Opening extract from

Cue for Treason

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1. Dawn is Dangerous

I ASKED, weren't we taking the pistol, or anyhow the long, murderous-looking pike which has hung across our broad kitchen chimney ever since I can remember? I was disappointed when my father whispered, 'No,' and more than disappointed – in fact, I felt mad – when Tom said, in that sneering superior way that elder brothers have:

'What do you think this is, kid – a raid against the Scots? Or do you fancy you're marching against the Spaniards?'

I was glad it was pitch dark in the kitchen where we stood whispering. There wasn't a glimmer from the fire, though the fire has never gone out in my lifetime, nor for a few years before that. But, as usual, Mother had covered it with slabs of black, damp peat before we went to bed, and it wouldn't show a gleam till morning, when one poke would stir it into a cheerful blaze.

I was glad it was dark, so that Tom couldn't see my face. I was getting tired of the way he made fun of me.

Why shouldn't we go armed? There *was* danger in what we had decided to do. Otherwise, why were we creeping out of the house in the middle of the night, like foxes round a sheep-pen?

'Leave the boy alone,' said my father in his deep whisper. 'No more words till we're clear of home, or we'll be waking your mother and the girls.'

'Doesn't Mother –' I began.

'Sh!' said Tom importantly, like the beadle in church on Sundays. I had the satisfaction of tapping his shin as we groped our way through the door, and he daren't say a word. He was only sixteen, after all, and Dad would have leathered him as readily as he would me, if need arose.

It was lighter when we got outside. The full moon had risen now above the crest of the fells, and all the upper air was bright, though our valley was still like a pool of darkness. The silver light slanted across the valley, high above our heads, and struck the wild precipices of Blencathra mountain, showing up the black gulleys as though their shadows were splashed on with ink. Every minute, as the moon climbed higher, the shadow-

line dropped a little down the mountainside, like water ebbing away, and I knew that by the time we got to Sir Philip's wall there would be ample light for what we had to do.

The dog rose silently from the threshold as we stepped into the soft midsummer air. Not a bark, not a growl – he knew our steps. My father hesitated, then grunted something, and Snap's tail drooped. He gave a long, soft sigh, and curled up again, burying his nose in his bushy tail.

If Snap had gone with us that night, as he wanted to, I should never have come into the peril of death, and this story would never have been told. But it's no good crying over spilt milk, and perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing after all.

We walked down in single file, without speaking a word. There's a stream at the bottom – becks we call them in Cumberland – and you cross it by flat granite slabs, which in winter are often under water, though on a July night like that they stood a foot clear of the frothy surface. When we got that far, we knew the rush and gurgle of the beck would drown our voices, so we could talk without whispering.

'Your mother would only worry,' said my father, 'in any case, the fewer who know about

tonight's work the better. Then, if questions are asked, the fewer lies will need to be told.'

I felt rather pleased when he said that, about 'the fewer who knew the better'. Though I was only fourteen, I had been counted in with the men. They could say what they liked, but there *was* a certain amount of danger. Sir Philip was a bad enemy to cross, though up to that time none of us knew just how bad an enemy he could be.

Anyhow, it doesn't do to believe my father always when he says a thing isn't dangerous. See him going up a crag to rescue a stranded sheep! See him squaring up to some drunken German miner in Keswick marketplace – some fellow twice his size, jabbering his foreign lingo and waving a great dagger, like as not.

When you see my father's red beard jut out a shade more boldly than usual, and when you hear him chuckle down in his broad chest, and murmur, 'I'm all right, leave this to me; there's no danger', then you can get ready for some excitement.

Nothing *should* have happened that night. The secret had been well kept.

Not even Tom knew what was in the wind till my father roused us just after midnight, telling us to take our clogs in our hands and creep

downstairs. But we guessed at once what it was all about.

We'd been a happy enough family in our valley till young Sir Philip Morton had inherited his grandfather's estate a couple of years before. Brownriggs, Bells, Atkinsons, Hudsons, Cockbains – we were all old farming families, who had kept our sheep on the fells since Domesday Book or the founding of Rome or, for all I know, since the Flood itself. We held our land direct from the Crown, and all the rent we paid was to fight the Scots if they came over. We weren't gentry, we were yeomen – 'statesmen' or 'estatesmen' we call ourselves up there – but we were independent people, not caring much for man or devil. Certainly we didn't care anything for a young knight who put scent on his handkerchief and didn't know one end of a Herdwick sheep from another.

But Sir Philip soon showed us that he wasn't a soft young man. In fact, he was extremely hard. We were sorry for the lowland farmers who rented lands from him, for their rents began to go up like rockets. Then he turned his attention to us.

He couldn't hit us so easily. But there was one way.

Down in the valley, by the river, the meadows have been common land since time immemorial. I don't say they belong to nobody – they belong to *us*, Brownriggs and Bells and the rest of the families who've farmed Lonsdale all these hundreds of years. And Heaven help the man who puts a stone wall round them and calls them his – even if he has money and men in livery and a 'Sir' in front of his name.

That's what Sir Philip did that summer.

His men came one day at dawn and started on the job. Most of our men were away up the fells – I was off to school at Keswick myself – and when Mr Atkinson went down to warn them off, they threatened to throw the poor old man into the Greta. So the wall was done, almost, before our people had time to turn round and discuss the matter. They complained afterwards, of course, but a late complaint is like cold porridge, precious little use.

Sir Philip snapped his fingers at us. Asked us where our title-deeds were, waved a roll of yellow Latin documents which might have meant anything, and `challenged us to take the matter to court.

No one wanted to do that. We hadn't much money for lawyers, and we didn't trust them either. Besides, said my father, why go cap in hand to a bench of judges to beg back the land which was ours and always had been?

That was why, that night, the dale was full of moving shadows.

From every farmstead the men and boys were marching down to the meeting-place. And the meeting-place was Sir Philip Morton's wall.

It shone white and new in the moonlight, which by now had slanted down far enough to reach it. You could see the faces of the waiting men, too, white and drained of their usual ruddiness. Their teeth flashed as they greeted us with a laugh and a word. It was almost like a meeting to hunt foxes, only there were no hounds.

My father cocked his eye at the moon, now sailing as serenely as the *Golden Hind* across the great expanse of sky.

'Just nice time we've got, friends, before morning. Now, before we set to work, let me remind the young 'uns, specially, what we have decided to do.'

We all clustered round, and he made us all swear a solemn oath we'd tell no one a single word about the night's doings. Sir Philip could do nothing to the whole village, but if he got proof against one or two individual men, he'd try to get his revenge on them.

'All stand together, and keep mum,' my father ended. With that, he spat on his hands very deliberately, strode up to the wall, and pushed at the top row. I shall never forget the sound as the small flat slabs rattled and clinked to the ground. The die was cast.

Then we all set to work with a will to throw down Sir Philip's wonderful wall.

It was a dry wall, of course, such as we build in our part of the world when we make a pen for sheep. There was no mortar binding the rough stones together. They were fitted carefully – it's a real craft, building those walls – and at proper intervals you put in binding stones of the right size and shape, to hold the lot in place. A well-built wall can stand the winter gales and the weight of a great snowdrift. The walls my grandad built under Blencathra will be standing long after I'm dead and gone.

Sir Philip's won't, though!

There must have been thirty or forty of us out that night, and we all worked as if it were haymaking-time and a thunderstorm just coming up from Derwentwater way. My own hands were soon bleeding – I'd torn a nail on the rough stones. You never heard such a bump and clatter as that wall went down, all along the line. It was a great game for us all, knocking it over in heaps. Even the older men were laughing like boys at school.

'Here, Peter,' my father said, 'run up to the road, there's a good lad, and keep an eye open for anyone coming. Mr Bell's a wee bit nervous; he thinks we ought to have a scout on the watch.'

'What does he think this is?' I said, imitating Tom's voice. 'A raid against the Scots?'

All the same, I wasn't sorry to go. My hands were hurting, and knocking a wall down gets monotonous after half an hour.

I walked up from the river to the road. I could see a goodish way towards Keswick – the road wound white and bright, except where the moonbeams were broken by black clumps of oak and ash and birch. I couldn't see so far towards Penrith, for there was a bend hiding the distance. I walked there, and looked eastwards. Now

I could see a clear mile or two of the road climbing up the hem of Blencathra, which I still think is the noblest mountain in the world. I ought to have stayed at that bend, for it was that way that Sir Philip's new manor-house stood; I could see the moonlight flashing on its wonderful glass windows, though it was every bit of three miles away. But I wanted to stay where I could see the others, and hear the jokes they shouted to one another, and watch that wonderful wall going down as though it were the rampart of Jericho itself.

So after one glance to make sure that there was no living soul on the road to eastward – which was about as much use as a silk slipper in a snowstorm – I turned and walked back.

Soldiers say that dawn is a dangerous time. I have heard that from men who have fought in Ireland and the Low Countries and in the steaming forests of the Spanish Main. It's the time when sentries get slack and their eyelids droop, and a wise enemy chooses his moment to launch a surprise attack.

It was getting towards dawn. The moon would soon be down. The rich blue colour was draining out of the eastern sky, and the mist was coming

up from the meadows, so that I could see only the heads and shoulders of the men standing in their long line, each a few paces from his neighbour. High above us, the mountain mists were drawn close round the peaks like the curtains of a four-poster bed.

The wall was so low I could no longer see it. But I saw young Dick Hudson jump over it with a cry of derision, and I thought of the story we read in the old histories of Rome, of how Remus jumped scornfully over the first low wall of the city. Romulus killed *him*, and I expect Sir Philip would cheerfully have killed Dick Hudson if he'd seen him at that moment. But Sir Philip wasn't there, and he'd never know . . .

When people asked who'd overthrown that wall, we were all going to say it must be the work of the Devil. The Devil has a great reputation for destroying what honest men would be glad to see out of the way!

So the dawn drew near, and danger too, if I'd only known it, and not been so occupied watching them scatter the last stones, right and left, in the long wet grass.

I felt, rather than heard, the coming of the horsemen.

They weren't riding the sunbaked earth and rock of the road itself – they galloped almost silently along the green verge, so that there was no loud ring of hooves to set the valley echoing from fell to fell, but only a dull, regular vibration.

I wasn't aware of them till they swept round the bend, not a hundred yards from where I was standing.

It was Sir Philip in front; I knew him by his grey mount. There were a dozen or more behind him, strung out head to tail, head to tail, and every rider with a sword or pistol or both.

I gaped at them for a half-second, I was so dumbfounded. Then, as my big mouth was conveniently open, I stuck in two fingers and whistled. *That* set the echoes going all right.

It was everyone for himself then. Luckily for me, there were plenty of rocks heaped about on the steep hillside above the road, and once among these I should be safe. I skipped into the shelter just before the cavalcade reached me. Then I was tempted by some devil I couldn't resist; I turned round with a piece of rock in my fist and shied it straight at Sir Philip. I don't think it touched either man or horse, they were travelling too fast,

but it made the horse shy, and threw the men behind into temporary confusion.

'There's one of 'em, sir!' a man shouted, and flung up his pistol. The muzzle flamed in the twilight, and it is a wonder my story didn't finish there and then. I felt the bullet whizz through my hair – which was standing on end, I expect, for I'd never been fired at before. I'm not exaggerating. The cap was blown clean from my head, and fell somewhere among the rocks, where I'd neither time nor inclination to stay and look for it.

Instead, I hared up that mountain as though all the hounds in Cumberland were trailing me. Only when my heart felt as though it would burst through my skin did I drop breathless on my belly, on an overhanging slab of granite, and look back into the valley.

Of my father and brother and the neighbours there wasn't a sign. They'd vanished like June snow. The daylight, growing every moment, showed only Sir Philip and his servants, clustered glumly round the ruins of the wall.

I slipped home by a roundabout way. I shall always remember that summer morning, with the sun bounding up between Great Mell and Great Dod, and the wild roses out along the Greta, and

the hay that had been cut yesterday so rich and scented on the air.

I enjoyed it especially because, if that bullet had been an inch or two lower, I should never have seen the sun rise over Lonsdale again. I never thought as I jumped the beck and went up to our house that it would be many a long day before I *did* see it again. To tell you the truth, I was thinking mainly of breakfast.