

TALES FROM THE TELLING-HOUSE

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Tales from the telling-house by R. D. Blackmore

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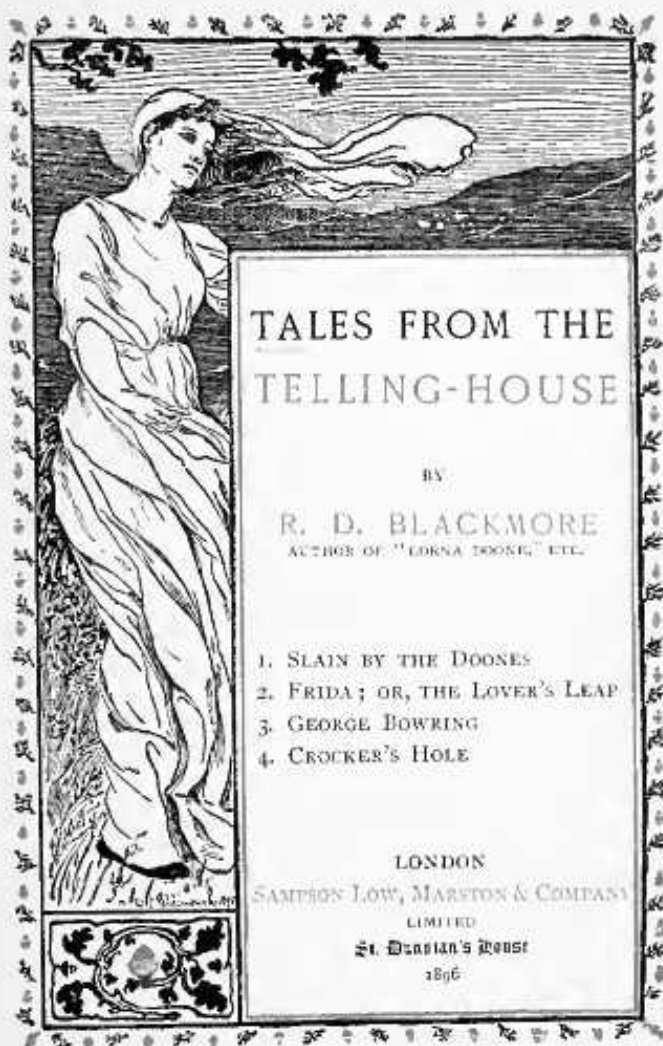
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R. D. BLACKMORE

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TELLING-HOUSE

BY
R. D. BLACKMORE
AUTHOR OF "LORNA DOONE," ETC.

1. SLAIN BY THE DOONES
2. FRIDA; OR, THE LOVER'S LEAP
3. GEORGE BOWRING
4. CROCKER'S HOLE

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PREFACE.

SOMETIMES of a night, when the spirit of a dream flits away for a waltz with the shadow of a pen, over dreary moors and dark waters, I behold an old man, with a keen profile, under a parson's shovel hat, riding a tall chestnut horse up the western slope of Exmoor, followed by his little grandson upon a shaggy and stuggy pony.

In the hazy folds of lower hills, some four or five miles behind them, may be seen the ancient Parsonage, where the lawn is a russet sponge of moss, and a stream tinkles under the dining-room floor, and the pious rook, poised on the pulpit of his nest, reads a hoarse sermon to the chimney-pots below. There is the home not of rooks alone, and parson, and dogs that are scouring the moor; but also of the patches of hurry we

can see, and the beves of bleating haste, converging by force of men and dogs towards the final *rendezvous*, the autumnal muster of the clans of wool.

For now the shrill piping of the north-west wind, and the browning of furze and heather, and a scollop of snow upon Oare-oak Hill, announce that the roving of soft green height, and the browsing of sunny hollow, must be changed for the durance of hurdled quads, and the monotonous munch of turnips. The joy of a scurry from the shadow of a cloud, the glory of a rally with a hundred heads in line, the pleasure of polishing a coign of rock, the bliss of beholding flat nose, brown eyes, and fringy forehead, approaching round a corner for a sheepish talk, these and every other jollity of freedom—what is now become of them? Gone! Like a midsummer dream, or the vision of a blue sky, pastured—to match the green hill—with white forms floating peacefully; a sky, where no dog can be, much

less a man, only the fleeces of the gentle flock of heaven. Lackadaisy, and well-a-day! How many of you will be woolly ghosts like them, before you are two months older!

My grandfather knows what fine mutton is, though his grandson indites of it by memory alone. "Ha, ha!" shouts the happier age, amid the bleating turmoil, the yelping of dogs, and the sprawling of shepherds; "John Fry, put your eye on that wether, the one with his J. B. upside down, we'll have a cut out of him on Sunday week, please God. Why, you stupid fellow, you don't even know a B yet! That is Farmer Passmore's mark you have got hold of. Two stomachs to a B; will you never understand? Just look at what you're doing! Here come James Bowden's and he has got a lot of ours! *Shep* is getting stupid, and deaf as a post. *Watch* is worth ten of him. Good dog, good dog! You won't let your master be cheated. How many of ours, John Fry? Quick now! You can tell, if

you can't read ; and I can read quicker than I can tell."

"Dree score, and vower Maister ; 'cardin' to my rackonin'. Dree score and zax it waz as us toorned out, zeventh of June, God knows it waz. Wan us killed, long of harvest-taime ; and wan tumbled into bog-hole, across yanner to Mole's Chimmers."

"But," says the little chap on the shaggy pony, "John Fry, where are the four that ought to have R. D. B. on them? You promised me, on the blade of your knife, before I went to school again, that my two lambs should have their children marked the same as they were."

John turns redder than his own sheep's-redding. He knows that he has been caught out in a thumping lie, and although that happens to him almost every day, his conscience has a pure complexion still. "Twaz along of the rains as washed 'un out." In vain has he scratched his head for a finer lie.

“Grandfather, you know that I had two lambs, and you let me put R. D. B. on them with both my hands, after the shearing-time last year, and I got six shillings for their wool the next time, and I gave it to a boy who thrashed a boy that bullied me. And Aunt Mary Anne wrote to tell me at school that my two lambs had increased two each, all of them sheep; and there was sure to be a lot of money soon for me. And so I went and promised it right and left, and how can I go back to school, and be called a liar? You call this the *Telling-house*, because people come here to tell their own sheep from their neighbours’, when they fetch them home again. But I should say it was because they tell such stories here. And if that is the reason, I know who can tell the biggest ones.”

With the pride of a conscious author, he blushes, that rogue of a John Fry blushes, wherever he has shaved within the last three weeks of his false life.