

The Parish Clerk of Old Challacombe.

(1812 - 1896)

Below the Church of Holy Trinity
Upon a stream and not far from the Bray
There stood an ancient mill and dwelling place
Enshrouded in the trees' and hill's embrace;
A quiet spot, idyllic, but focus
Of a drama that played for sixty years.
The mists, the rains, the balmy summer days,
Autumn's tints and Winter's snows were backdrop
To the frugal life that was endured
By this god-fearing Exmoor family.

10

Here lived the Barrows for those three score
years,
John Howe , the father and Agnes, his wife,
The parents of a family of eight.
In old age the father's face was whiskered,
With eyebrows high-arched, feathered at the tip,
And shining pate, bright as a billiard ball,
Hedged with two tufts of hair on either side;
His brown eyes sparkled and nothing missed
As they rolled their gaze with piercing fixity.
Short he was in stature but quite stocky,

20

His hands, though fine of form, had been much
used;
His clothes were heavy and of country style,
A buttoned waistcoat wrapped around his chest
And a frock coat that hung down to his knees;
His trousers patched and baggy led the eye
To well-cobbled leather upon his soles.
He never wore a collar in his life
But round his neck a scarf of black and white,
Which was the hallmark of his honest garb.

Of similar practicality and taste

30

Were Agnes' clothes; she wore a dark cloak, shawl
And full length dress with buttons at the waist;
Clean cuffs set off the fingers of her hands
And a ruffler the features of her face,
A picture of grim determination;
A bonnet sat upon her head and plaited
Hair, parting in the middle, framed her face.

For all those years the Parish Clerk was John,
A well-known and respected man who used

His brains to help the farmers round about.

40

He had a way with words that mesmerized
His neighbours; a rich Devonian accent
That enthralled all visitors to those parts.

Though poor, he kept his fingers on the pulse
And ruled, a self-appointed autocrat.

He helped to calculate the parish rate
And to distribute it to the needy:

He was a fine surveyor of the farms
And planned the restoration of the Church:
In his copper-plate hand he drew up wills,

50

Set down minutes in the parish ledger
And in Census years it was he who penned
The records of the entire district.
A trusted servant was he in his work.

Another of his jobs was schoolmaster,
A self-taught old style village pedagogue,
He drilled generations of her children.

A mill-house room was set up for his school
With wooden seats upon a wooden floor,
A blackboard too and high chair for himself

60

To oversee his charges sat below.

A homespun philosopher at his ease

With science, music and a love of books,

By trade he also was a shoemaker

Who cobbled the boots while he taught his school.

In truth he was a legend in those parts,

Remembered for his quaint and unique ways.

Challacombe Church was Holy

Trinity,

A grey stone edifice with fine tower,
It looked down on the vale and stream below.

70

Within, its walls were plain and unadorned,

No touch of colour or memorial stone

Relieved that arid white-washed nakedness.

Unpainted pews of deal filled up the nave,

And at the altar end a reading desk

With Bible, and pulpit for the rector.

The choir filled the north side of the chancel

And opposite them the rectory guests,

Eye to eye across six feet of the aisle,

They often vied for superiority.

The leader of the music was John Howe

80

Who with three sons in close support held sway;
The rector did not dare to intervene,
His flock sat dumb and merely watched the show.
Beneath his seat the maestro kept his flute,
And when the time was ready took it up
To sound the tune which he held in his head.

With husky bass he blasted forth the words,
Followed close by the tenor of his son
-- A bricklayer of bucolic aspect -
Who with monstrous, coarse, loud voice filled the
church. 90

In concert with him was his brother,
A youth with freckled face and fiery hair
Who piped a shrill metallic alto.
The eldest son, a stone mason by trade,
-- A dull Hogarthian peasant type -- gave them
A solid tuneful flute accompaniment.
The metrical psalms of 'Brady and Tate'
Were often the choice of their repertoire.
As the music swelled John Howe would sway
And tap out the time with his hob-nailed boots;
100

With wagging head and rolling eyes he stared
Around the nave, the chancel and the roof,
Especially when the chosen hymn ran thus:

"Oh! Let them shout and sing
With joy and furious mirth".

At the conclusion of each melody
He mopped his brow with coloured handkerchief,
And sat contented with his rendering.

Thus did John Howe hold sway for twenty years,
Unassailed as parish clerk, schoolmaster
And leader of the music in the church;

110

There was no threat to his supremacy.
Things prospered in a mean and modest way
But life was hard on Exmoor at that time.
Clouds of change began to rumble which were
To revolutionize their well set ways;
Decisions made in distant parts upset
The steady evolution of their lives.
The government built a school and with it
Came a teacher into the community,
A bright young miss, well qualified and keen

120

To fill the hearts and minds of country folk
With reading, writing and arithmetic.
She drained the scholars from the old mill school
And so usurped the old man's livelihood.
It must have been a sad and rueful day
When silence fell upon the abandoned room.
A further change to strike the parish came
When a brand new harmonium was installed
To embellish the music of the church.
Who would play this instrument of the age
130
And so end the reign of flute and flautist?

None other than Miss

Blatchford, school mistress,

Who henceforth accompanied the singing.
John Barrow pretended not to notice,
But in truth it must have shamed his honour
And blighted his standing in the parish.

Though bowed, he did not lose his dignity,
For at school, after the pupils had gone,
He taught the gentlemen farmers' sons
Such subjects as the clever miss could not.
140

They learnt to calculate the slates required
To fit a roof of given measurement,
Or the quantity of seed for a field
Of very irregular shape and size.
He also gave instruction on the flute
To a young man staying at the rectory.
In the deserted schoolroom, with his charge,
He sat on his cobbler's stool, with well thumbed
Music books beside him on his bench;
He entertained with flute and piccolo.
150

The poor light of the tallow dips played on
His spectacles and shiny swaying head.
In reverie he played his repertoire:
"Drink to me only with thine eyes", echoed
Through that empty hollow and ghostly gloom.
Tune followed tune as he became entranced:
"The Last Rose of Summer", "I Know a Bank",
"In a Cottage by a Wood", "Believe Me",
And most appropriately that German air,
"The Mill-wheel", all sad and plaintive ditties.
160

In church he clung on to his dignity,
Although he no longer called the tune.

When Challacombe Revel was revived
And festivals of song began to thrive,
He and his sons joined in the larger choir
And performed in their time honoured fashion.
Still, he swayed his head and rolled his large
brown eyes,
The silent congregation sat in awe.

Though something of a tyrant in his time
And rather quaint in the manner of his being,
170
In death he triumphed where in life he failed;
Outside the doorway of the church, there stands
His tombstone, set on the pathway's right hand
side,
For all to view as they approach the church.

Ron Tucker

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