

fury of the winds: "Launch the life-boat, lads! We have to go out - We don't have to come back."

The boat was launched.

It disappeared into the gloom beyond a line of surf.

It never returned.

TREE AND CROW

April 12, 1999

Rollin W. Workman

After Winston Churchill lost the Prime Ministership, he was knighted and given the ceremonial office of Warden of the Cinq Ports, where "Cinq" (Sink) is, of course, the anglicized pronunciation of the French word for "five". For some reason, the title fascinated me, perhaps because I thought it romantically medieval and I vaguely associated it with Olivier's wartime movie version of Henry V. Incidentally, in case you don't offhand remember, the five ports are Dover, Hastings, Sandwich, Romney, and Hythe.

Last summer, I spent a number of days wandering in imagination up the channel side of Great Britain. I had no aim except to stop off for at least a few hours in each of the Cinq Ports and also to gaze at the Wash, where King John lost the English crown jewels by trying to beat the tide to the crossing. One evening in a pub, I heard portions of the family history I am going to relate. And, since I was near the house in question, I visited it and met the owner, who told the story in full. I found later that it is also contained in a pamphlet, copies of which are for sale at the local inn. The tale is comparatively short, and begins here.

Alice Creshle was born in 1920 near the small east coast town of Hareborough-on-Bight, England. Hareborough-on-Bight is about halfway between West Mersea and Marsden and some ten miles south of Colchester. The Creshle family owned thirty acres of land, extending inland from a sea frontage of a thousand yards. The wooden house, located seventy yards back from the sea, was built in the middle of the 19th century on the stone foundations of an earlier building. There are two floors, the second containing three bedrooms and a bathroom. On the first floor, there are a sitting room to the north and a dining room to the south, both facing the sea, on each side of a central hall. Behind the dining room is a kitchen, and behind the sitting room, what was once designated as a sewing room. On the north side of the sitting room, also facing the sea, is a small parlor. In the 20th century, it has served mostly for storage of unused furniture. The windows of the dining and sitting rooms look out upon a garden. The parlor, in Alice's youth, had only grass in front of it, on top of earth which filled the upper end of an old gully. The gully runs on down to the sea and, for most of its length, is five or six feet both in width and depth. Rainwater from the house was once directed into the gully and thus to the sea. Sewage may have taken the same course before the county of Essex constructed a sewage disposal system.

The Creshle family had a moderate amount of wealth derived from their wine import business. Importing wine from France had been the family occupation for four generations, though for only the last two had it been carried on legally. Alice's great-great and great grandfathers were smugglers, who operated successfully for over forty years. The great grandfather switched to legal importation near the end of his career, though he was still cursing taxes on his deathbed.

Alice's great-grandfather was named Harold. Harold Creshle was born in or around 1800. He was orphaned at the age of eleven. What happened to his parents is not known. He was taken in by a fisherman who needed help on his boat and recognized cheap labor when he saw it. Over the course of the next six years,

the fisherman came to look upon Harold as a son. And, when he died, he left Harold the boat.

Harold had for some time been comparing in his mind the income from fishing with the possible rewards of smuggling. The latter always came out significantly larger. Harold had even tried to interest his foster father in the idea of trying a bit of smuggling on the side. But the older man always refused, citing the government revenue cutters which occasionally came poking round suspiciously. On his own at age 17, Harold possessed the cocky certainty of immunity, which, along with the superiority of physical over rational development, makes males of that age the best material for the military. He borrowed a couple of pounds, sailed over to France, purchased four casks of not awfully good wine, stole back home, and sold the wine locally for 7 shillings a cask. The profit of 8 shillings was the start of his fortune. By the time he was 22, he was dealing in superior wine and was able to buy the Creshle property described earlier.

He had two buildings constructed on his land, a two room house and a chapel. Harold was not particularly religious, but he guessed that giving God a building might elicit some favorable inclination from the Deity in case of a close encounter with a revenue cutter. More practically, the chapel had a cellar in which to store casks of wine. The cellar had two entrances. One was a trap door in the floor of the chapel, covered with straw. Under the trap door, there was a ramp up which casks could be rolled. The other cellar entrance was a door opening into an underground tunnel. How Harold managed to construct the tunnel is a mystery. He may have brought over workers from France who had practice in building concealed passageways for smugglers. The tunnel was 5 1/2 feet high, just enough for Harold to stand erect; and it was 4 feet wide. It had wooden beams as pillars and cross pieces, the latter supporting a plank roof. The floor was packed dirt, as were the sides, which now and then had to be repacked when crumbling occurred. The tunnel went from the chapel to the shore, where it opened behind planted bushes, near a dock. Harold transported wine casks from dock to cellar on a dolly, which had large wheels to compensate for unevenness of the dirt

floor. The tunnel allowed him to move the casks with a minimum possibility of observation.

During the summer of the year in which he was 24, Harold brought back a lady from France. How and where he met her is again unknown, as is whether they were ever legally married, either in France or England. Nor is there any explanation of why she was in France. Her name was Zahida, and she was Turkish. To accommodate her, Harold had the house enlarged, adding a dining room and an upper bedroom. Zahida never mixed with residents of the area, and only rarely did they even catch a glimpse of her. She and Harold apparently had a happy year and a half together. But no more, for she died of typhoid fever.

Though her life in England was short, it had great significance for Harold and for the generations that followed him. In one of his later years, Harold wrote a letter addressed to his son. In it, he said that Zahida brought two valuable items with her from France. One he referred to as "a treasure beyond price, a ruby which makes all rubies pale, a pearl beside which all pearls darken." I continue quoting Harold's manuscript because his words seem to have been carefully chosen.

"The treasure became mine as well as hers. It made us one; but, when she died, our treasure went from me with her. I encased both in tin, one large box, one small, and buried the boxes together in the earthen floor of the chapel cellar, directly beneath the altar. I give the location, not so that you might someday search for the boxes, but that you will under all desire and necessity avoid disturbing them.

I will tell you why. The other item Zahida brought from France was a pet crow. She let it fly free. It must have ranged widely, but it reappeared every two or three days, expecting to be stroked and fed. The crow transferred part of its attention to me and eventually came to me as often as to her. When Zahida realized that she would die, she had me bring the crow to her. She held it before her face and spoke Turkish for perhaps two minutes. The crow responded with a

peculiar cawing noise. She thereupon said to me that the crow would protect me and, if I should have any, my family. However, Zahida warned, the crow's protection would last only so long as three conditions were fulfilled: I must never reveal the nature of the treasure, I must bury her and the treasure together, and both must remain undisturbed in the place where I would put them.

I have good reason to believe what she said."

That ends the message Harold wrote to his won. What was the good reason for belief referred to? The story which came down through the family was the following. After Zahida's death, Harold courted a local woman named Louise. Louise's parents saw Harold's money as making him a most desirable husband for their daughter. They put heavy pressure upon her to marry him. One warm spring day, Harold invited her to tea. They sat at a temporary table beside the chapel. Both knew the purpose of the get-together. Harold intended to propose formally and had brought with him an especially made ring. The band was gold in the shape of a coiled rope, and the setting was a moderately large diamond. Louise came with a couple of individual spice cakes which she had baked. We would probably call them cupcakes. Her dog also showed up, fixated on the cakes since it had first smelled them baking. Zahida's crow apparently spied the dog from afar, and came to taunt it from a nearby tree.

Harold duly made his proposal and produced the ring. Unfortunately, the band proved to be a bit too small for Louise's finger; but she laughingly said that was because she had a peasant's hand. Embarrassed, Harold took the ring back to have it enlarged, putting it down on the table in front of him. Louise then brought forth the cakes. Food is better than gold any day, she declared; and they could ceremoniously pledge their troth by taking their first bites simultaneously. As Harold lifted his cake to his mouth, the crow suddenly dived. Its objective, by any plausible hypothesis, was the ring which must have glinted in a bit of sunshine. But the crow's aim was atrocious. It drove its beak into Harold's hand, delivering such a wound that blood rapidly spilled out. Harold dropped

the cake, most of which fell to the ground, where the ever-vigilant dog gobbled it up. Cursing the crow, Harold rushed to his house, where he wrapped the hand tightly in a towel to stanch the blood flow. When he returned some ten minutes later, the dog lay on the ground dead. Louise had disappeared. So had the ring. Two chicken deaths later, procured by giving the fowls bits of cake that remained on the table, established beyond doubt that Harold's cake was poisoned. Despite strenuous efforts by the sheriff, Louise was never found. A farmer reported seeing her in a two-person buggy with an unknown man driving rapidly in the direction of London. One speculation about her motive was that she resented being pushed by her parents into marriage with Harold when she loved the stranger in the carriage; and she had decided to resolve the situation through Harold's death. A less kindly alternative said that it was all pure greed. She wanted the ring without Harold. In any case, Harold stopped cursing the crow.

He did more. He had an artist in Paris, who was young and unknown and therefore cheap, commemorate the escape in a painting which he entitled "Tree and Crow". The 4 feet by 2 feet canvas portrayed what it was called: part of a tree including a large branch, a patch of green grass, and a prominent crow sitting on the branch, looking forward out of the picture. Harold hung the painting in his dining room.

Eventually, Harold married a French girl distantly related to the minor nobility of Brittany. They were together for 29 years and had four children, two of whom, a son and a daughter, reached adulthood. The parents saw both offspring satisfactorily married. Harold died in his early 60's, followed a few months later by his wife.

Perhaps a reminder is in order at this point. Harold's story is part of a longer account of the Creshle family put together by his great granddaughter, Alice. When she composed the account, Alice was in possession of both the painting and the letter Harold wrote his son concerning the burial of Zahida and her death bed declaration of the protection promised by her

pet crow. The other facts of Harold's life reached Alice through word of mouth tales.

I must now say something about Richard Creshle, Harold's son and Alice's great grandfather. Richard learned the smuggling business by assisting his father. When the latter died, Richard continue the trade. As the 1850's wore on, and even before his father's demise, Richard found it increasingly difficult to stay clear of revenue cutters and to maintain the tunnel. As for the latter, the thirty year old beams and planks were rotting, and waves regularly washed into the tunnel opening at the sea end. In 1861, the great surprise March storm which foreshadowed the death of Prince Albert swept down the east coast of England. In an afternoon of hurricane-like winds and breakers, the lower part of the tunnel collapsed. The chapel and the house were badly damaged. Richard, his wife, and young son escaped injury by taking refuge in the wine cellar beneath the chapel.

The storm marked the end of Creshle smuggling. Richard was sufficiently wealthy to purchase a replacement boat and built a new house. The latter was and is the one described at the beginning of this paper as that in which Alice grew up. The chapel was torn down and not rebuilt. The remains of the tunnel were allowed to disintegrate. And Richard made himself into a legal importer of wine.

There is a footnote to the storm. Richard had planned to be crossing the channel in his boat on a regular run to France the day the storm arrived. Unnoticed by him, however, on the day before his scheduled trip, a great flock of crows settled onto the boat and spent nearly twelve hours there talking to each other. The crows also defecated. They defecated all over the boat in heaps and sheets. When Richard discovered the disgusting condition as he checked out the boat in the late afternoon before his projected trip, he had to change his plans. The next day would have to be devoted to cleaning up the gooey mess. Richard went back to the house, got his shotgun, and went crow shooting. All of the crows apparently went into hiding except one, which flapped from tree to tree, high up, watching. Richard sent three

unsuccessful blasts in its direction before he calmed down enough to recall his father's experience and letter. The memory nibbled at him enough so that he gave up the chase. After the storm, he wondered.

Richard had a son, Charles, who, in his turn inherited the business and the property. Charles was Alice's grandfather. He was the first member of the family to turn the sailing and upkeep of the boat over to a two-man hired crew. Charles would have liked to delegate the purchase of wine in France to an agent. But he could not conceive of anyone else being a better judge of wine than he himself. Charles was also the first of the family actively to cultivate friendship with crows. He felt that there must be some sort of connection of the family to the birds which might be developed. Charles managed to induce a couple of crows to come to him regularly for food, and he learned to make several variations of the cawing sound, which the crows seemed to appreciate. Crows, like the natives, are always grateful when one tries to speak their language instead of shouting at them in English.

It would accord with tradition had a crow somehow saved him from injury. But nothing of the sort ever happened. The most opportune moment for it came at the age of four, when Charles fell out of a second story window. But, instead of a miraculous crow intervention, he happened to land on his father who at that moment was bending over just below the window, pulling weeds. Richard, the father, was sent sprawling; and Charles' fall was slowed. He rolled unharmed off Richard's back as the latter hit the ground. The back in question ached for several days afterward.

The case was quite different for Charles' son. That was Edward, Alice's father. Edward was born in 1896. One late June day in 1914, he went horseback riding for recreation. On his return, he was almost home when a crow swooped down from a tree beside the trail, directly into the horse's face. The startled horse reared and threw its rider to the ground. He landed in such a way that both bones in his lower right leg were broken. Fortunately, he was near enough to the house that his calls for help were heard. He was

carried in a wagon to Colchester, where a doctor set his leg. After many weeks, the patient was able to walk again. But his fractured leg came out of the ordeal somewhat shorter than before. Edward ever after walked with a limp, though his activities were otherwise unaffected. In October, about the time when he was finally able to dispense with his remaining crutch, he was summoned for induction into the infantry. He was rejected, of course, and thus became one of the males of his decimated age group to be still around after the first World War.

As Alice points out in her family history, the incident of her father and the horse has a puzzling logical aspect. Accepting, as she does, the notion that the Creshles were under some sort of crow protection, she asks, how was the crow which agitated the horse related to Zahida's pet crow? It is possible that the pet was an actor in both the event involving Harold (the attempted poisoning) and the event with Harold's son, Richard (the trashing by defecation of the boat). But, though crows do live a long time, the horse occurrence came 75 years after Zahida died. It must have been a physically different crow in the last case. Then, even if it is not nonsense to imagine that a crow could have a sense of obligation, how could that sense be transmitted to another, younger bird?

Alice also notes a necessary re-interpretation of Zahilda's words as reported by Harold. Zahida said that the crow would protect Harold and his family. He probably took "family" to denote only his own wife and children. Now, however, "family" takes on a more Exodus 20 interpretation: "unto the third and fourth generation."

Edward was the fourth generation Creshle. He had a daughter, but not a son. In 1920, when Alice was born, Edward was 21, having married the year before. Alice's childhood was free of care in a fairly well-to-do household until the world wide Great Depression began in 1930. Gradually, the regional population which had been the Creshle's traditional customers began to stop purchasing quality wine. Edward was forced to buy and sell ever lower grade wine at correspondingly lower prices. Then that market too

dwindled. In 1933, Edward faced a cash crisis. His income was insufficient for his day to day expenses. He borrowed with his boat as collateral. The time came when the lenders threatened to seize the boat in default of repayment.

In a desperate state of mind, Edward suddenly thought of his great grandfather's letter. The letter stated that Zahilda had brought with her "a treasure beyond price, a ruby which makes all rubies pale, a pearl beside which all pearls darken." The description suggested that the treasure consisted of a jewel, or more probably, jewels of unusual magnificence. The treasure was buried in the chapel cellar. If whatever it was could be found, it surely would solve all of Edward's money problems and might even make him quite wealthy.

Edward was aware that disturbing the box containing the treasure would bring to an end the alleged protection afforded by Zahida's crow or its descendants. But Edward told himself that the crow-protection explanation for past events, including his own deferral from World War I, was a kind of anthropomorphizing mysticism. Besides, the actual need for money far outweighed the vague possibility that a crow would fly in from nowhere to save a family member from a lightning bolt or something of the kind.

Deciding to exhume the treasure was one thing; finding it was another. As noted before, the chapel had been demolished by his great grandfather's day. No record was kept of where on the property it had so long ago been located. No trace of the old tunnel existed either. Had something of the latter survived, the remains could perhaps have been followed to their upper end at what was once the underground chapel door. The oldest residents of the area, all of whom Edward questioned, could provide no useful information. One woman in her 90's remembered that her grandfather as a boy had secretly explored the tunnel after coming across a hole in the ground where the tunnel roof had collapsed. But that was all anyone knew. The degree of Edward's frustration rose to match that of his anxiety.

Edward's daughter, Alice, had turned thirteen a couple of months before the financial situation became serious. She still had much of the imagination and belief in magic of children, coupled with a budding urge to participate in family affairs. She had been told the crow stories, which she only vaguely separated in her mind from tales of genies and fairy princes. She conceived the idea that the family protector was actually a crow spirit which was immortal and which had embodied itself in the birds of the ancestral events. The crow spirit must stay somewhere between encounters, and where would be a better place than in the pictured crow of the old painting "Tree and Crow". The painting then hung in the parlor, where it was rarely seen because, as mentioned before, the parlor had become a storage room for unused furniture.

Alice decided to ask the crow spirit to help her father. One day, without revealing her plan to her parents, she went into the parlor and closed the door. Standing before the painting, she explained the financial situation, reminded the crow of its promise to the family, and begged it for help. Undismayed by the lack of any response from the pictured crow, she began a hopeful wait for something to happen.

She knew that her request was under consideration when an old crow established itself in the garden a few days later. Its feathers had a grayish tinge, and its eyes seemed dull. Whenever Alice was in the garden, the crow would sit on a branch and stare at her. That went on for several days. During all that time, the crow never made a sound until one morning when it uttered a noise that was more like a sigh than a croak. It then flapped from its perch and began flying up and down the ravine. When it reached the sea end, it would turn and come back to the house. Another turn, another round trip, repetition after repetition. Now and then it would stop on a branch for a rest, always resuming the curious activity. Alice watched for nearly an hour. Puzzled, she went to tell her father.

Edward inwardly scoffed at his daughter's childish romanticism when she told of her request before the painting. But the crow's behavior was undeniable. Edward went into the garden and watched for himself.

He started to think. Suppose as an hypothesis that the crow were answering Alice's petition. How would flying up and down the ravine be a response? The solution came as if in a vision from the past. The ravine had been created by the collapse of an old tunnel. And the landward end of the ravine, though almost obliterated by fill, was at the parlor wall. When Edward's great grandfather had the house rebuilt and enlarged after the destructive storm, he must have had the parlor constructed on the stone foundation of the chapel. Beneath the parlor, then, in the dirt floor of a long hidden and forgotten cellar was the treasure.

Edward was only 35; so he undertook the excavating himself. He began by digging against the outside wall of the parlor, where the door from the tunnel into the cellar must have been located. The top of the old portal was only three feet down. Uncovering enough of the opening to crawl inside was a bigger job, made more arduous by dirt which had formed a mound inside the cellar as the former wooden door which kept it back had rotted. Even for a 35 year old, the task took several days.

Then came the question of where to dig in the cellar floor. Harold wrote that he had buried Zahida and the treasure directly beneath the chapel altar. Edward first reasoned that old churches were almost always laid out on an east-west axis, with the altar at the east end. So the east side of the cellar was the place to try. But that was unlikely. The east side was the sea side where the tunnel door was located. Harold would not have put the boxes where he and casks of wine would constantly tramp over them. By the same token, the most desirable spot would be that most out of the way. The two back corners of the room fulfilled that condition. Edward decided to try the northwest corner since, of the two, it was the one on an exterior wall.

The first metal Edward struck turned out to be a long box lying parallel to the wall, evidently Zahida's casket. Not wanting to disturb her remains unless necessary, Edward dug again farther out from the wall. He was surprised when what Harold had described as the "small" metal box was revealed. It was almost a yard

in length. The box was not heavy, and Edward managed to drag it out into the sunlight. He shouted for his wife and daughter and ran to get a bucket of water to wash the dirt off the box. As they watched, he sloshed on the water. A plaque attached to the box appeared which Edward excitedly cleared with his hand. He read aloud the words on the plaque. They said: "Jasmine, daughter of Zahida Creshle. Born 1822. taken with her mother by typhoid, 1824. Ruby of rubies; pearl of pearls." Inside the box, when Edward finally brought himself to open it, were the bones of a child.

In spite of appearances to the contrary, the crow had not failed to fulfill its ancestral obligation. The as yet unrevealed complexity of its action only made it seem so. A dispirited Edward reburied the small coffin in its formal place. Instead of closing up the entrance to the cellar, however, he cleared out the earth remaining in the old doorway. Eventually, when he had the money, he had a new door installed, as well as steps leading down to it. Meanwhile, using a wheelbarrow, he moved the excavated earth from where he had piled it off to a corner of the property. Part way through the task, the old crow landed heavily on the ground. It picked up something from the dirt and dropped it at Edward's feet. The coiled rope design of the band showed it to be the ring with which great grandfather Harold had proposed betrothal to his would-be poisoner. The ring must have fallen off the tube, lain unnoticed in the grass, and then sunk gradually into ground. When the tunnel collapsed and the upper end of the resulting gully was filled, the ring was buried some feet down. There it would have remained had not Edward sought the presumed treasure. That, Alice opines in her family history, must be why the crow, as the way of helping in her father's financial crisis, gave him the clue for discovering a "treasure" which was of no monetary use.

Alice went to the painting to thank the crow for what it had done. It was gone. There was no crow in the tree, no trace of one. And, though the cawing of crows was subsequently occasionally heard in the neighborhood, no crow again came near the Creshle house.

Edward sold the ring. It brought enough to save his boat and to enable him to eke out a living for the next four years. Economic conditions bottomed out and gradually improved as the civilized nations of the world prepared for another war. By 1940, Edward was prosperous again, but facing the complete cutoff of his wine supply because of the fall of France. In the end, he never had to deal with that problem. His boat was hit by a German shell and he was killed during the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Why did Zahida so long ago admonish Harold not to reveal that the treasure was her child? Perhaps the answer is suggested in a letter Alice Creshle received in July 1997. The letter was from an Emil Roussere of Dijon, France. M. Roussere wrote that a friend on a tour of England had picked up a copy of Alice's Creshle family history. M. Roussere thought that she might be interested in a bit of ancient lore about his family. It was said that one of his great-great-great grandfathers had an affair with a foreign woman who bore him a daughter. A few weeks after the birth, mother and daughter disappeared. Acting upon a charge of kidnapping, the local officials searched for them without success. Somehow great-great-great grandfather came to believe that a British sailor had ferried the missing pair to England and was hiding them. Great-great-great grandfather tried unsuccessfully to retrieve the child, and, failing that, he and the wife he later married tried to take revenge upon the sailor. Family legend did not report how, or whether the attempt succeeded. But, said M. Roussere, what made the story of possible interest to Alice was that his great-great-great grandfather's wife was English and named Louise.

Alice and her mother held jobs at a rifle plant near Colchester for the duration of World War II. Afterward, Alice worked for British Petroleum until she retired in 1985. She married a man nine years older than herself, who died in 1983, not long following their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. She maintained the family house after her mother passed away and moved back there upon retirement. She is now 79, in good health, and pleased to see the occasional visitors, who, like me, have stumbled upon the family history.

She shows visitors the location in the cellar where the caskets are buried; and she points out the exact area of the painting where, she says, the crow sat for over a hundred years. The solitary tree stands impassively, caring nothing for the activities of the world, whether they be human or non-human, fact or fiction. An ancient, tarnished brass nameplate at the bottom of the painting still bears the title "Tree and Crow".

THE GO-AHEAD MAN

April 19, 1999

George Gibson Carey IV

This is the story of Thomas Jefferson Green, a most interesting man. Even if he were not my ancestor I would find his life a curiosity worth sharing with you. Some of his adventures challenge both understanding and credulity. But there is more. I will try to sort out historical fact from family legend; a daunting task. Where his actions sometimes suggest motivations that are perhaps less lofty than family lore would have them, I will ask you to consider with me some alternative explanations of his proud deeds that are often puzzling, to say the least.

But first, a little background. If you are a really serious student of America history of the period 1830-1850, you might have stumbled across a fleeting reference or two to T J Green (as I shall refer to him throughout this paper). He was born in North Carolina in 1801, and after a full life of adventure on the frontiers of a young and growing America, he died in 1863. He was my great, great grandfather on my maternal side.

Now, southern families, in my experience, take their lineage and ancestry more seriously than northerners. All too often, family is about all they have to be proud of. There is a tendency to revere one's forebears, whether they deserve it or not. And