the challenge, tapping Valiant Soldier on the shoulder with his wand and stepping up beside him in his turn:

'Who is this man with courage bold? /
If his blood's hot, I'll make it cold. On guard!'

Slasher and the Turk set about each other with their wands, *click, clack, click, clack,* in ritualised swordplay with all the drama of a butcher honing his knife on a strap.

Father Christmas stifled a yawn that was taken up by the audience: from year to year the outcome never changed.

'Aargh!' The Turk impaled the Valiant Soldier, who fell dying to the floor. But, never fear, Good Saint George now stepped forward amidst cheers to fight for the cause of Christendom:

> 'I can give some lusty thumps /
> And, like a true born Englishman /
> fight on my legs or on my stumps.'

The louts at the back stood up in anticipation. Something had to happen now that Charlie Paine and Edward Acton looked all set to have a go.

Sure enough, the ritualised *click-clack* of crossed swords had hardly begun before Ned Acton managed to bring his willow rod down sharply on Paine's wrist.

'Ow! You done that on purpose.'

'No I never.'

Guffaws from the crowd. Even the furiously blushing Sally Bere raised her eyes from counting the eyelets in her shoes yet again in time to see both swains make mute appeals to her. Rapidly she looked away again, hopeless in confusion. From the corner of her eye she saw the stylised battle resume till the Turk fell, as scripted, to his knees. He managed to collapse with his head just an arm's length away from his true love.

To Sally's amazement, Meg Sturdy was whispering, 'Who do you fancy, 'an, Sal?'

'Ssh!' Sally Bere was not one to be indelicate, even though decorum had tumbled all about. Acton's head was within earshot, not that he could have overheard the women's exchange, for he was pretending to scream in agony, demanding a doctor in a bellow designed to impress the girls.

Slasher the Valiant Soldier, lying dead on the stage, kicked Father Christmas into action once again. Fred Newcombe, thus cued, bawled:

> 'Is there a doctor to be found /
> to cure this man of his deadly wound?'

The Doctor stepped forward with his horse-barrel of pills:

> 'Wi' this girt barrel you can see /
> I cure all evils that there be.'

There ensued a haggling match between Father Christmas and the Doctor, not about the Turk's wound, but the cost of treating it.

Meanwhile, off-stage: 'Sal, which one do you fancy? I had an idea, see.' Meg Sturdy started trying to bargain a man away from her friend while Father Christmas and the Doctor bellowed at each other and the Turk lay howling in pain.

'Fifty pounds to heal the Turk!' the Doctor shouted.

'Half a crown,' offered Father Christmas. 'Not a penny more.'

'Meg, shush! I can't say. I dunno!'

'Sally, it's important. Look-see, 'tis our life! Thee cassen have the twain.' Meg's dialect grew thicker as the stakes went up.

She got no answer.

'Forty sovereigns,' roared the Doctor.

'Three and sixpence,' countered Santa Claus.

'Sal, please, I think Ned fancies me.'

The mummers mummed, the two girls hissed at each other like a pair of geese, and Saint George, standing to ritual attention, studied the pair of them. They were hatching something down there: they seemed to be comparing him and Ned. He wondered how he'd come out of it. Most of all he wanted to put his boots to Acton's ribs, but this was not the time.

'Sally!' hissed Meg, 'if you was back with Charlie, I'd have Ned again. Don't you see?'

Sally Bere was not slow to catch the germ of the solution which Meg seemed to be offering.

'Forty pounds,' the Doctor bellowed.

'Five shillings,' Father Christmas counter-bid.

The Turk lay yelling in feigned pain.

True love might once again revert to course. But how to make it happen?

'Just say 'Yes', Sal.'

'Thirty pounds!'

'Ten shillings!'

Meg Sturdy's beloved Turk kept screaming.

'Ned and me was going together before the hay-making,' Meg told Sally, furious in her intensity. 'You d'know that! Then we quarrelled and… Ned took up wi' thee.'

'Twenty-five pounds!'

'One pound!'

The Turkish Knight, wondering at the intense, whispered conversation next to his dying ear, ceased shouting and started listening. Saint George, still standing at rigid attention, began connecting pieces of the puzzle and got it wrong.

'Twenty pounds.'

'Done.'

The haggling over, the Doctor stuffed a few dried white peas in the Turkish Knight's mouth. The latter revived, winking at the women whispering together just feet from his head. Saint George gripped his rod, gritted his teeth and looked on.

While the Doctor's miraculous pills worked to restore the Turk, the Saracen got into the act at last, declaiming to Saint George:

> 'The Saracen behold in me: /
> I am the man who'll conquer thee.'

This was followed by another set-to of knife-sharpeners, *click, clack, click, clack…*

...while Sally confessed to Meg, 'All right. I *do* fancy Charlie.'

'We got to do it public-like, so they can't drop us after.'

'Do what?'

'Why, go wi' them. Right here. They got to fight again, like they always do. When 'tis all done and they bow at the end, we run up and you goes to Charlie and I d' go to Ned. Agreed?'

'Meg, I can't. 'Tain't in the play.'

…click, clack, click, clack. The strike of wand on wand, metronomic in its rhythm, was a tradition as old as the play, denoting the passage of seasons, of time, of old years and old lives. *Clack!* With a howl of mock pain the Saracen joined the Turk and the Valiant Soldier, wounded, on the floor.

'Sally, say *yes*, pleeez!'

'Iss!' Sally hissed. But then she reconsidered, having more to add. She tried urgently to get Meg Sturdy's attention, attempting to prevent what ever mad plan was hatching in her head, but Meg was already bent way over the stage, telling the Turkish Knight, 'Neddie, let's make up after! Sal's going with Charlie Paine again!'

'Eh?' What with the Doctor and Father Christmas shouting bids at each other, the Turk caught only the end of the sentence, which was unfortunate.

'Me and Sally fixed it,' Meg added.

Reviving for their final duel, what was Ned Acton to think? He caught Sally smiling at Charlie and he was sure he detected a wink going the other way. He'd fix that stun-poll here and now! No, they'd have to wait till after; the whole tradition of the mummers' cycle was at stake. Turks and Saracens never won. Saint George must always claim the day. And Sally Bere was his now, wasn't she? What did Meg Sturdy mean? Mind you, Meg had been more fun, more easy by half than Sal. And Sally definitely had her eye on Charlie Paine. Oh yes, he'd noticed that, lying there on the floor. Well, he wanted to do Charlie anyway. Why was it always Charlie who was left standing at the end of the mummers' play?

This was the moment when tradition demanded that the Turkish Knight, in evil's last gasp against righteousness, must stagger to his feet, miraculously revived by the Doctor's expensive pills, and make a final, ritual and unsuccessful stab at defeating the forces of Christian virtue in the form of Saint George. Acton determined to make a better show of it this year.

More than common custom had kept the Turk from ploughing Saint George in the teeth during their first bout. Beyond the red and white of Christmas cheer with which the barn was decked, the glitter of coach-lights in performers' eyes, the crowd, the festival, and the manger-like surroundings in the dark old hall, the mummers' play spoke pagan qualities in volumes reaching back to a time before there was a Christmas. If the play itself was not timeless, well, its theme was not modern either. The tradition of celebrating the death of darkness and the midwinter birth of the sun was as old in these parts as Stonehenge. And Saint George represented the New Year, the Sun, the promise of ripening crops and a goodly harvest. Saint George had to win. The fate of their community depended on the myth of it.

The Doctor and Father Christmas were still noisily negotiating a fee for the resurrection of the fallen Saracen when the Turkish Knight got up, picked up his willow rod and made to set about the traditional final duel with Saint George.

Click, clack, click, clack…

'One hundred guineas,' yelled the Doctor.

'Sixpence!' shot back Santa Claus.

'I told Ned, Sal,' Meg hissed. 'When the play is done and over, you and me goes up and hugs our man.'

Sally Bere was on the point of renouncing her station in the human race, but she had enough wit to acknowledge that this might be her only chance to escape her predicament. Either way the future stared her in the face; what must her expression reveal? In between fending off his opponent's strokes, Charlie Paine was glaring down.

The Doctor and Father Christmas moved their auction off to the wings to make room for the affray.

Click, clack, click, clack…

The two protagonists couldn't but notice that the two girls were whispering earnestly as if life itself were at stake. Now the third was joining in.

Saint George, confident in his tradition of victory, put little effort into the ritual struggle until the Turk's blows started falling harder than usual. Left, right, left, right, *click, clack, click, clack…* Ned Acton was angry. His strokes came raining in on his startled opponent until one, harder than the rest, caught Charlie Paine a sharp blow on the shoulder, pricking him to anger in his turn.

Suddenly sticks were thrown aside and the men were scrapping in earnest, wrestling and kicking around the stage. Father Christmas and the Doctor stopped bidding at each other and looked on in awe. Their argument had become redundant: Valiant Soldier and the Saracen, dead till a moment ago, were shifting their own corpses to make way.

There was no containing the rowdies now. The vicar might point and glare all he liked, but the lads around the walls were more like a crowd at a cockfight than a mummers' play.

'Cor, good un there, Ned!'

'Whack 'en, Charlie!'

'A tanner on Acton.'

'Done!'

Nutshells came raining down.

By now the scene resembled a wrestling match at Okeford fair, the contestants struggling around and tripping all over the stage. Informed members of the audience—indeed the cast—became more than a little worried about the outcome. What if the Turkish

Knight won? The Green Man of the woods, of spring, of harvest and fertility must never be bested. The triumph of Saint George over darkness represented the rebirth of every value that a rural community understood. Upright, educated Christian folk who went to church three times on Sunday found themselves distressed by the prospect that the Turkish Knight might win this pagan brawl. Older folk were put in mind of an incident some years before—the Christmas after Waterloo—when the stage gave way and Saint George broke a leg. The following year, England didn't get a summer worthy of the name. By this time, even among the rowdies the prospect of a dark New Year was slowly sinking in.

Then it happened. Wrestling across the stage, Paine and Acton tripped on a crack in the rough boards and fell. Saint George lay still, concussed. The Turk rolled off him, got to his knees and started to stand. The enormity of this appalling outcome infected every body in the house: the place was stilled.

The Turk had one knee drawn up and was raising the other when Fate's frown became a smile. With great presence of mind the Doctor stepped forward, lifted high his horse-barrel of pills, and brought it smartly down on Acton's head. The Turkish Knight dropped stunned to the floor.

The house roared its approval, stamping, shouting…

…while Meg pulled Sally to her feet. 'Come, Sally, *now*, there'll never be a better time.' With that, the two women were on the stage, Meg Sturdy bending over Edward Acton while Sally Bere attended Charlie Paine.

Whistles and laughter threatened to bring down the old barn. Loose straw fell from its manger.

But now the Doctor was bellowing louder than the rest, 'Get 'en up, there. Get 'en on 'is feet!' while Slasher and the Saracen, both supposedly dead, hauled Saint George to his feet and Sally Bere slapped his face gently to bring him around.

The noble warrior was soon fit enough to stand by himself with some support from Mistress Bere, while the Doctor began shouting at Slasher and the Saracen over the roar of the house: 'Lie down! Lie down! You'm dead.'

Whereupon they obediently died, lying next to the still stunned Turk reviving slowly in the pleasant comfort of Meg Sturdy's arms.

In the normal course of events the Doctor would now extract a hundred pounds or so from the worthy Saint George in exchange for restoring life to the dead and wounded, but the Saint was in no shape to give, and the evening was far from normal. Nevertheless, the Doctor extemporised, showering corpses with pills and shouting as how he could 'raise the dead to walk the earth again.'

And he did. Slasher and the Saracen got up sheepishly, restored, and set about helping Mistress Sturdy breathe new life into her Turkish Knight.

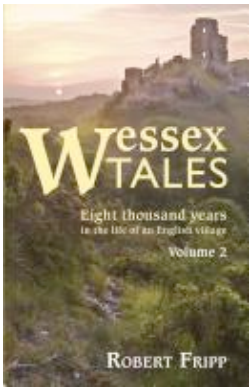
It took some minutes before the laughter subsided and the play returned to the form it had taken in years of yore. At that point, the cast began to sing a closing dirge about the dying of the old year and the raising of the New. The audience hummed along:

> 'Our time is come, the old must pass,
> The New shall lift 'is head up like spring grass.
> Bain't naught to fear, for winter's dead,
> We raise our eyen to the Sun instead.
> Gi' us good fate in the New Year,
> And let our harvest bring good cheer.
> Our words are spoke, our play is done,
> Now lift we up our hearts to the new sun.
> God speed, God speed, This was our play,
> We'll lay him down until next year a day.
> Good fortune may the New Year bring!'

The Turkish Knight, aware of a rustic chorus but still too stunned to know if he enjoyed the bliss of heaven or the pleasures of men, found himself kissing a face which he took, in his abandoned state, to be an angel. Mistress Sturdy kissed him back.

Hazelnuts rained down and even the vicar began to laugh.

All's well as ends well, folk do say. [36]



This is Volume 2 of Wessex Tales, 'Eight thousand years in the life of an English village.' Travel Stone Age woods, the Blackmore Vale, and ramparts of Iron Age hill forts defended by slingers with fist-sized stones. Dorset's land is magical, mystical, down-to-earth. Our characters toil, poach game, reap crops, and venture as soldiers, carters and smugglers. Life perseveres, from the Stone Age to the stresses of the First World War.

Wessex Tales

Volume 2