

THE RAGGED COT INN, HYDE and ITS GHOST STORY



SOME of the most delightful scenery in the Cotswolds may be seen from Minchinhampton Common, a glorious expanse of turf covering a plateau about 600 ft, above sea level, described by *John Halifax* "as such a fresh, free, breezy spot,—how the wind sweeps over it!" It is noted for its golf course and series of ancient intrenchments, so interesting to archaeologists. There is a noted landmark known as "Tom Long's Post" reputed to be the unsanctified grave of a highwayman. Minchinhampton from which the Common derives its name was in olden days a cloth making centre and market town, and it still retains many picturesque old houses and a fine seventeenth century Market House supported on pillars.

Travellers from Cirencester to Minchinhampton pass a small attractive country inn situated on the edge of the Common with the unusual name of "The Ragged Cot." It was probably so named because for many years it was little more than a cottage (it was enlarged and modernised in 1926 by the present owners, The Stroud Brewery Company, Ltd.).

There is a story told * (whether it is founded on fact or is only fiction is unknown) of a man who lived there named Bill Clavers who was a loyal subject of King Charles and fought in his cause in 1745 for which his home and lands were confiscated and he was turned penniless upon the world. He took to the landlord business and

did jobs for his pals, who were mostly gentlemen of the road or smugglers. He claimed to be honest, owing no man anything, paid for everything he bought and every man who did him service. The winter of 1760 was a very hard one, he and his family were starving and he was desperate for money. He therefore arranged with a companion, as needy as himself, to stop and rob the Stroud mail coach and to take life if opposed. His wife heard of this and strove to dissuade him. When the trysting time came he went to his room to prepare and as he stepped out on the landing, his wife, holding their child flung her arm around him declaring he should not go thus. He had drunk brandy many times that day and in sudden anger he thrust her from him and she fell to the hall below. In a delirious state he fled the house and mounted. Bill and his companion stopped the coach that night and each man was the richer by sixty golden guineas besides mail and jewels. It was late when he returned home and on entering the house, which was in darkness, he stumbled across something at the foot of the stairs. In sudden panic he struck a light at the bar and came back to find his wife and child laying there both cold and dead.

Christmas eve 1760 was a night long remembered by the gaffers and gamblers of the district, snow had fallen all day and as night fell two horsemen, wearing long cloaks with many capes and large jack boots, carrying swords and an enormous horse pistol thrust in each holster, could be seen making their way across the Common. Their cocked hats with a cockade of leather denoted them as men in the King's service. Their business was at the Inn which had been shut up for a month, although lights had been seen in a window some nights. Open in the

King's name' called the leader, but got no response. The window was then forced and the two men climbed in and found themselves in the kitchen of the little inn which bore no sign of recent occupation with little furniture and no food visible. The door was locked on the outside. With a dexterous jerk it was thrown open, when there was the report of a pistol and a bullet whizzing past their heads shattered a plate on the dresser. The rays of the lamp showed a half dressed man in the passage outside, with a smoking pistol in his left hand and a drawn sword in his right. In another instant the younger man who had raised his pistol, would have replied, when the man, uttering a shriek, dropped his sword and fell on his knees, burying his face in his hands, which trembled visibly. To the astonished officers there then appeared, moving silently along the passage and between the combatants, the white figure of a woman with a babe at her breast. The face was pale and agonised, and the right arm was extended as if in appeal. It moved across them with fixed eyes, and passing up the staircase it vanished. "Zounds, man!" said the elder to the young constable, whose ashen face proclaimed his terror, "buck up and arrest him. Whether woman or ghost, its gone now." The man was easily secured. In fact, he appeared to have sunk into a condition of apathy, and made no resistance. The snow had ceased falling, and the clear moonlight, streaming in through the broken window, fell now upon a figure strapped to a chair. He made no struggle, but sat like one entranced. A few kegs of brandy of a suspicious character were found, but nothing else, and they proceeded to the bar parlour. The younger man threw open the door, and immediately staggered back, with white lips which with difficulty pronounced the words "Its in there." The elder man,

whose nerves were of a harder nature, went to the door and gazed in. The moonlight illuminated the room, and where its beams fell was a large oaken chest on which was seated the dim outline of a woman in night attire holding a babe. The figure was motionless, the eyes fixed, and there was a red patch on the temple. The man retreated breathlessly and closed the door. Recovering himself, he strode into the kitchen and confronted his prisoner. "Bill Clavers," he said, "who is this woman in there?" The wretched man swayed from side to side and moaned, "Its her and the child." The constable returned to the bar. His teeth were set. Addressing his companion, who was gulping down brandy he said "there's something besides smuggled goods here. I mean to look into that chest, ghost or no ghost. Come along." Seizing the lantern, he thrust open the parlour door. It was tenantless. The moon shed its light now only on the shabby furniture. The officers approached the chest, and wrenching off the hasp raised the lid. Lifting the lantern they gazed down into it, and, with sensations of horror, discovered a body clothed only in a night-dress, while half hidden by the hair which flowed from the woman's head was the body of a little child. They let fall the lid and left the room. The elder man turned the key in the door and dropped it into his pocket. "William Clavers," said he, again confronting his prisoner, "I arrest you in the King's name."

At the Gloucester Assizes Court the prisoner had pleaded "Not Guilty" and stoutly maintained his innocence. Although the identity of the remains found had been clearly proved, the prosecution were unable to produce a scrap of direct evidence or to suggest any plausible theory as to motive. The prisoner's counsel had skilfully made the most of the situation and

was entering upon his peroration when the prisoner was seen to start to his feet, and with pale face and eyes staring into the darkened gloom to the right of the judge's chair, he startled the court by exclaiming, "She is here to condemn me." Falling back into the dock he became insensible. All gazed in the same direction and on the judge's right hand was seen a white figure of a woman with a child in her arms. It remained but a few seconds and then vanished. The judge alone had seen nothing, and after a short adjournment until the prisoner had recovered, proceeded with his summing up. The jury were not long absent. The incident had completely annulled the impression made by the counsel for the defence. "Prisoner at the bar," came the measured tones of the judge, "You have been found guilty. Have you anything to say before sentence of death is pronounced?" The prisoner made no answer, and the words of the judge were repeated to him. He looked up and around as if in a dream and then made a full confession.

No ghosts are to be found at the inn today, but the spirit of good fellowship and a cordial welcome is extended to all who care to visit it.

A.R.S.

* The full story appeared in the Christmas number of the Pall Mall Magazine, December, 1907. The Magazine has been defunct for some years. Ed.

