

2. WATERCRESS.



1864

Jack Wells hunched his shoulders and turned up the collar of his coat against the cold wind and spitting rain. He sat down on a rock and started to fling loose stones into the river.

"Jack, Jack. Let Brat throw too."

Jack carefully ignored his three-year-old sister. He was so angry that Mam had made him watch her; he would not smile or even look her way. He'd been glad enough that morning, when his mother had said that he might miss his lessons, for he dreaded the strict old dame, with her sharp cane and angry voice. But even school was better than having to play nursemaid, and he might as well have gone. What he'd really wanted was to spend the day working with his dad, but it was not to be. His dad had gone wading up the freezing cold River Loxley to gather watercress that scraped a living for the family.

Dad would be up past the big new dam, and here was Jack turned out of the house to mind Brat with her whining voice and runny nose. Mam was hard at work dealing with the washing, while the girls cleaned the cottage.

Jack reminded himself that there were bad things about gathering watercress too, especially on a cold March day like this one. Last time he'd gone with his dad, his feet had turned numb, as icy water seeped into his boots. His hands had gone numb too for a while and his chapped fingers, had blazed and itched. But however bad the discomforts of gathering, at least there was freedom to go slipping and sliding and jumping from rock to rock. He could put up with the scolding that would come from Mam.

"Not more clothes for me to scrub and dry," she'd complain. "What I've done to deserve all this scrubbing and drying out of folks' clothes, I don't know."

He smiled to himself as he thought of it. It would be worth listening to that, just to have a day of freedom.

Jack was getting very cold and stiff crouched out there on the riverbank. He longed for them to hurry up with the work, and let them back inside. Angry thumps of wood banging against wood came from the upstairs of the cottage, where Becky had been sent to sweep the bedroom. Jack looked up at the sounds, and Becky's face showed at the window. She saw him and stuck her head right out, pulling a rude face.



"Stare cat, stare cat.

What d'yer think yer staring at?"

She bellowed it out of the window, not caring that Mam might hear. Then she repeated it for Brat's benefit.

"Little Brat, little brat,

What d'yer think yer staring at?"

Sure enough the cottage door opened and Mam appeared through a cloud of steam. Her hair was damp and sticking out wildly from her cap; bright red arms showed beneath sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Mam was always vexed on washdays. She twisted round so that she could see the upstairs window.

"Hold tha noise lady, or I'll be up them stairs and after thee. Keep your energy for shifting muck." She shook her fist up at Becky, who vanished from the window and resumed her banging. Mam gave a furious glance towards Jack and his sister.

"Can't we come in? It's perishing cold and Brat wants to be in the river!" Jack begged.

"No you can't! And DON'T call that child Brat," she told him, slamming the door behind her and returning to her work.

"Hah!" Jack gave a nasty laugh.

"Hah!" Brat imitated him, trying to get some sort of response. She ran on thin legs towards him and threw herself upon his back.



"Kiss Brat, kiss Brat."

Jack shoved her away, and turned at the sound of a gig. He was surprised that anyone would be wanting to drive out in this bitter wind, then he saw that it was Mr Gunson the water company' man, off to inspect his fine, new reservoir and dam.

"Horsey, horsey, giddy up." Brat still struggled to please him, but Jack kept his face grim and blank.

Then the rain came on heavily... driving rain carried by the wind. That was it. Jack had had enough; he wasn't hanging around outside anymore. He headed for the house, Brat running at his heels.

He thumped on the door and shouted, "'Tis raining like mad. You'll have to let us in or there'll be more clothes to get dry."

His mother opened the door, clicking her tongue with annoyance.

"All right. Get in quick!"

Jack sighed and settled down by the steaming clothes that were draped around the fire. It was an angry day. Everyone was angry. Why did there have to be days like this?

Later that evening, when the girls had gone upstairs to bed, Jack thought he heard the sound of a horse galloping towards Sheffield Town, along the riverbank. He got up from his fireside couch and fought his way through clothes and rags to the window. He was still grumpy. The day had gone from bad to worse. Mam had insisted on going out herself to meet their dad, and help him carry back the load of watercress. The whole family would be selling bunches at Sheffield market in the morning.

"Let ME go and meet him," Jack had begged. "I've done it afore. I'm thirteen aren't I, old enough to go walking up past the dam messen."

"No!" Mam told him angrily. "I've got to get out of this house; or there'll be damage done!" And before he'd had chance to do more complaining, she'd flung her cloak around her shoulders and was off. So he was left once again to watch Brat, asleep in her crib beside his couch and turn the washing as it dried. Surely Mam couldn't be as desperate to get out of the house as he was!

Jack shivered as he looked out of the window. It was a filthy night, with a bitter wind and the cold beating through the glass. He could hear the sudden whoosh and patter of slicing rain. Perhaps after all, he had the best of it there in the steamy warmth. He frowned as the sound of a horse's hooves faded into the distance. It wasn't unusual to hear horses at this time of night, but there was a sense of urgency about the lone horseman galloping off towards Sheffield, that bothered him.

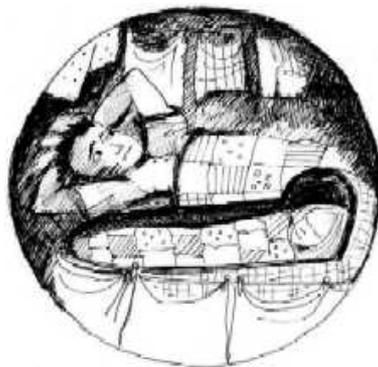
He sighed and crept back to the warm fireside. That was the one good thing about being the oldest lad and sent to sleep downstairs. He'd felt miserable when he'd first been turfed out of the big, sagging upstairs bed that he'd shared with his sisters and told that growing lads must sleep below. But now, the comforting glow from the embers did him good, despite the irritating drip-drop that came from the damp washing. Clothes, shirts, petticoats and rags hung from the drying rack and from the line slung across the room. More washing dripped from the table, the chairs, and even from the highest cupboard, stacked with Mam's best plates.

Jack sat by the fire and dozed, but then again heard the sound of a horse galloping fast. He opened his eyes wide with a jerk. Brat stirred in her sleep

and murmured. What was it about tonight? What were folk up to? He went to the window again, just in time to see the fast disappearing shape of a gig driven at speed. It looked like Mr. Gunson driving up to the reservoir once more. It couldn't be him again: not twice in one night.



He stared into the dark after the carriage had gone, but there was nothing to see, just the black shapes of the trees swaying in the wind. He began to get cold. Might as well get settled for the night. He went to lie down on the couch, pulling the warm wool rug around him.



Horses galloped through his dreams, with thundering hooves; then suddenly he woke with a startled jump. Jack looked around the room, but everything seemed still and calm. The washing still dripped and the fire gave out good heat. Why were people riding about so late at night when decent folk needed their sleep? Jack turned over and settled down again, pulling the rug up to his chin.

Suddenly there was more noise. Not horses this time, but voices shouting and the sound of running feet. Someone hammered loudly on the door. Jack swung his feet down to the ground and pulled on his shirt.

"All right, all ri..." he started to say.

A voice bellowed, "It's coming! Look out! Dam's broke!" Then running footsteps sounded further on and frantic knocking in the distance.

Jack flung open the door, but there was nobody there: nothing but wild wind, soaking rain and a strange distant roar. Jack closed the door again. What was coming? What dam had broken? It couldn't be that big new dam ... it couldn't, but then ... what was that roaring noise? He couldn't think that he'd ever heard anything quite like it before. It grew louder as he listened. Almost as though the wind had found itself a beast-like voice and howled and roared through the night.

Brat was awake and fretting in her crib.

Jack couldn't think. A sense of urgency gripped him. Something WAS very wrong. He'd get himself dressed properly and go upstairs to wake his sisters. It was while he sat on the couch to pull on his boots that he saw it, ... out of the corner of his eye - a dark shadow creeping across the floor, spreading round the chair legs. It slid towards the hearth. Mam's rag rug, usually bright with colours in the light of the fire, had turned grey.

Jack looked about and stared. Mud-dark water was pouring fast into the house, turning the clean washing foul. The strange sound changed from howling to thunder, with sharp cracks like pistol shots. Suddenly the cottage door began to shake. Then with a deafening whoosh and thud it crashed down into the room, forced from its hinges by a wave of solid water. Mam's washing was ripped down. The fire turned to choking steam, and before he could do anything, the couch carried Jack, shooting up to the ceiling. Jack heard one loud, desperate howl from Brat; then all went silent and black.

The filthy night had come inside!

When he opened his eyes, Jack could see nothing. His head ached above his right ear. He put his hand up to touch it, groaning aloud with pain. Where was he? What had happened?

A faint whimpering from across the room brought it all back to him and he clung with sickening fear to the rocking couch that still carried him. He was cold and naked, his unfastened shirt gone. He'd never been so cold in his life.

Slowly he lifted up his head, trying to see. He couldn't see much, but there was something. A small patch of dim light, ... moonlight. That must be the top of the window. Water had risen almost to the ceiling. Was there more still coming in? He could hear the small hiccuping sounds of Brat's frightened breathing. She was still there somewhere and not drowned.

Gradually his eyes got used to the dimness and he began to see some light shapes: Mam's washing twisted and torn, hanging from the top of the window. A wide dark shape that bobbed beside him and reflected the gleam of moonlight was the tabletop. A boulder slid across from one side to the other and plopped into the water. What looked like a branch from a tree floated beside it ... and books ... schoolbooks, the pages shredded and drifting loose from the binding. Whatever it was that had wrecked his home, it had got his school too.

A small cry came from Brat. Jack thought that he could see the dark shape of the crib, on the other side of the room and something white that moved inside it.

"Braa ..at," he whispered. Somehow knowing that he must talk low and gentle to her.

He was answered by a faltering whimper, and more hiccuping sobs.

"Keep still Brat. It's all right... Jack's coming to get you."

He wondered if he could manage to steer the couch over towards her. He put out his arm to reach the table, but the couch wobbled wildly, so that he had to pull himself back and cling on tight, while it steadied again.

He could see Brat's white face clearer now. Despite the scary tipping of the couch, he was nearer to her. Her arms waved inside the floating crib.

"Keep still Brat. Be a good lass and keep still."

He dipped his arm purposefully into the water, trying to use it like an oar to push himself along. This time he ignored the tipping and waited calmly for it to subside. He was much closer now; he could almost stretch out his hand and catch hold of the wooden cradle.

Brat sat still as he'd told her, whimpering gently, but the bottom of her crib was dark with water. It slopped around her skinny legs and crept towards her stomach. He stopped, his arm stretched out towards her.

What could he do? At any moment she would sink. Just the slightest touch and the whole crib would go down. He took a deep breath, then lurched towards her, knowing that he'd lose the couch. As he touched the wooden edge of the crib, it sank like a stone.



Jack frantically fought to keep his head above water, grabbing at anything within reach. Foul tasting water filled his mouth and ears while he thrashed his arms and legs in panic. His hand caught on something hard and solid above his head and he hung on to it tightly. Jack shook water from his eyes, seeing Brat's cotton nightgown floating before him. Below it he caught a faint glimmer of silver - Brat's hair. He grabbed for it with his free hand. The fine baby hair slipped through his fingers like fish. He grabbed madly again; he felt as though that silvery skein was the most precious thing in the world.

His fingers caught tight in a strand and he heaved Brat up, coughing and spluttering as she came. He almost wanted to laugh, he was so glad to have her spitting dirty water into his face. It was only then that he turned to see in the dim light that the solid thing that held them both was Mam's best plate cupboard. Dad had built it and set it firmly into the wall, high above the reach of small, careless hands. It was so close to the ceiling that Mam had to stand on a chair to reach it.

Holding tight to Brat, Jack heaved himself up so that he could see inside. Mam's best plates were smashed. He strained hard, trying to lift Brat up towards the shelf.

"Climb up Brat. Climb up onto the shelf."

Still panting and coughing, she held her dripping fingers up towards the cupboard and gripped the edge. Jack lifted again so that she could haul herself up and get her knee onto the shelf. She climbed gingerly in amongst the smashed china.

"Mammy cross," she said, holding out a broken piece to Jack.

Again Jack wanted to laugh. "Very cross," he agreed. "Throw it in the water! Throw it all down!"

Brat did as she was told with relish, but at the end she brought out one blue willow pattern dinner plate that was whole.

"Stop," yelled Jack. He heaved himself up out of the water and with Brat pulling at his hair to help, he somehow managed to fit himself into the cupboard beside her.



They set the one undamaged plate safely against the back wall of the cupboard, then Jack bent himself round to make himself as comfortable as possible inside the awkward square shape. Brat curled up on his front, her arms clinging tightly around his neck. Jack pulled the cupboard door closed, sealing them both inside, in hopes that it might bring warmth. Although they both still shivered and their teeth chattered, a faint patch of warmth began to grow where their skin touched.

Brat sighed. "Brat loves thee Jack," she whispered.

Mr and Mrs Wells took refuge from the storm in the shepherd's shelter up beyond the dam. In the morning they set out for home, hurrying to get the fresh watercress to market in time, grateful that the weather had turned calm.

As they passed the broken dam, all was still and calm, so that they did not notice immediately that the wall was breached and the water gone.

Suddenly Mr Wells stopped and caught his wife by the arm. "What the blazes?"

Mrs Wells stood open mouthed. "But what has happened? Where has all the water gone?"

Then a terrible understanding dawned on them.

"Down the valley," they muttered.

"To our home!"

Without a word Mrs Wells dropped her great bundle of watercress and ran; her husband did the same.

The watercress gatherers home was flooded. Water went right up to the upstairs windows, but to the desperate parents the children leaning out of them was a wonderful sight.

Mam waded up to her armpits towards them, but then had to stop. "Are you all safe?" she bellowed across the dirty water.

"Oh Mam," Becky cried. "We haven't got Brat and we haven't got Jack."

Mr and Mrs Wells begged the help of a boatman to take their children safely from the top windows, across to dry land.

"Oh Mam," Becky whispered. "What has happened to our little Brat and Jack?"

Mam could only shake her head and weep.

A whole day and night passed while the waters slowly sank and the following morning the family managed to wade back in through the door of their home. Doors, furniture and crockery were overturned and smashed. The whole place smelt foul, but Mam did not care about any of that.

"Brat!" she cried. "Jack? Where's my little Brat?"

There was no sign of either child.

Mr Wells hugged his poor wife. "I fear they're gone."

Then Becky pointed up to the high cupboard that was still closed tightly. "I heard a thump," she said. "Up there."

"Quick, quick," Mam called frantically. "Brat! My Brat!"

Mr Wells sought amongst the mess and found a solid, unbroken, upturned chair. He set it firmly beneath the cupboard and climbed up. With a huge tug, the door swung open, and two sleepy, naked children moved and opened their eyes.

"They're safe! They're safe!" the family cried.

"Hand me down my baby. Hand me down my Brat," cried Mam.

"Don't call her Brat!" said Jack. "She's got a good name ... you give it her. Our little Cressida, you call her that."

Author's Note.

On March 11th 1864 the Dale Dyke Reservoir, near Bradfield, broke its embankment and the water rushed down the valley towards Sheffield. Two hundred and forty people were killed.

Amongst the records of devastation, is mentioned a man called Wells, who got his living by selling watercress. The man was away from home with his wife. When they returned they found the lower floor of their cottage submerged. Four children upstairs were able to call out from the upstairs window. A boy of thirteen, and his three-year-old sister, had been downstairs and they were supposed drowned. When eventually the floodwaters had receded, enough for a search to be made, the two children were discovered in a high cupboard. They were naked and huddled together, fast asleep and quite unharmed. (This story was published in the YORKSHIRE JOURNAL Spring 1994)

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