

THE HOUSE OF BLUE DRAGONS

by Geoffrey Trease

The scene is Dorset, 1807. The vicar's children, Andrew and Sarah, have warned the local revenue officer, Captain Taylor, that the smugglers are planning a run at Barbary Chine. Next morning the children learn that the smugglers had carried out their plan.

11. Who can be trusted?

"At Barbary Chine?" cried Sarah. "That's what they say, miss." The maid laughed and added quickly: "Course, I wouldn't know aught about that. I don't have naught to do wi' smugglers. Parson wouldn't like it now, would 'ee?"

Andy made a face at his sister behind Dora's back. His look showed the disgust he was feeling. First, there was the sharp disappointment that after all their efforts and their warning to Captain Taylor, the run had taken place successfully—and at the very place and time expected. What on earth had Captain Taylor and the dragoons been doing to allow it?

Secondly, he did not believe Dora was quite sincere when she pretended to disapprove of the smugglers. After a week or two in Midport, Andy was beginning to feel that most of the local population were in sympathy with them—if not actively helping them.

If old Bannister, the sexton, had allowed the crypt to be used as a store for smuggled goods, it was not impossible that a maid at the vicarage should also know more than she was willing to admit. Had not Dora tried to persuade his mother not to let the children sleep in the bedrooms overlooking the churchyard? And, when that failed, hadn't she tried to frighten Sarah and himself with her ghost-stories? Anything, in fact, to stop them from finding out about the the crypt until its illegal contents had been safely removed.

As Captain Taylor had said yesterday, you could not trust anyone in Midport. Not even sextons or vicarage servants, not even romantic young poets from London like Mr. Collingwood, not even—not even riding officers in the Revenue service, like Captain Taylor!

This startling thought did not strike Andy until he had begun to eat his breakfast. He nearly

choked as a result. Sarah gaped at him across the table, and Mr. Hunt broke off an angry speech about the smugglers to ask him what was the matter.

"N-nothing, Father! I-just a—c-crumb!"

"Well, as I was saying, the impudence of it! Not only do these people break the law themselves, but they imagine that every one else is prepared to do the same. They actually come here in the middle of the night, to the vicarage, and leave a present."

"It was a very nice present," said Mrs. Hunt with a wistful smile. "Tea, and some beautiful French lace, not to mention the two bottles of brandy."

"Temptations of the devil," said the vicar firmly. "If we drank one cup of that tea—never mind the brandy!—we should be no better than the rest."

"What will you do with it, Father?" asked Sarah.

and brought it back empty, with the captain's compliments and thanks to their father.

"Can't we see him for a moment?" Andy said.

The woman shook her head. "No, sir, I'm afraid the captain's very much occupied this morning."

"I am sure he is," said Andy under his breath.

Sarah said, rather boldly: "Perhaps he's still in bed? I expect he was up half the night, wasn't he, chasing the smugglers?"

At this, the servant looked surprised. "Nay, the captain never stirred out last night. How was he to know? He only heard about Barbary Chine at breakfast-time. My, he did seem vexed!"

The children came away puzzled.

Effect of taxes

"So he didn't even try to catch them!" said Sarah as they went back through the cobbled streets.

"He's been bought," said Andy darkly. "Bribery and corruption! I can see now why Father gets so wild. It isn't just that people dodge the taxes and the Government loses money. It's the effect it has on their characters. Even officers and gentlemen—even clergymen, I expect, now and again, if they're not as strict as Father!"

"It seems hopeless. If you can't trust anybody at all, what's the use of trying to do anything?"

"And that's the very worst part of the whole thing!" Andy turned on his sister almost fiercely. "Giving up—saying 'what's the use?' if the honest people give up even trying, well—!" He paused, at a loss for words.

"You needn't bite my head off! But what more can we do?"

"Find out some more details about Mr. Poetical Collingwood!" "How?"

Andy's plan

Andy considered for a few moments with knitted brows. "I'd like to get inside that cottage of his and look round."

"Inside? But I don't see—"

"It might be possible. Remember, Dora's auntie goes over every morning to cook and tidy up."

"Yes, but—"

"Dora said that Mr. Collingwood often slept late after his night walks and didn't get up till his dinner was on the table. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but didn't she say something about the key being kept under the window-ledge?"

"She did! That's how her auntie gets in!"

"If that key is always put back there—if it's not only there in the mornings—"

"Andy! You're not planning to go there again in the middle of the night?"

Sarah sounded anxious. Remembering the alarms of their last visit to the deserted village, she was not keen to repeat the experience.

"No need," said Andy impatiently. "I expect Mr. Collingwood goes out in the daytime. We've got to watch the place a bit, that's all. The afternoon, say. We'll have a word with Dora—only we'll have to seem terribly casual. She may know something about his habits."

They were in luck, as it happened. But, as Sarah said afterwards, they were due for a little luck, after their recent disappointments. As soon as Andy began his casual remark to Dora, "Does your auntie go to that poet man every day of the week?" the maid answered:

"Every day, wet or fine. Unless Mr. Collingwood be away for a night or two. She weren't goin' today. The gentleman told her yesterday. He were off on some visit, he said. There wouldn't be no bed to make today and he'd send word when he wanted her again."

The children could hardly hide their delight. They slipped out and discussed the matter in whispers.

"Too good a chance to miss," said Andy.

"It isn't wrong, is it? I mean, if this man is breaking the law, it isn't like going into an ordinary house—"

"Course it isn't."

As soon as dinner was over, they set out along the cliffs.

"We may not find any clues," Andy warned her. "I mean, if he lets Dora's aunt have the run of the cottage, he won't leave a lot of evidence lying about."

"She probably can't read, though. Not many of these country women can."

Into the cottage

They had already decided that, if they came upon anything suspicious, it would be no use reporting it to Captain Taylor. Either he was in league with the smugglers himself or at least was too lazy to take action. The only thing would be to send the information to some higher officer, perhaps even to the Government in London. If it came to that, they would simply have to bring their father into the affair. They would not know what to do alone.

All went smoothly. They reached the deserted village in the cove and found Mr. Collingwood's cottage looking as lifeless as the

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Sarah makes a strange discovery in Mr. Collingwood's cottage

"Hand it over to the Revenue officer, of course. After breakfast, you and Andrew can take the stuff down to this Captain Taylor at his lodgings. I can't think what the fellow's doing, allowing this sort of thing to happen under his very nose."

"Nor can I," said Andy with deep feeling.

He had never felt keener to carry out an errand for his father. It would give him an excuse to call on Captain Taylor again and perhaps find out what had gone wrong last night.

An hour later the children presented themselves at the bow-windowed lodging-house overlooking the harbour. The servant took in the basket with the goods in it,



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