

UNDER SUFFOLK SKIES

BY BOB CATTELL

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TIMELINE AND LOCATIONS

Story	Date	Location
1 <u>Ad Nusquam Via</u>	83	Halesworth
2 <u>Sea Wolves</u>	868	Hoxne/Bury St Edmunds
3 <u>The Anarchie</u>	1140	Framlingham
4 <u>The Storm</u>	1286	Dunwich
5 <u>Homecoming</u>	1349	Wenhaston
6 <u>Jackanapes</u>	1450	Wingfield
7 <u>Comedy in Three Acts</u>	1550	Ipswich
8 <u>Duck Shoot</u>	1663	Cookley/Walberswick marshes
9 <u>Tom Brown</u>	1749	Aldeburgh
10 <u>Mrs Sutton</u>	1793	Bungay
11 <u>Emigrants</u>	1835	Debenham
12 <u>Pigman</u>	1904	Sibton
13 <u>1939</u>	1939	Shotley
14 <u>Mach</u>	1972	Sotherton
15 <u>Strange Tractor</u>	2012	Woodbridge

AD NUSQUAM



The unsuspecting Britons spoke of such novelties as 'civilisation', when in fact they were only a feature of their enslavement.

Tacitus

The Road to Nowhere. That's what the men call it. It speaks volumes.

On the other hand, who are we to complain about our instructions when they come directly from the Governor himself? No-one is going to argue with Gnaeus Julius Agricola at this present time. His reputation has been rising ever since his return to govern Britain in the ninth year of Vespasian's reign and his victories in the northern campaign have given him a further boost. Some are even speculating that he could be the next Emperor after Domitian.

However, it is a consequence of the Governor's orders that we are languishing here in a cold and miserable backwater, building a road to keep the already defeated and demoralised Iceni under the Roman thumb. There is nothing glamorous or exciting about our mission and the grumbling gets louder every day. I've made numerous attempts over the months to raise morale, mainly by vastly exaggerating the importance of what we're doing and lying about our contribution to the glory of Rome. I've even taken to quoting Agricola himself: 'Great empires are not maintained by timidity or laziness'- etcetera, etcetera. That backfired badly because it only served to remind the men of the laurels being won in the campaign in the north: everyone knows that Agricola and the flower of the twentieth and the ninth legions are at the front-line hundreds of miles away. After quelling the Ordovices and the Brigantes, they're said to be pushing the frontier even further north, pursuing what's left of Calgacus's Caledonii rabble into their mountain retreats after the great victory at Mons Graupius.

Here there's no glory, no battles, not even a skirmish to break the monotony. Every morning I ride from the scruffy fort by the harbour of H to the mobile camp, which is now, with the completion of the first two sections of the road, some seven miles distant. And every evening I ride back.

On the well-laid surface it takes me less than a summer hour each way without having to push the horse too hard. The work has progressed steadily in spite of some minor trouble with the slaves, most of them local lads who took up arms against us in the past or infringed other laws. There are young women too: land workers and the like. All the construction materials are transported along the road in convoys, protected from ambushes by a handful of troops. Sand and gravel are quarried nearby; we have substantial workings, stretching along the river for several miles. Stone, timber and volcanic ash for concrete are brought by water and landed at the port. The engineers take care of most of the planning and groundwork; our job is security: running convoys and keeping a close eye on the slaves and the surrounding villages. To be honest I wouldn't mind a minor uprising to break the monotony but the Iceni haven't got much mettle in them these days.

The road's final destination is now just three miles away: a stretch of rising ground above the estuary of Vividin where we will construct a fortified watchtower dominating the tribal heartlands of the Iceni and keeping them under constant surveillance. The theory goes that, in the event of an insurrection, a signal can be sent by the chain of beacons to Camulodunum and reinforcements rushed in by sea, river and along the new road. It will take as little as 12 hours if the tides are favourable. As I know all too well, the alternative journey by land is a circuitous inland route of some 70 miles – a full three-day march, mostly along byways and poorly maintained tracks.

Today was wet. Cold, too. Midsummer in these parts is a bit of a contradiction in terms; most of the time it rates not much warmer and a great deal wetter than winter at home. I did a recce in the rain this morning to the site of the new watchtower with the praefectus fabrum, the senior engineer, who measured the area and produced a schedule for its

construction. He estimated five to six months to put up a modest stone and wood, three storey tower. I told him he'd got four months maximum to complete it. He wasn't happy but I insisted there was no way this project was going to take us into next year.

Having missed the midday meal and feeling somewhat despondent, I returned to barracks early and ordered a much-needed hot bath. Then, before supper, I picked up the letter I had been writing to my wife for the past week. Struggling with it would be more accurate. I've never been much of a letter writer and this one was proving particularly difficult. I read what I had managed to compose so far:

My dearest Domitia,

I am writing to you in daylight, though the night will have descended several hours ago in Leptis Magna. In summer here the days are long and the sun, when it appears, sets in the north-west.

We are building a military road some 20 miles or so from Venta Icenorum, which you will probably never have heard of. It's a modest place, yet one of the larger towns in the eastern part of Provincia Britannia. I am camp commander in charge of the operation, appointed by Gnaeus Julius Agricola himself.

I winced at the pomposity of my words, but I knew that Domitia would share the letter not only with our two impressionable boys, but also with her father who is a tribune and carries much influence in Leptis. He already has a pretty low opinion of me and I didn't want him to think that I'd risen to the rank of praefectus castrorum of the Valeria Victrix XX Legion only be hived off with a centuria of callow recruits to supervise the work of engineers and road builders in some marshy, tribal wilderness.

I read on, feeling a mild sense of shame at how little I had managed to write so far and how lacking in feeling it seemed...

You and the boys would laugh at my accommodation, Domitia. This place is a small port on a minor river. When I say 'port' you will no doubt conjure up the magnificence of Leptis, its fine marble wharfs and colonnades welcoming great ships from across the fair Mediterranean. Nothing could be further removed from what I now see before me. The docks are small, built of timber with banks of flint, the local stone. Only small, low-keel vessels, barges and the like can navigate the river, which is little more than a muddy stream. My humble wooden residence on a mound above the river has two basic rooms divided by a curtain. It is to be hoped our work will be completed in a few months as I have no wish to spend a winter in these parts. Although, when I rejoin Agricola and the legion for the northern campaign, I expect far harsher conditions.

You may be interested to know that Britannia is an island. Agricola instructed the prefect of the fleet to sail around its northern coast, which by his account is mountainous and thinly populated. So, with any luck, we will have subdued the entire country by this time next year.

By Jupiter, it's even worse than I thought. I can just imagine what Domitia will make of this second-rate geography lesson. Nevertheless, I raise my pen in the hope of thinking of something to add to the letter just as the curtain, acting as a screen to the adjoining room, is swept aside. It is Epona with my supper. I stand up instinctively, dropping the pen, and admire her long legs, narrow waist, big green eyes edged with black kohl and breath-taking red hair. But for me the most striking feature of this beautiful woman is her white, almost translucent skin. I'm not dark for a man of northern Africa and I'm considered tall in Leptis, but standing next to Epona

I must appear swarthy and, barefoot though she is, I always have the feeling she's looking down at me. Her powder blue dress hangs loosely about her shoulders, clasped by the gold and garnet brooch I gave her in Camulodunum. She puts the tray on a low table by the couch without glancing at me and as she stands she lets her red tresses fall across her shoulders.

'I must speak to you, my lord,' she says in her precise but heavily accented *lingua Latina*. Few natives, even the elite, speak our language so grammatically correctly. But I wish she wouldn't call me my lord. I've told her plenty of times that she should use my name, Quintillius, in private, but she takes no notice.

'Yes, Epona. I am listening.'

'I don't feel safe in this place, my lord.'

'And what do you have to fear? No-one from the village will dare to act against you.'

The unspoken words are: you belong to me and you are protected by the power of Rome. She gives a short, mirthless laugh.

'It's not the local people I dread, backward and superstitious though they are.'

'Then who?'

'Your soldiers. Their behaviour. They are vile and repulsive.'

It wasn't the first time she had complained about the men. But I had never taken it too seriously. Today, however, she seemed genuinely scared. 'Tell me,' I said, trying to sound solicitous.

'It started with jokes and bawdy chants. And now they are making up songs around the campfire... what they would do to me if they got me alone. Disgusting things that I can't repeat. They frighten me.'

'But you know well enough that they are ignorant barbarians.' Barbarian wasn't a word I liked using, particularly since it was commonly applied to the Iceni by the soldiers themselves.

'And ignorant barbarians don't rape and kill women?'

'Epona, they fear you far more than you fear them. With my protection, you are a powerful woman. Like Boudicca.'

She laughs dismissively again and looks away. I probably shouldn't have mentioned Boudicca. Epona's father had died fighting for the Queen in her final battle and her mother had taken her own life, allegedly after being raped by Roman soldiers in the savage days following the revolt. That was more than two decades ago, well before my time. But my legion, the Twentieth, had been on the frontline. The battle against the Iceni was part of our roll of honour. The troops gave no quarter that day, even to the women and children, who were added to the pile of bodies. They reckoned eighty thousand Britons fell. It was a resounding victory and, as you might expect, the men rarely pass up an opportunity to sing about the events of that glorious day. Epona was only eight when she lost her parents: abandoned by her few surviving relations, she walked alone to Camulodunum. By the time she was 12 she was a whore.

But I was right about Boudicca. She had been powerful. And although long dead she still instilled fear in the hearts of Roman soldiers. Wherever they came from: Syria, Dacia, Germania or Africa, they all knew her story and what they didn't know they made up. As with the mythical Amazons, tales

abounded about Boudicca's cruelty and strength in battle. In truth it hadn't been Rome's finest hour. After the death of King Prasutagus, Boudicca inherited the kingdom of the Iceni as well as considerable wealth from her late father's will. But the Emperor Nero had other ideas: he ordered that the Queen of the Iceni be publicly humiliated and scourged and her daughters raped by slaves. Little wonder she went on the rampage. It took a determined and courageous leader to take on the mighty Roman empire and destroy the new cities of Camulodunum, Londinium and Verulanium. In the words of Gaius Cornelius Tacitus: 'they omitted no species of cruelty with which rage and victory could inspire barbarians.'

To this day my soldiers, who would fight any man to the death, are in utter awe of female warriors. Boudicca was defeated by Paulinus, yet who remembers him today? Boudicca on the other hand, I would be prepared to bet, will still be talked about in a thousand years' time.

As I say, it wasn't the first time Epona had complained about the troops. They were an unruly lot, particularly the recruits from Gallia Aquitania who'd joined the legion in the years when Agricola was governing their province. Deep down none of them had any real understanding of women and their attitudes to sex were shaped by the harsh and mostly celibate life in the army. Yet I had to profess some fellow feeling for the young louts, far from home and dreaming of wine, lemon trees and rustic wenches while they served out their time in this frigid land. For all their ribaldry, I told myself, they wouldn't dare lay a hand on Epona. They know she's mine.

She's been with me now for at least two years. I travelled to Camulodunum frequently when I was stationed with the legion at Viroconium and I had my choice of pretty whores. But since I first set eyes on Epona I haven't touched another woman. The men put it about that she was a slave, but it isn't true. She's a free woman and she followed me to this

backwater of her own free will.

I survey the two plates on the tray and sit down to eat. Two roasted woodcocks and a minestre of cabbage and leeks. Given how hungry I am, it looks almost appetising.

'I'll speak to Lucius Blandus and the other principales in the morning,' I said as I tucked into the food. She seemed none too impressed by my words of reassurance and stood there with her head hanging down, watching me. Her silence was putting me off my food. But finally she spoke.

'What are you writing, my lord?'

'A letter. To my wife.'

'In Leptis?'

'Yes.'

'She must miss you.'

I shrug and take another bite of woodcock. But she won't give it a rest.

'When do you expect to return home?'

'Maybe three or four years. When my term here ends.'

'Your children will be grown up. Do you miss them?'

'Yes, but that is the lot of a soldier, isn't it?'

'And where will you go when you finish the road?'

'Oh I don't know...I'll rejoin the legion. On the frontline, I trust.'

'In Caledonia?'

I nod.

'Will you write to me?'

'Yes,' I lie.

She sighs and looks at the letter again. I know she can't read but I feel my cheeks glowing red all the same. An uncomfortable silence hangs between us.

'Are you going to join me?' I ask her eventually, making room for her on the couch and pointing to the food.

She unclasps her brooch and lets her dress drop to the earth floor. She does it in silence and stands there unmoving and naked. I breathe her strange, musky scent and feel a familiar twist in the base of my gut. She steps towards the couch and puts her hands over my shoulders and gently scratches my back, her bare belly pressed against me. The sensation is instant. She has my total attention. I take her buttocks in my hands and pull her towards me. I move a hand between her legs and I look up and see that she is smiling, but not at me. Her eyes are focussed far away. A soft sigh comes from her throat.

Soundlessly she sinks to her knees and I tug her head into my belly. I feel the warmth of her lips and the rush of desire takes me over with a force that is unassailable. I undress quickly and press against her on the couch, holding her firm breasts and taking a nipple between my lips and teeth. She scratches my back with her long nails and I roll between her thighs and we begin to move together in harmony.

After, when we had slept a little and picked at the cold woodcock and drunk a glass or two of raisin wine, I dismissed her.

She put on her dress in silence and left quickly. But I had the strong feeling that she didn't want to leave me. As she drew the curtain she glanced back at me and then at the letter on the desk. That same distant, trance-like look was in her eyes. I'd seen it before but tonight it deeply unsettled me. It was as if she dreaded what lay beyond the curtain. She seemed about to speak but then thought better of it. I was on the point of calling her back but I succumbed to the weariness of the day and slumped back on the couch.

I resolved to talk to the principales and commanders in the morning about the men's behaviour. It wouldn't be an easy conversation but Epona deserved better protection. It wasn't fitting for the concubine of the camp commander to be subjected to such ribaldry, however harmless it may be. I dozed again and had a dream: a fight between gladiators in the amphitheatre of Leptis, Domitia was there with her father, Tullius, in the VIP seats reserved for the tribunes. Tullius was in his element; he adored the violence, the butchery. He was licking his fat lips and hollering and with that persistent tic in his right eye he looked as if he was winking at the gladiators.

When I woke, I remembered the last words Tullius had said to me before I left to join the legion: 'Fear and dread,' he said, that's all the barbarians understand and all that holds the Empire together.

I probably more or less agreed with him at that time, but his words came back to me years later when I was talking to Agricola and he said something rather different: 'Terror and dread alone are weak bonds of attachment and once broken, they who cease to fear will begin to hate.'

The Roman empire, it seemed to me now, was an efficient system for plundering and pillaging and amassing wealth. Yes, it was held together partly by fear, but also by envy and admiration. In the conquered provinces the ambitious ones,

like Tullius, wanted a piece of the action. And they ended up being more Roman than the Romans. I had met plenty of men and women just like my wife's father in Britain. The new rulers of the province, Agricola called them. Africa had been part of the empire for more than 200 years, ever since the fall of Carthage and Leptis now had wealth to rival anywhere, even Rome itself. Britain will go down the same path. It's already happening.

It was late. I rolled Domitia's letter away for another day having failed to add a single word. As I stretched out on the couch, I heard voices outside the door and the cook, a round-faced man from Hispania, entered my room lifting the curtain nervously.

'Forgive me, sir.'

'Yes.'

'I have bad news.'

'Spit it out, man.'

'It's Epona.'

'What about her?'

'She's dead, sir. She hanged herself.'

'Where?'

'From a tree.'

'Yes, but where, you fool?'

'By the side of the new road. They cut her down, but it was...'

'Too late.'

'Yes, sir. Her body is still there.'

'Thank you. I'll come in a moment. You're dismissed.'

'Yes, sir.'

I blew out the lamp and sat for a while in the half-light of late evening. It was the first recorded death since we had embarked on this dismal mission at the beginning of the year. Technically it didn't even need to be officially recorded because she was a native, worse still a whore. She counted for nothing. Except to me. She'd left me alone.

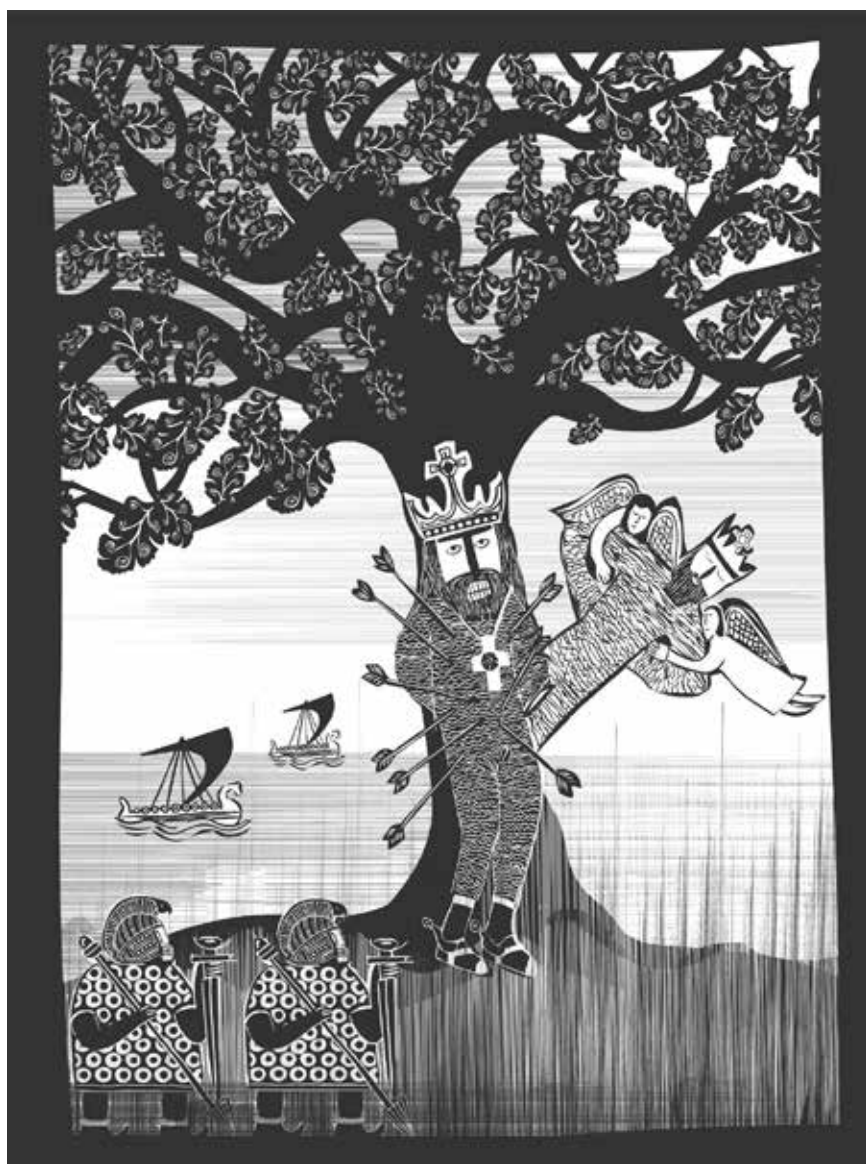
I got up and made my way across the camp to the road to nowhere.

Note

This story takes place In AD 83 or 84, shortly before the end of Agricola's governorship of Britain. It is now the town of Halesworth from where the road ran to Burgh Castle on the estuary of the Yare, Waveney and Bure rivers, near present day Great Yarmouth.



SEA WOLVES



Anushka Patel, known to her family as Nushky, grew up in Bury St Edmunds where her Gujarati grandparents had settled after being expelled from Uganda in the early nineteen seventies. A difficult time at school, where she was bullied for being shy, overweight, unsparty, Indian and clever, was followed by three lonely years at Oxford studying medieval history, just failing to get a first. Her year at Leipzig University was more enjoyable; there she perfected her knowledge of Old Low German and Old English, before doing a PhD at Cambridge on Saint Boniface's missions to Frisia and Germania.

Our story begins with Anushka, now a research assistant, at her desk in the postgraduate study room of the University Library. It is October 28th and the desk is groaning under the weight of books, manuscripts and bound periodicals, which include Wulfstan's Institutes of Polity, Alcuin's letters, the Saxon poem, The Battle of Maldon, and numerous related texts.

It should perhaps be said at this point that Anushka's life had already taken an unexpected turn. Less than twenty-four hours earlier she had met a boy, an undergraduate from Senegal, who was at Churchill College, studying European medieval literature and doing his dissertation on *Le Chanson de Roland*. He was tall with broad shoulders and beautiful, big eyes. Until now men had scarcely featured in Anushka's life. Her shyness and lack of interest in pop music, sport and parties had kept them all at bay. But now, quite unexpectedly, she found herself with an attractive young man and deep in conversation about the chansons de gestes and early French literature in general. She even made a risqué joke about the love potion in *Tristan and Isolde*. They talked late into the night. And they were meeting again that evening.

So, it was altogether possible, as the end of the afternoon approached, that Anushka's powers of concentration were

beginning to wane a little when, delving through a box file of commentaries on Alcuin and his journeys to Rome, she chanced upon an unexpected manuscript.

The first lines she read were these:

*Those dark days we dwelt with dread of the Danes;
Criss-crossing the country like wild, wailing wolves.
From their broad boats they would batter and burn
Town after town till the sea thieves were sated
With plunder and payments and the land was laid bare.*

It was clear to her immediately that the document had been misfiled. It consisted of two sheets of foolscap linen paper, folded together in half. The text was handwritten in black ink.

But what was it? She read on...

*Faced with fear and famine we looked for a leader
To defend our homeland and harass the heathens.
Then Earl Ælfgar arose and marshalled his men
And Godwine of Gipeswic gathered his troops.
In war-gear they went through forest and fen
To Burva, the royal retreat of the King.
And Earl Ælfgar spoke, his stout shield held high:
'My Liege Lord pray heed your suffering subjects
And raise your standard for the servants of Christ
Against the heathen horde that ransacks your realm.
Lead us to Deodford to redress our disgrace.'
And fair Eadmund arose in his royal robes
And answered ...*

That was where the first fragment ended, cut off in the middle of the line. It appeared to be a poem, written in modern English but using the old Saxon verse style. Fair Eadmund was clearly none other than Edmund, king of the east Saxons. But who were Ælfgar and Godwine of Ipswich? Their

names were new to her. Burva, on the other hand, was well documented as the site of one of the Saxon king's fortified palaces.

Anushka was puzzled and at the same time almost breathless with excitement. Born and brought up in Bury St Edmunds, she already knew a good deal about the legend of St Edmund and the related literature. She had even delivered a short series of lectures on the martyrdom. This poem, however, was entirely new and she was certain it had never been published. The text was in four relatively short fragments with no documentation to explain what it was or who had written it. She read the entire poem once, and then again. It bore a strong resemblance to an 18th century translation of *The Battle of Maldon*, which she knew almost by heart. Was it possible...could she have stumbled upon a translation of a lost Saxon poem about St Edmund?

The writer, whoever she or he was, had sought to retain the alliteration of an early Saxon poem, though there was no means of knowing how closely it adhered to the original, even if there were one. Yet there was something about its fragmentary nature along with the use of Saxon and Viking names and place names and its overall rhythm and integrity which convinced her it was genuine. A recent research paper on the Maldon text had demonstrated convincingly that it had been written in Saxon England around 1000 AD. Could this Edmund poem derive from the same period?

She looked at her watch. She was late. No time to go back to her room and change. She rushed along the river to the Mill where they had agreed to meet, arriving hot and red-faced. Thank god, he was still there. Sitting in the corner, staring into a half-empty glass of fruit juice. He smiled broadly when he saw her.

'I'm so sorry, Oumar. I got caught up with something and

forgot the time.'

He grinned. 'What do you want to drink?'

'Same as you.'

They sat with their drinks facing each other across the table and she launched into her discovery, unable to keep it secret a moment longer. He listened in silence as she told her story and explained the poem's narrative, fearing all the time that he wouldn't understand or be at all interested. She needn't have worried.

'Oh my god, that's so exciting,' said Oumar. 'A fragment of a lost Saxon poem. And you found it!'

'It's a translation, not the original text.'

'Yes I get that. But wow, you've even got a new hero: Ælfgar who dies to save his king, exactly like Roland at Roncesvalles.'

'Though it was probably written nearly a century earlier.'

'In England?'

'Probably. Somewhere in the south-east I should say. So, what shall I do with it?'

'That's obvious, isn't it? Publish it, and quickly.'

'I ought to tell my supervisor.'

'And let him take the credit? Look, what difference will it make if you transcribe it and write a brief commentary before you announce it to the world? That way your name will be on it. I'll help you if you want.'

Anushka agreed.

At 9.05 the next morning they were again sitting facing each other, but this time across Anushka's table in the library. Omar began transcribing the poem. He asked her whether he should give it a title and they settled on, The Battle of Thetford and the Martyrdom of St Edmund.

He had lovely handwriting, much better than her scrawl, and she watched his long dark fingers delicately encircling the fountain pen as, head down, he carefully copied the first fragment. Meanwhile Anushka refreshed her knowledge of the relatively few facts known about the death and martyrdom of St Edmund.

The year was 870AD. The first fragment of her poem told of the Saxon resistance to what became known as the Great Heathen Army, a large Viking or Danish force under the command of two brothers, Ivar the Boneless and Ubbe Ragnarsson. They had launched a war of aggression in 865AD and had conquered much of the north-east of England (Northumbria and Mercia). Over the winter of 869-70, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, written only 20 years after Edmund's death, the Danes settled at Thetford (Deodford) which became their centre of operations for the continuing conquest of East Anglia. Unfortunately, all that the Chronicle says about the battle is: *'That winter Edmund fought with them. But the Danes gained the victory and slew the king.'*

The line from the poem that had really caught Anushka's attention was:

Lead us to Deodford to redress our disgrace

because over the centuries many places had laid claim to be the site of King Edmund's last battle. Hoxne, near Diss had always been the favourite but strong arguments had been

put forward in recent years for placing the battle on the River Gipping near Stowupland, and also at Maldon in Essex (not to be confused with the Battle of Maldon of the Saxon poem, which took place over a hundred years later in 991AD).

However, the idea that Edmund's army travelled from Burva (now Bures St Mary, south of Sudbury) to confront the Vikings at their headquarters in Thetford seemed wholly convincing. The distance was just 35 miles and there was also evidence of a battle fought at this time at Snarehill, above the river just to the south of Thetford. Yet, by giving the poem the title '*The Battle of Thetford*' Anushka knew she would come in for heavy criticism from some entrenched academic quarters.

The second and longest fragment of the poem opened in mid-battle and at first the Saxons' surprise attack seemed to have paid off...

along the length of the line

*The Saxon men stood with their shields raised aloft
As the arrows rained down from archers' bows.
There fell Eardwulf, and Leofric too lost his life,
But Earl Ælfgar arose and rallied his ranks
And wielding their weapons with ferocious force
They crossed the cold waters. Face to face with the foe,
They slashed with their swords and stabbed with their spears
And drove the Danes back like the turning tide.
Ælfgar led the line, urged on his brave band:
'To the glory of God and the death of the Danes!'
He cried, and he cut down the savage sea-men
As a sharp scythe severs the barley stalks.
Bitter the battle, many brave fighters fell:
Bada and Beorthric both died in the dust
But they sold their souls dearly in Danish blood.
Then a lofty sea-warrior launched his long spear,
Hurled from his hand with fearsome force it struck*

*The breast of brave Bertwald, blood brother
Of Ælfgar; the point passed clean through his heart.
He was the son of Theomund, thegn to the king
And he fell face down at the feet of the Earl.
Ælfgar beat his breast and howled to the heavens
For vengeance; he advanced on the Viking
And, with one blow from his bright battle-axe,
Split the head of the heathen in two equal halves
As a woodsman will cleave the trunk of a tree.
The Danes drew back from the savage assault;
Many fled to the forest in fear of their lives.*

After the initial successes, however, the advance of the Saxons is stopped with the arrival of reinforcements under the command of Ubbe Ragnarsson...

*Yet, the moment the Vikings seemed vanquished,
There came a clamour and clashing of swords
As two hundred heathens borne by their boats
And wading the waters and with blood-curdling cries,
Smashed into the swordsmen encircling the king.
The shield wall was shattered, the slain fell to earth
And the king called for his ranks to retreat
And hold their line on the heights of the hill.
Led by Ubbe, the Danes gained ground on the guards;
Godwine fell to ground, stabbed through with a spear,
And, as his breath left his body, he bellowed:
'Stand firm, fair Saxons; show the heathen your swords
And lay down your lives by the side of your lord.'
His cry carried across to the ear of Ælfgar
And the earl raised his...*

The topography of the poem – the navigable river, the ford and the hill above the river – seemed to fit the location of Snarehill. Anushka also discovered a legend that the Nunnery of St George, now a ruin on the Little Ouse below Snarehill, was founded in memory of those who fell 'in a

great battle between Edmund and the Vikings’.

She explained her theory about the location of the battle to Oumar. He said it made complete sense, which pleased her immensely. Oumar then read aloud the third, short fragment about the last moments of the battle. He had a strong deep voice and he read the poem beautifully. Anushka closed her eyes and imagined the scene on the hill above the river.

*‘...not one foot will I flee,
But for my liege lord I will lay down my life.
Beside my brave brethren, I brandish my sword
To bring death to the Danes.’ So spoke bold Ælfgar,
His sharp sword held high and first into the fight
He slew two sturdy sea-wolves with one slash
Of his blade and he fought on with fury
‘Gainst the hordes of the heathen, till wearied by wounds
He fell at the feet of...*

‘Ælfgar sacrifices himself in the name of his king,’ said Anushka.

‘Just like Roland for Charlemagne,’ said Oumar.

‘Exactly. And Edmund flees the battlefield. But where does he go?’

‘My guess is that he would head back to Burva, particularly with Ubbe and Ivar hot on his heels.’

‘That’s due south. But Hoxne, where everyone says he was martyred, is 20 miles to the east of Thetford.’

‘So, why would he go there?’

‘Too be honest there’s not a lot of evidence either way.’

'But you've got a theory,' said Oumar grinning broadly.

'Well, sort of. As you say the king's best hope would be to return to his fortress. And the route south would take him through Bury.'

'Where he's buried. So, what you're saying is that the Danes caught up with him somewhere near Bury St Edmunds and that's where he was murdered.'

'That's right.'

'Are you going to tell me where?'

'Yes, but I need to look something up first.'

'Then let's have lunch and after you can do your research.'

Anushka suddenly realised she was very hungry. They went to a cheap restaurant called the Rice Boat and had vadas and samosas with sambar, which was a bit spicy for Anushka and made her sweat, but it was nice all the same. She told Oumar about her home in Bury St Edmunds. She wondered as she spoke what her mami would think of her having lunch with a handsome black man, who was a Muslim and four years younger than her.

When Oumar began to tell her the racy story of his own family she thought with a smile that her mother would have a fit.

'My great grandfather Moussa called himself a sea trader,' said Oumar. 'But you could say he was more of a pirate.'

'Or a sea wolf like the brothers Ragnarsson?'

'Exactly. They say he would raid the villages from Dakar all the way up to the Barbary Coast. By the way, I've been

meaning to ask you, why is Ivar called Boneless?’

‘No-one really knows... but some say it may be a reference to male impotence,’ said Anushka blushing.

‘Ah, really. Well Moussa wasn’t. Impotent, I mean. He captured my great grandmother on one of his raids and she had nine children with him. But he made so much money that, even shared out between all those kids and grandchildren, there was plenty to go round. My family is still quite wealthy by Senegal standards. Though my parents couldn’t have afforded to send me to Cambridge if I hadn’t got a lucky scholarship.’

Anoushka found herself relaxing in his company. She even liked his habit of touching her arm or shoulder to make a point in his conversation or when they were sharing a joke, though if anyone else had behaved like that towards her she would have recoiled instantly. He told her she had the best brain of anyone he’d met in Cambridge, which for all its absurdity made her smile with pleasure.

After lunch the translation of Abbo of Fleury’s Passion of St Edmund that Anushka had ordered from the archive was lying on the desk. Written around 985AD by Abbo, a monk, it claimed to be based on an account by Edmund’s armour-bearer, an eyewitness at the king’s death.

She showed Oumar the key passage about the Danes capturing Edmund: *Eadmund, it happened, was at that time staying at some distance from the city, in a township which in the native language is called Hægelsidun, from which also the neighbouring forest is called by the same name.*

‘Hægelsidun?’ said Oumar. ‘Where’s that?’

‘There’s a place called Hellesden Ley which stands next to a

medieval moated enclosure. It's five miles south of Bury on a direct route to Burva.'

'So, that's where he died?'

'Perhaps. I think it's where Ivar and Ubbe caught up with him.'

Oumar read the final fragment of the poem, a moving description of Edmund's martyrdom...

*The villainous Vikings tormented their victim,
Aiming their arrows at the bare breast of the king;
They taunted and teased him and bled him dry.
Eadmund suffered in silence till his soul
Took flight and his lifeless corpse hung from the tree.
Then Ivar with one savage swing of his sword
Beheaded the king and held him by his hair,
And, to the cheers of his comrades he cast
Fair Eadmund's head far into the forest
Amongst thickets and thorns...*

'The thickets and thorns of Hægelisdun wood,' said Oumar.

'It's a pity the story of the wolf is missing,' said Anushka.

'Wolf?'

'Yes, after the Danes departed, the local people went in search of Edmund's head. And this is what Abbo of Fleury says: *It was also a great miracle that a wolf was sent, through the guidance of God, to protect that head both day and night from the other animals. The people went searching and also calling out, just as the custom is among those who often go into the wood: "Where are you now, friend?" And the head answered them: "Here, here, here," and called out the answer to them as often as any of them called out, until*

they came to it as a result of the calling. There lay the grey wolf who watched over that head, and had the head clasped between his two paws.

‘And I guess the head was miraculously joined to the body and brought to Bury St Edmunds to be buried in a church and become a destination for pilgrims?’

‘Right first time.’

‘And there it lies today.’

‘Well, no actually. In 1010 the Danes invaded East Anglia again. And Edmund’s body went on another journey, to London this time. It was brought back to Bury later, only to be stolen by the French knights fighting in the Barons’ War of 1217, and taken to Toulouse. His bones were finally returned to England in 1901, though not to Bury, but Arundel Castle in Sussex.’

‘How is it you know so much?’ said Oumar, taking her hand.

‘Because I’m a lot older than you,’ said Anushka.

Oumar smiled. ‘Not so much older. And after today,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I can live without your stories. Will you tell me another one this evening?’

She nodded.



ANARCHIE



The Normans are a race inured to war, And can hardly live without it.
William of Malmesbury

Edwin is a carpenter. Over the years he has turned his hand to most things to do with wood, from felling and planking oak trees and building houses to making fine furnishings for the lords and barons. His workshop in a big lean-to attached to his house is open on two sides but sheltered from the northerly winds by drop-down leather awnings. Presently he is working on one of his most taxing tasks: a long, oak banqueting table and benches for Earl Hugh's castle.

He has selected the boards for the tabletop carefully from his large stock of timber: fine, long planks of well-dried oak, largely free of knots and blemishes and with a nice, close grain. The trestle legs are made of sturdy oak too, again the best pieces chosen from his store. The timber has been drying in the air for at least two years; it's still pliable and easy to work and feels right to the touch.

Edwin thinks a lot about wood and not just when he's working. Whenever he sits on a chair, he measures it on a scale from comfort to instrument of torture. A door must fit its frame perfectly and close with the right sound. He looks at trees every day and visualises the objects they might become. The oaks that produced the planks for this table would have been planted 200 years ago or more. They were fine, tall trees at the time of the Conquest. He knew this for fact, because his grandfather had pointed out the stand to Edwin when he was a lad, told him what to look for in a growing tree and which ones would be ready for harvesting in twenty years or so.

His grandfather had been a fine carpenter and his father, too; mysteries of the trade passed on from father to son. Both are dead now. His grandfather lived to the great age of 75, old enough to remember King Harold's time and the Saxon lords of the manor, before the Normans came. His father died ten years back, when a rope broke and a beam from the tithe barn he was building collapsed and crushed his back.

Edwin brought his attention to the mortice joint he was chiselling. He was never happier than with a mallet and sharp chisel in his hands: every cut demanding precision and concentration. He listened to his young apprentice, Jack, working outside, sawing lengths of timber for the table legs and resisted the temptation to go and check up on him again. Jack was a good lad but he could be a bit slapdash at times and any mistake cost good materials.

When Edwin had taken the commission from Earl Hugh's steward, Allan Rolfe, he hadn't foreseen the aggravation it would bring. Not only was Rolfe forever interfering, trying to cut corners on cost and badgering him to deliver it sooner, but there was also the question of his own reputation. Edwin was determined that this table should be not just the biggest but the best he had ever made. He put pressure on himself. Working for the wealthiest family in Suffolk the very last thing he wanted was criticism or complaints about the quality of the finished piece.

Edwin's father, Edgar, had never worked for the Bigods. Never wanted to. Like his own father, a staunch Saxon of the old school, he was deeply suspicious of the Norman barons. *Veire, nen, excusey me!* Edwin's grandfather used to say, holding his nose to mock the nasal sounds of the French language. He deeply resented the way the old Saxon nobility, source of his most lucrative work, had been swept aside by William the Conqueror. *The Bastard has stolen our land, he'd complain. We're a country of deer parks and forests now, chased off the commons so that the barons can hunt and carouse.*

But times changed. The new barons became more English in their dress and customs. They married into the old Saxon families and spent more time now in England than on their estates in Normandy. Plenty of people had come to terms with the new gentry, said that they were doing a good job

of keeping the peace and protecting the fiefdoms. The Normans had built a reputation for strong castles, strong governance and law and order. And the long-suffering villeins were as usual prepared to put up with most things if it meant an end to constant fear of an attack from the north or from the sea. People grumbled about the taxes, though if pressed they'd admit that it had been no better under the Saxons. King Henry, son of the Conqueror, had ruled for 25 years and gained a reputation as a master builder of cathedrals and monasteries but also a builder of trust and relationships and institutions. It was said of him that he kept the barns full, and no king could be expected to do more. By the end of his reign he was almost accepted as a true English monarch. And then it all went wrong.

Like a forest full of raging wild beasts, the barons had been seized by a passion for violence for the past ten years. The struggle between King Stephen and the Empress Maud for the throne had cast the entire land into turmoil. The Anarchie was the word the French Norman lords used to describe these times of abject lawlessness and confusion. And confusion there was, no doubt about it: every baron taking up arms against his neighbour, forming new alliances every week, depending on whether they judged that the King or the Empress was in the ascendant. One week you hear that Earl Bigod has seized Norwich Castle on behalf of the Empress. Then he's forced to surrender by Stephen and fights on his side at the battle of Lincoln, where Stephen gets taken hostage and old Hugh changes sides again. Next thing you know Maud has invested him as first Earl of Norfolk. In short, no-one knew where they stood from one minute to the next.

News that filtered through locally was often based on rumour and hearsay and even if accurate it was likely to be out of date. The local folk didn't get involved a great deal in the fighting, which was largely borne by the knights, like Edwin's friend Geoffrey, and mercenaries from the towns and cities.

But, of course, the poor suffered the taxes and the shortages and the rising prices that civil war brought. Uncertainty affected everyone to a greater or lesser extent.

As he worked on his table for the castle, Edwin always had the nagging thought that Hugh Bigod might cancel the order because he needed money for the wars or, worse still, that Framlingham Castle might fall into a rival's hands. He'd talked to Geoffrey about his concerns when his friend had ridden by earlier that morning.

'Bigod's doing his best to avoid taking sides,' said Geoffrey. 'He may have backed the Earl of Essex in his latest rebellion against the King, but he won't throw in his lot with Maud again.'

'But I heard King Stephen has sent his sons to Bury Castle,' said Edwin.

'That's right. William and Eustace. They won't be much of a threat to Hugh Bigod though. A few skirmishes maybe.'

'Why not?'

'Stephen hasn't got the men to raise an army against Earl Hugh. He's too busy with the uprisings in the west country.'

Geoffrey had fought with Earl Bigod's forces at Lincoln and more recently he'd been riding with the militias protecting the castles at Bungay and Framlingham. He was a tall, fair-haired, good-looking young man, the same age as Edwin, though not of the same upbringing. Geoffrey was a knight; his father owned an estate near Framlingham. Yet the two boys had grown up together, climbing trees, making camps in the woods, swimming in the Mere and later, when Geoffrey was a squire, riding and hunting on his father's horses. Perhaps surprisingly, their friendship had lasted into

manhood.

'There won't be a lot of trouble round these parts. Least not for a bit,' said Geoffrey. 'Old Hugh's playing a cagey waiting game.'

'Waiting for what?'

'For the King to die and Maud's son Henry to be crowned.'

'And you think that will happen? He's only a lad.'

'Put money on it. Neither the townsfolk nor the baronage will allow Maud to run the country because they don't want to be ordered about by a woman. And beside she's too bad tempered. Her husband, Geoffrey the Handsome, isn't much liked either.'

'Because he's handsome?'

'No.' Geoffrey laughed. 'Because he's Duke of Anjou and Normandy and too powerful for the barons' liking. But young Henry is another matter. He's the grandson of the old king. They'll flock to him and he will bring an end to the Anarchie.'

Edwin scoffed. Geoffrey was well known for his wild predictions, which mostly turned out to be hopelessly wide of the mark. But an end to the Anarchie would suit most people. The wars had badly affected the administration of justice: complaints were not being heard and the stewards and the reeves and the tax-collectors felt they could behave in an ever more high-handed manner with their masters away. There were some folk, of course, who preferred it when their lords were off fighting, but they were the cunning and the tricky ones who took advantage of the break in the rule of law.

Geoffrey was bound for Bungay Castle and couldn't stay long. But he found time to greet Edwin's wife Anne, and his younger brother, Arthur who lived with them and worked on the family's smallholding. Edwin and Anne had been married for three years. They'd yet to be blessed with a child which was a growing concern for them and grist to the mill of the local gossips.

Geoffrey was in the saddle before he asked the question Edwin had been expecting.

'And your mother? How's Ester?'

'I saw her a week or so ago,' said Edwin, blushing slightly because he knew full well it was longer.

'The boys still as unruly as ever?'

'Uncontrollable.'

'Take after their dad, eh?'

Geoffrey was very fond of Ester. His own mother had been ill for most of his childhood and died when he was still in training as a page. Ester was his support through those tough times as he struggled to meet his father's expectations. His second mother, he often called her. The two boys grew up side-by-side and she was the constant presence in their lives, feeding them, mending their clothes and giving them advice and sympathy whenever needed. Geoffrey never forgot his debt to her.

But Ester's fortunes had changed. After Edwin's father Edgar died, she had remarried within the year. There was nothing unusual in that; she was still relatively young and it was fully expected that a widow should look to another protector. The problem was that she chose the wrong man. Roger Rolfe,

brother of the Earl's steward Allan, was a rude, arrogant, avaricious man, who had never been much liked in the town. He was a sheep farmer, a sheep rustler too if you believed the gossip, with enough good pastureland to make him rich. Edwin always wondered what his mother saw in him. Fat and red-faced when he married her, he was now twice the size and rode a long-suffering mule rather than walk anywhere.

It wasn't long before malicious rumours started to circulate. People had seen them together before Edgar died. She was only interested in the money, they said. Some went so far as to suggest that Edgar had been murdered and his wife had used witchery to make the beam fall so that she could marry Roger Rolfe. All nonsense, of course, but nonsense heaped on nonsense began to gain weight and credence in the context of a less than happy marriage. From the outset Rolfe refused to welcome Edwin and his brother into his house. He had already grabbed half their land as part of his wife's dowry. Ester protested but she knew that for a wife to speak her mind was beyond her legal status. Under Norman law her rights were entirely subsumed under the protection of her husband. She too had become Rolfe's property.

So, in the end Ester was left with little choice but to agree that Edwin, 17 at the time of his father's death, and young Arthur should stay on in the family home, where Edwin would be able to carry on the carpentry business. Most days she came over to cook and look after them. But then she had the twins. The two boys were now nine years of age and they were the terrors of the town.

'They've been thieving chickens again and poaching deer and the devil knows what,' said Edwin.

'Everyone knows they're up to it. And Roger, he only encourages them,' said Geoffrey.

'They'll be caught afore long.'

'Poor Ester. She got her own Anarchie to deal with,' said Geoffrey. 'I'll visit her when I'm back.'

Edwin watched his friend ride off. The conversation had re-kindled his own feelings of guilt. It had been a good bit more than a couple of weeks since he'd been to see his mother. More like two months. And the last visit, late one afternoon, had left bitter memories. As usual he'd made sure that Rolfe wasn't at home before he announced himself. She was washing clothes. She jumped when he entered the cottage.

'Oh, Edwin, it's you.'

She didn't even give him a smile but he put his hand on her back and kissed her on the cheek, her hollow cheek. She looked gaunt and tired, Her eyes were black and sunken and her hair hung long in uncombed strands.

'I brought you some plum jam Annie made.'

She took the jar and put it on the table without a thank you.

'Is that what you come for?'

'I come to see you, of course.'

'Well, I can't stop to listen to you. Got to get these done before dark.'

Edwin stood and watched her working. As the years of living with Roger Rolfe had gone by she'd become sullen and increasingly silent. She had been a devout woman, a regular churchgoer but after the twins were born, she attended less frequently; Rolfe never went.

Except for the pummelling of the washing and the odd sigh from Ester, the cottage was plunged into silence. Edwin scrutinised his mother's face and arms as she worked. There had been rumours that Roger beat her and, in the past, Edwin had noticed the odd cut and bruise. But when he'd plucked up courage to mention the subject she'd laughed it off, made some excuse for the injury and then told him firmly that it was none of his business. Though it went against the grain, he didn't pursue the matter again. Arthur said they shouldn't interfere. But then Arthur had always been scared of Roger.

There were dark patches under her eyes, most likely tiredness but in the gloom of the cottage he couldn't be sure. His mind drifted to happier memories of her. The occasion, after his father died, when she had gone with a group of pilgrims to the shrine of St Edmund at the new abbey at Bury; it was the longest journey of her life and it rained most of the time but when she returned she was full of smiles and joy and it was as if the burden of grief had been lifted from her shoulders. Edwin recalled her smile when she'd shown him her pilgrim's badge, with St Edmund tied to a tree and pierced with arrows.

'Have you still got that old badge from the abbey?' he asked her abruptly.

'That what?'

'You know the pilgrim's badge you got; the one with the martyrdom of St Edmund.'

'Don't talk daft. I must have thrown that out years ago.'

There was a racket outside and the door flew open. For a moment Edwin thought it was Rolfe, but one of the twins burst into the room, he couldn't distinguish which one. The boy was laughing and holding a rook by the feet and the bird

was flapping its wings feebly. An arrow had pierced its breast and the arrow head stuck out on the other side of its body. The boy waved the stricken bird in front of his mother's face and made cawing sounds.

'For Chrissake take that out of here, Nicholas,' cried Ester.

Nicholas laughed again, slapped the rook on the table and rushed out of the cottage. Edwin walked over to the flapping bird and swiftly wrung its neck.

'Is he always like that?'

'It's just a thing they're going through.'

'How do you mean? Killing things?'

'Yes.'

'With bow and arrow?'

'That's what boys do. They'll grow out of it.'

As he left, Edwin picked up the dead rook.

'I'll come round when you're less busy,' he said.

His mother mumbled something inaudible and returned to her washing.

* * *

The delivery to the castle of the table and benches took careful planning. The tabletop was 20 feet long and weighed almost half a ton. Edwin intended to attach and glue the trestle legs on site but the sheer length and weight of the timber meant that he had to construct a special carriage by binding

two sturdy, two-wheel wagons together. Even then, the axles had to be reinforced.

'Seems a lot of work and effort just for old Hugh to entertain his hunting party and their hangers-on,' said Geoffrey as he helped lash one end of the table to the cart.

Edwin hammered in wooden wedges to keep it in position. The wagon was already hitched up to two stout horses.

'Thanks for your help,' Edwin said to his friend. 'That's a fine pair of cart horses you borrowed. How much they cost you?'

'Nothing. I called in a favour.'

Geoffrey had also brought along some villeins from the estate to help with the loading. It had taken ten men to lift the table into position.

The slow procession through the town up to the castle accounted for the best part of the morning. The track was badly rutted after the rains and several times the great oak table was on the brink of sliding into the gutter as one or other of the cart's wheels pitched into a pothole. It was noon before they arrived at the castle gates and it took a further hour to manhandle the wagon across to the great hall and manoeuvre the table into its chosen location. Allan Rolfe was precise with his instructions and as rude and officious as he knew how to be. Edwin's dislike of the two brothers seemed to grow with every encounter. Allan was now nearly as fat as Roger and he certainly knew how to throw his weight about.

There was some consolation for Edwin in the news that Earl Bigod was away holding court in Bungay and wouldn't be on hand to pronounce his verdict on the table. But as Edwin and Geoffrey were assembling the legs, the countess walked in, surveyed the scene and announced haughtily that *it ought to*

be at the other end of the hall. Rolfe treacherously blamed the mistake on Edwin and the villeins had to be called back to relocate the finished trestles and table.

By the time the job was done it was late afternoon and everyone was tired, hungry and thirsty. Rolfe hadn't offered them so much as a small beer.

'It looks magnificent,' said Geoffrey. 'You must be proud.'

'Not bad,' said Edwin modestly.

'Too good for a banqueting table. You'll have Hugh's knights carving their names on it in no time.'

'You watch they don't,' said Edwin, polishing the surface with his sleeve.

'Has Rolfe paid you yet?' asked Geoffrey.

'Don't make me laugh.'

'Pity. I was hoping you'd take us all to the alehouse. Looks like it's me in the chair again.'

Geoffrey led the motley crew to the recently opened alehouse in the market square where it transpired that he had already ordered food and drinks. Cold chicken, bread and beer quickly restored spirits. The church bells were ringing for evensong when the little party filed out into the marketplace.

'I thought I'd call in on Ester on the way home,' said Geoffrey to Edwin.

'Good idea. I'll come too. I can take the horses back in the morning,' said Edwin.

Rolfe's house was a mile or more out of town and they bounced their way there on the heavy, makeshift wagon. Geoffrey leaned against the side of the cart and told one of his many tales from the civil war. The King had laid siege to Oxford Castle, where the Empress Maud was in residence. The siege dragged on into the bitter winter and, in desperation because supplies were running low, Maud devised an escape plan. The river had been frozen for several days and she ordered a dozen or more pure white cloaks to be made. Then early in the morning with her knights, all of them dressed in the cloaks, she walked across the Thames on the ice, under the noses of her attackers.

'Stephen's army continued the siege for days until they realised she had gone,' said Geoffrey. 'The King called it a 'woman's trick' and tried make out that she had used unnatural practices.'

'Sounds like a poor loser to me.'

Geoffrey laughed. 'Maud has twice the guts of Stephen and three times his intelligence. If she were a man she'd make a fine king and the barons wouldn't dare provoke her.'

'Women have a hard time of it,' said Edwin.

'You're telling me. Maud's value was in her womb. Her father Henry married her off to the Holy Roman Emperor when she was twelve. And when he died she was packed off to Geoffrey, Duke of Anjou.'

'The Handsome?'

'That's him. And they produced the sought-after son. Henry Plantagenet, future king of England...if all goes well.'

It was the same with his own mother, thought Edwin. Once

she'd produced the twins, Rolfe had got what he wanted from her. Now she was little more than a servant in his household.

They were approaching the cottage and Edwin stood up on the cart to survey the scene.

'Blast!' he said. 'I reckon Roger's home.'

'How's that?'

'His mule's tied up over there against the barn.'

'And what's that in front of it?'

'Looks like a dead sheep,' said Edwin.

He leapt down from the cart to inspect it. An arrow was sticking out of the beast's back. He turned it over.

'Throat cut too,' said Edwin. The blood had not yet congealed

'There's another over there,' said Geoffrey. 'Same thing, I reckon. Someone's been using them for target practice.'

The two dead animals were lying within twenty yards of Rolfe's house. A strange brooding silence hung over the place. Edwin walked slowly towards the front door. Geoffrey followed closely behind. Neither man spoke. They were within a stride or two of the cottage when the door flew open and Ester was standing there, her face white, eyes staring. In her right hand she held a bloody kitchen knife. Her white sleeve and the front of her pale green dress were covered in dark red blood. Her lips moved slightly as if she were saying something, but not a word came forth from her mouth.

Edwin stood transfixed. Behind him he heard Geoffrey's sharp intake of breath. Seemingly unaware of the presence of the two men, Ester edged forward uncertainly, continuing to stare into the distance. Then she glanced down at her hand and, with a look of horror and a sharp intake of breath, she let the knife drop. The sharp point stuck in the ground.

Edwin felt a gentle tap on his back. Geoffrey was gesturing him to enter the house. He brushed his mother's arm as he stepped forward and she flinched slightly. Geoffrey moved quickly to her left and took hold of her arm. She continued staring blankly ahead. Through the open door the room appeared to be in darkness. Edwin hesitated on the threshold, listening. Silence.

His next step took him into the room... into the Anarchie.



THE STORM



Bright were the city buildings, many bathhouses, lofty with many roof-tops, and the great clamour of the warriors – many meadhalls filled with the joys of men, until mighty fate changed all that.

The Ruin – 9th Century Anglo Saxon

I went back to Dunwich on Christmas Eve, nine months after my disgrace. I returned because I had nowhere else in the world to go. My mother was sick abed and the old man needed a skivvy. But he told me straight there was no place in his home for the produce of my fornication.

My father never loved me. In truth, I think he hated me because I was born a girl and a cripple and, in his words, wasn't much to look at. Either way he paid no attention to me except to curse and beat me. That's about all I remember of my childhood.

I came between my mother and my father. It was as if I was the cause of their quarrel, though I reckon they would have found plenty of other reasons to fight had I never existed. My mother loved me well enough. I was an only child and four still-born babies only helped to increase her love. She stood up to father as best she could and he would beat her too, especially when he was drunk. But when she fell sick a darker cloud came over our home. As well as the nursing and the cooking and the housework I took the sharp end of the old man's anger. It was far better when he was away. He was a fisherman and his boat was often out for two, three nights on the trot but when he came back the drinking and the cursing and the beatings got worse than ever.

So, I went home with fear in my heart. But the hardest part was leaving my baby. When I found I was with child, I was sent away to avoid the scandal. An old aunt in Woodbridge gave me lodgings but she was a severe, religious woman and wanted nothing to do with me after the bastard was born. I gave birth in a poor hospital and after that I had a cruel choice: to starve with Alice, as I named her, in a strange town or leave her in the foundling home and hope that one day fortune's wheel would turn and I could go back for her.

My other bother was seeing him again. No matter how much Stephen tried to keep out of my way, I was bound to run into him or hear about him sooner or later. Dunwich is a large town with 18 churches, including the friaries and priories, yet with all those priests and clergy the gossip is worse than a small village. Everyone knows everyone's business.

I didn't want to think about Stephen but sometimes I couldn't get the honeyed words he'd said to me out of my head. He was the only man who had me believing, if but for the brief moments I was with him, that I was beautiful, like he said, in body and soul. I met him in our church – St Michael's, the fishermen's and mariners' church down by the East Quay. He was a Franciscan; the friars had come to the town a few years before I was born. They put up a fine, modern church and friary on the low-lying land by the coast, between St Michael's and St Bart's. Stephen was what they call an ordained friar. He told me that his life's calling was to care for the poor and sick and bring the Bible to the hearts of the uneducated. My mother grew very fond of him and when she fell sick and the ulcers on her legs got real bad so she could no longer walk, he'd come and sit by her bedside and read from the New Testament. I loved listening to his voice reading those sweet verses of the Gospels. And I loved him for his kindness to mother. He was a tall, dark-haired man, a bit shy with a slightly awkward manner. I found him good-looking, especially when he smiled and I believed in his goodness when he offered to be my confessor.

When I was with him I forgot I walked with a limp on account of my club foot and that, even though I was now nearly 18, not one of the fishermen's sons had courted me. I forgot the difference in our age – he was 33 – and in our upbringing. And, though I curse myself or being so naïve, I believed him when he said *our souls were always destined to find each other.*

The first time he kissed me, I was confused but flattered. But a day or two later he kissed me again, hard on the lips, and he squeezed me and fumbled with my clothes and held my breasts and said he longed to see my beauty. I fought him off. Held his wrists, but he was strong and determined and kissed my neck and begged me and stroked me between the thighs. And I gave in.

After that, he came to our cottage on the days that the old man put to sea. Sometimes the boat would go out early and come back in the evening; sometimes it was two, three days or more. I'd leave a pot of dried flowers at the window to let him know the coast was clear. He'd read to mother as usual but, after, he'd give her a strong sleeping draught called dwale. He told me that the friars had developed it from secret ingredients to ease the pain of the sick. When she was asleep we were off to my room and closing the shutters and he'd undress me and kiss my body all over. He never stayed long though after he had had his way with me for fear of the neighbours' gossip.

That late autumn and winter were the happiest days of my life. Stephen told me that God was on our side and our love put us firmly in His grace. He even told me that in the arms of an ordained friar my virginity would always remain unspoiled. But then as the daffodils showed and a hint of Spring, I started growing fatter and mother soon got wind that I was pregnant. She guessed that it was Brother Stephen and, when I finally confessed, she sent for him.

I shan't forget that evening and the conversation I overheard from my room.

'Well, what are you going to do about it?' mother demanded.

'Do? What *can* I do?' His voice was faint and slightly strangled.

'Marry her.'

'Impossible. I'm a priest. I can't marry. Couldn't she marry someone else before...?'

'Before the whole town knows she's a harlot and fornicating with a depraved, so-called man of God?'

'Well... yes it would be the best thing if someone could be found.'

'Maybe. But it would take money. And plenty of it.'

'Money,' mumbled Stephen. 'I have no money. I renounced everything to become a friar.'

'Then what are we going to do.'

'We must put our hopes with God.'

'You mean do nothing you thoughtless man. You mean let God and his depraved priests ruin the life of a poor girl. Leave her with no prospects, no future and a bastard child to bring into the world.'

Stephen was silent. I imagined him staring at her in horror. Then he made his feeble excuses and left without speaking to me. From that day on he locked himself away in the friary and I didn't see him again before I was sent off. Mother said he was a lily-livered coward and I was far better without him.

* * *

My first week back in Dunwich was cold even for the time of year, with a raw east wind coming off the sea. Dunwich is a town like no other. Fishing and shipbuilding are its trades. But the second biggest population and not far behind the

fishing families in numbers are the priests. The town is the seat of the bishop and there are more churches here than any city in East Anglia.

Now, I wouldn't say seafarers and fisherfolk are the most ungodly of people but they are certainly amongst the most blasphemous. Every day the novices and monks and clergymen are treated to curses and oaths and swearing that would make a knight-at-arms blush. Like all ports Dunwich is a lively place and, in its market and crowded streets, you can hear German and French and Dutch spoken most days of the week. I dare say they're swearing too, if I could understand them.

It was Christmas time when I returned, but there was little cause for celebration in our family. In some ways it felt like I'd never been away. When he was home, the old man was just the same: silent and brutal. Mother was frailer and her coughing worse. One night she brought up blood from her chest and I wanted to call a doctor, but she said we couldn't afford nothing like that. There was a Christmas mass at St Michael's and I went alone and sat at the back. On St Stephen's day – his saint's day – there was a procession of relics in the market square, followed by singing and dancing. I watched the goings-on and spoke to some old friends and acquaintances, but no-one seemed to want to talk to me for long.

My daily chores of washing and drying our clothes, changing mother's dressings, shopping at the market, cooking and mending nets for the boat left little time for thinking. A life of drudgery was what lay ahead for me. But little did I know that everything was about to change.

It was that awful last day of the year. It began badly. I was walking along King Street with my basket full of turnips from the market and the wind was up and there was rain and sleet

in the air and I was hooded with my head down. And in the corner of my eye I caught sight of him, Stephen, heading towards me coming from the harbour. I panicked and I was about to dive into the gorse when he spotted me and turned sharply off, on a path which led to the friary. I watched him go through the great gate and head for the refectory. Before he entered the building another, younger friar joined him and said:

‘Brother Stephen, you look as if you have seen a ghost.’

‘In a way that’s true, Brother Martin. I have just evaded a ghost from the past. None other than the fisherman’s girl.’

‘Ah, your old misdeeds come to haunt you, brother.’ There was a playful note in the young friar’s voice and he added, ‘You were a little lucky that the Minister did not take a more serious view of your frolics.’

‘I think he understood. After all I am not alone.’

‘Far from it, brother. We are all prey to human weakness. And perhaps you will be a little more careful next time.’

‘I shall follow your fine example with a certain daughter of a shipbuilder, Brother Martin,’ said Stephen sarcastically.

Martin laughed and slapped him on the back. ‘Prettier than your limping fishwife,’ he said and they entered the refectory together.

I was a good distance away, in truth they were almost out of sight. But their words seemed to drift towards me as if on the wind or in some even more mysterious way. Of course, I would rather not have heard the things they said and I returned home angry and right downhearted. But later I was glad because at last I could see Stephen for what he was.

The wind blew up much stronger through the morning. By midday the sea had already come over the shingle banks of the harbour, forcing the river back on itself. I had never seen the boats so high in their moorings and waves were breaking over the wooden pier at the mouth of the East Quay. The fishermen were muttering about *a rare old high tide tonight with the wind in the north.*

Mid-afternoon the storm broke. And it was a fierce one with snow first, then heavy rain. It would last on and off for three whole days. After dark the rain lashed down and the wind grew to gale force and beyond. My first thoughts were for the boats that were out at sea. Father had gone out the previous morning to fish the northern banks and he was expected back that night.

In the evening I went to St Michael's and said prayers for the fishermen. As I walked home I was near blowed off my feet. I heard some of the men shouting as they went down to the Daine and the Quay to secure their boats. It was dark and I couldn't see a lot from the cottage but I could hear the shingle being thrown up the beach by the force of the waves. It was like a ravening beast charging closer and closer. Mother was mad with fear and I tried to calm her but the panic got the better of her. She tried to get out of bed and fell and cut her leg. I tied a cloth around the wound and put her back. But she was still in a wild state, shouting that the house would be swept away and in the end I agreed to go to her sister's place in the High Street and find someone to help me carry her there.

As I stepped out I was hit by the full force of the storm. It was thunder and lightning now, loud and overhead. And, as a sheet of lightning lit up the East Quay, I could see that the water was over the harbour wall and spray from the breakers lashing the fishermen's huts. To the north-east waves as big as I'd ever seen were crashing over the low bank against the

walls of St Michael's. I headed up Hen Hill to try and get a better view, though it was near pitch black between the flashes of lightning. I made out some lights around the Daine but by now it was nigh impossible to distinguish where the land ended and the sea began.

I looked out to the east and the watery horizon. I couldn't see any lights at sea but I had the notion that I could hear the cries of fishermen and the wind roaring in the reefed sails and screaming through the sheets. And then I heard him clear, I know I did.

'Into the wind or we lose her,' yelled father.

'We'll be beached. Hold her facing,' yelled another.

'Bring it round, bring it round. My that's a beast. God save us!'

'The mast's gone, boy. We're buggered. Pray for your soul.'

And there was a roar of the giant wave breaking and a fearsome crash and screams. I saw nothing but I knew that father's boat had gone down with all hands.

I took the track past the chapel and through the Guilding Gate to my aunt's house on the High Street. She let me in. But she was alone and she wasn't coming out, even to help her sister.

What could I do? I set off again into the teeth of the gale to St Michael's. Maybe the pastor or James the warden might help me. The rain stung my face and I was soaked to the skin. I got halfway along the track above the shingle and met the sea, churning and raging. At first I couldn't understand it, thought I'd taken the wrong path. Then a sheet of lightning lit the sky and for a brief moment I saw the friary and St

Michael's. Both surrounded by water; they looked more like ships, fighting their way against the surge.

The sound of men singing drifted across the sea. Plainchant rising as a prayer to God. It grew louder. I could hear it distinctly above the roar of the sea and the howl of the wind. I listened amazed to the rise and fall of the notes. It was at the same time beautiful and immensely sad. And then in an instant it stopped.

I headed up the slope and got to the house just ahead of the tide. The spray was already lashing against the clapboard. There were shadowy figures moving amongst the houses, shouting and busying to save their possessions. I found a little wooden gate someone had tossed out and tied a rope to it. Then I managed to carry and drag mother out of the house and laid her down on the gate and pulled her like on a sled up the slope away from the Daine. It took all my strength to move her a few feet at a time with sudden jerks of the rope. There was no-one to help; they were all too busy rescuing their own. For an hour or more I battled through the mud and the rain. Mother was groaning and crying out, but she was only semi-conscious. Finally, two men we knew came by – Jonny and Martin who own the skiff *Margaret* – and they picked mother up and carried her to a hut by St Francis chapel. That's where we spent a wet, sleepless and terrifying night.

The storm was still raging at first light. Mother was asleep at last so I ventured out. The sea had retreated with the tide and I fought my way through the mounting wreckage down to the harbour. Our house lay like a flattened pack of cards covered in shingle and sand and mud. Many of the huts and cottages had disappeared completely or had been lifted up and shifted down the creek. People wrapped in cloaks and seal-skin mantles were desperately hunting for their few remaining possessions. The harbour itself was a shocking sight.

Boats piled on the hard as if a giant hand had picked them up and dropped them from a height. Others floated upturned or wrecked in the Daine and the old port. The wooden pier had gone. And most shocking of all was the river itself. The storm had driven the shingle bank across its mouth, blocking the entrance of the harbour to the sea. The river now flowed north a good hundred yards along the coast before making a new breach through the bank to the sea.

Fishermen and boatbuilders were grimly inspecting the wreckage, though there was not much they could do with the storm still raging.

I heard two men talking.

'That's the finish for the harbour,' said one. 'You ain't never going to get much of a ship over that shingle bar.'

'We're going to have to dredge it.'

'Good luck with that, boy. The coast has shifted and that's the river gone for good, you'll see. And the churches too. Hev you seen St Michael's tower? That's half down and old St Bart's is a heap of rubble.'

'The Friary's gone and all. Washed away. And that's less than thirty years since they built it. They say most of the friars are missing.'

'Missing?' I said, interrupting them. 'You mean drowned?'

'Looks like the poor beggars stayed singing and praying and left it too late to escape the waves. There's a couple made it to safety; a pair of young novices. Least that's what I'm told.'

'And the rest drowned,' I said under my breath as I walked away.

* * *

After the storm died down the town started to take stock of the devastation. As well as the closure of the harbour and the destruction of buildings, there was upwards of three score dead, though many of the bodies, including father's, were never found. Fifty or more families had been made homeless. The parish of St Michael, hampered by the damage to the church itself, struggled to house them all. Mother and I slept in a common dormitory in the Maison Dieu by the Pales Dyke for four weeks. Then we moved to an abandoned hovel by the Leper Gate. It had been partly done up by the parish and, though it wasn't much, it had two small rooms, a fireplace and gave us shelter from the winter blasts.

My strange power of overhearing distant conversations stayed with me like a curse. Sometimes it seemed I had voices in my head. I heard the neighbours talk of us as paupers and scroungers, living off the parish now the breadwinner was gone. I heard the shipbuilders grumbling and speaking of leaving the town because of the state of the harbour and the prohibitive cost of digging through the shingle bank to reopen it. I learned that Stephen's body had been found washed up on the shore and listened in on the mass that the friars said for his soul at his simple burial in the new consecrated grounds near All Souls'.

Mother died in May. I scraped together a little money for the funeral, and she was buried in St John the Baptist's churchyard, because most of St Michael's graves had been washed away. A few fishing families came to pay their respects alongside the regular mourners: the cripples and starving widows and the orphans and the blind: their hopes for a grand feast were sadly disappointed. From across the cemetery I overheard two women – regular fishwife gossips – talking ill of mother and me and I went over and berated

them. I was upset and I didn't mince my words. But it was a mistake. I could see from their faces that they were amazed that I had heard their chatter from so far off.

It was soon after that folk started calling me 'witch'. I heard the word near every day, in the market and the church and the fish market down by the harbour. They thought they were talking behind my back. But I heard them. Gossiping about my fornication with the priest and that I had killed my baby. And some even said I had used my black powers to kill Stephen out of revenge.

Word got around. I could tell by the way some people looked at me. Not everyone, of course. Old James, warden of St Michael's, was always kind to me and so were some of the fishwives. But after the storm the town was in a state of fear and uncertainty and people were looking for someone to blame.

* * *

That were more than three decades ago. I still live alone in the old hut by the Leper Gate.

The town is less prosperous now. Many have left. The harbour still silts up in spite of all their efforts to cut through to the sea. You don't hear near so many foreign voices in the market these days and the docks are much quieter. There might be two or three ships built in the yards every year where there used to be twenty or more.

I go out twice a day. Early in the morning, before the town wakes, I walk the shoreline to soak up the wildness of the sea and then again, at the close of the market, to pick up what I can to eat for next to nothing. Some of the children abuse me and call me witch and sometimes throw stones. And I overhear people sharing all sorts of mad notions

about me.

The sea in the early morning stirs up my thoughts. I think of Alice as I walk the shore. Where is she now? Married? A mother? Poor or rich or dead? I no longer dream of being reunited with her, save in heaven. But I think of her every day. I think of poor mother, too. And from time to time Stephen and my father come to my mind and I try my hardest to forgive them for their sins against me. As I watch the sea every day I learn its secrets and its moods. I tune into it; you can't be stagnant when there's an ocean by your door. I watch the tides creep higher year by year. Winter storms eat away at the shoreline. St Bart's is abandoned. The stones of the Friary have disappeared under the shingle, washed by the high tides. St Michael's tower is still in ruins and the church has flooded twice more since the Great Storm.

I try to warn them in the market. It'll come I tell them. Another Great Storm. And this time half the town will be ripped away, walls and all. And soon – in a hundred or two hundred years – Dunwich will be no more. All its fine churches lost to the sea.

I tell them. But all they do is laugh at me and call me witch.



HOMECOMING



The condition of the people was pitiable to behold. They sickened by the thousands daily, and died unattended and without help.

Giovanni Boccaccio

The coastline became more familiar as he got nearer. At Dunwich he kept to the beach avoiding the stricken town on the crumbling cliff top. It was a morning of bright sunshine with a gentle breeze coming off the sea. Another warm day in prospect. The crests of the waves sparkled and the water almost succeeded in reflecting the deep blue of the sky, though the persistent sludge brown of the North Sea lurked beneath.

Apart from the pain in his left knee – his battle wound – he felt strong and well. His limp was hardly bothering him this morning, even after the trudge over the shingle. Beyond Dunwich the beach was deserted, though out to sea there was more activity. A couple of fishing boats were making their way back with the morning's catch. He spotted a coal barge, hugging the coast – bound for London, he guessed – and a wherry with its cargo of malt.

The cries of curlews, oystercatchers and black-headed gulls rose from the inland marshes. Overhead two marsh harriers circled. And then he heard the sound that told him he was coming home and that it was Spring: the unmistakable deep-throated boom of a bittern.

It had been three years since he'd walked this shoreline... tumultuous years they had been. After his father's sudden death, the family's fortune had taken a turn for the worse. His mother inherited the landholding in the village but times were hard. Successive years of poor harvests had brought many families to their knees. He was forced to give up his studies at Cambridge and with the help of his uncle William he'd bought a commission in the King's army, an ensign under Sir Richard Pembrugge. And so the adventure in France began.

Something dark caught his eye on the shingle ahead close to the waterline. A lump of peat. Or perhaps a dead seal. As he drew closer however he realised it was the body of a man.

It hadn't been in the water long enough to be devoured by fish, but the belly was bloated and the flesh black. At the base of his neck the grotesque bloodied and blackened swellings told their familiar story. He had either died of the pestilence and been buried at sea or, more likely, been thrown overboard by his fellow sailors when they saw the first tell-tale signs. May as well die from drowning as suffer three days of agony and infect others into the bargain.

He hurried by. But the sight brought back the recent nightmare in Calais. The pestilence had come to the town the previous summer, on a wine ship from Bordeaux. The boat departed before the first sufferers fell sick, carrying its deadly cargo onward to the south coast of England. Over the autumn months and early winter more than half the population of Calais died. Most developed a high fever and the vile swelling buboes in the neck or groin and were dead within three to four days. But others died almost instantly, spitting blood and suffering excruciating pain.

Many fled the town, and he would have joined them but for the fear of the consequences if he deserted his post. He was one of the commanders of the small and shrinking garrison that the King had left behind after the capture of Calais from the French. A great number of his men died as the sickness took its toll and almost as many fled, especially the mercenaries. People looked for a cause of God's wrath. The preachers said it was punishment for their sins. Others blamed strangers and vagabonds and for a time gypsies, lepers, pilgrims and foreigners, and especially Jews, were killed on sight.

In March his term of duty finally came to an end and he was free to return. But crossing the Channel was no easy matter. Few sea captains wanted to sail to England where the pestilence was now running out of control and it took until the end of May before he secured a berth on a boat to Ipswich.

As soon as it put into port, he embarked on the two-day walk up the Suffolk coast to his home.

Reaching the Blyth River he cut inland through the marshland of the estuary. The dark roofs of Westwood, one of the homes of John Clavering, lord of the Blythburgh manor, loomed on the far bank. Clavering had been no friend to his father or his family, taking delight in imposing the maximum fines whenever any of them appeared before him in the manorial courts. A fine of ten pence for poaching eels on the lord's estate still rankled deeply.

Within half an hour he entered the grounds of the great priory; there was little sign of activity. The west door of the priory church, built in the Roman style, was closed and locked. He saw two of the brothers clearing weeds from around the trees in the orchard at the edge of the marsh. He was later to learn that 17 of the 30 canons and novices had been struck down, including the Prior himself.

The fear that had been gnawing at his guts grew stronger as he approached the village. Had his mother and sister survived the scourges of these wretched months? How many of his old friends had been snatched away by the pestilence? His first sighting of the new church reminded him that he hadn't prayed for two days or confessed his sins since leaving Calais. As he entered through the west door, he saw Master Edwin replacing candles by the altar. He had known the old priest all his life; been baptised by him and confirmed into the church. And he still remembered Edwin's words of tribute which had reduced him to tears at his father's funeral. Master Edwin was well loved in the village, though some complained that his sermons were rather dreary and old-fashioned.

Edwin threw up his hands as he caught sight of him and in a tangle of robes rushed down the aisle to greet him.

'My dear Harry!' he exclaimed, enveloping him in a rare hug – most people shunned physical contact these days. His body gave off a sweet smell of incense suffused with sweat.

Edwin had aged. His beard was now entirely white and his cheeks hollow. The clerical vestments hung loosely from his tall frame. Exhaustion brought about by the tribulations of weeks of pestilence and death showed in his sunken eyes.

Harry grasped the priest firmly by his shoulders. 'My mother?' he asked.

'Elizabeth is well,' said Master Edwin, but a dark cloud immediately drifted over his face.

'And Kate?'

'We buried her a month ago,' said the priest. He grasped the young man's hand and whispered, 'I'm sorry.' After a pause he said, 'She made her peace with God and I made sure she had a Christian burial, unlike many others...' His voice trailed off and then he began again. 'Too many poor souls ended up in the common pit, bundled up and thrown in together. But her cross is in the churchyard. Shall I show you?'

Harry nodded.

As they stood over his sister's grave with its simple wooden cross carved with her name, Edwin talked quietly of the dreadful events that had befallen the village. Harry's uncle, his mother's brother, had died too. And his two sons. Scarcely a family had been spared since the pestilence arrived in early April.

'As always, the poor suffer worst,' he said. 'More than half the field workers are gone, and we have no blacksmith nor miller. The Lord only knows how we will get the harvest in

and feed ourselves this winter.'

There was something in the way Master Edwin said the Lord only knows that hinted at a questioning of God's purpose. He seemed to be saying: What have we done to deserve such cruelty? Why have You abandoned us? Yet kindness and love still radiated in the old man's face as he expressed the hope that the worst days of the pestilence might be past. The torrent of deaths had slowed, first imperceptibly but now with some sense of an ending. Yesterday there had been but one funeral; a fortnight earlier he had been burying nine or ten a day...and that in a village which numbered no more than 500 souls at the start of the year.

Edwin said a short prayer over Katharine's grave and in the long silence that followed Harry rose from his knees to depart.

'My fondest regards to your mother,' said the priest. 'Tell her to be vigilant.'

'What do you mean, master?'

'Careful of what she says. You know your mother. She is a very intelligent woman but she can be, what shall I say...imprudent. These are delicate times.'

'Is there anything in particular?'

'Ask her yourself, my boy.' Edwin slapped him on the back and changed the subject. 'She told me you were on the field with the King at Crécy.'

'I was an ensign with the yeoman infantry.'

'It was a great victory. And you were there at the taking of Calais too?'

‘Yes. A hard siege. It took us a full year to break their spirit.’

A hard year indeed. A week after Crécy the triumphant English army had encircled Calais. They’d made several unsuccessful attempts to breach the walls and take the town by assault. Harry lost many men in the process of tunnelling and mining the defences. Morale, which had been as high as the town’s new cathedral towers at the outset, plummeted as winter approached and they watched the French running in supplies and reinforcements by sea. In the spring they built a fort commanding the entrance to the harbour and cut off the city’s lifeline. After that it was a matter of time. The bloody flux took hold, the dead were thrown over the walls as the English watched from the heights of Sangatte. Reports of cannibalism reached their ears. At the beginning of August the town’s elders finally surrendered and, although the King forbade further bloodshed, every single French man, woman and child was ejected from their homes. The looting was the best of the war; most of the soldiers under his command, peasants, militia men and mercenaries alike, were able to double or even treble their wages.

Harry bade Master Edwin farewell.

‘Come to the procession tomorrow,’ shouted Edwin as he left. ‘We’re walking in penance to Blythburgh and Southwold. Persuade your mother to come.’ Harry waved. Fat chance of that, he thought. He hurried to his mother’s cottage on the edge of the village overlooking the Blyth. From the moment he first saw her pulling up weeds by the front door, he felt something in her nature had changed. She greeted him joyfully: a kiss and her familiar, indefinable smell, slightly medicinal but sweet too.

When they talked of Kate’s death and burial her eyes softened but there were no tears. She spoke calmly of life in the village, a world turned upside down, as she put it. And then

she said something that made him think of Master Edwin's warning.

'Our world isn't going to return to normal, you know...no matter what the lords and the bishops believe.'

He had heard these sentiments before. In Calais there had been plenty of grumbling about the power of the church and the gentry. Not only did they own the land, but they controlled the courts too. So what chance did ordinary folk stand, particularly now that there were far fewer of them? And yet everyone knew that changes were afoot. Discontent was spreading like a poison.

'The landowners will never change, save out of self-interest,' said his mother. 'As Roger Bacon tells us, "It is easier for a man to burn down his own house than to get rid of his prejudices".'

Harry smiled. His mother was fond of quoting Bacon and the other philosophers. She had received a far better education than most women of her time, and she took every opportunity to remind others that she could read and write in Latin.

It was later that evening, after a supper of bread and pottage with a small fillet of grayling for Harry, that they talked again. His mother spoke of Kate and her own brother, William and Harry's cousins Arthur and Francis, all gone in a week; they had died just after Easter. She told him of his lost friends: Roger the thatcher, Robert Young, Edward and his brother Tom and many others he had known. The sun was slanting low along the Blyth River and the ducks and cormorants and herons were returning to their roosts. It was a scene Harry's grandfather would have recognised and his grandfather before. Nothing had changed in this marshy valley for centuries. Yet, if he were to believe his mother, change was coming soon...and to every corner of the county.

'Who will work the land?' he asked, half under his breath.

Elizabeth laughed. 'Aye that's the question. And it's not just you asking it. The landowners are quaking in their shoes. Old Clavering and Argentine and their like know that all their pleasures and luxuries rest on the labour of the peasants and us tenants and the dues and fines we pay.'

She told Harry that she had inherited her brother's holding, the field by the hall, which on top of the land she already held after Harry's father died, made her one of the biggest tenants in the village.

'Cost me two good horses in heriot tax to that thieving John Clavering,' she complained. 'I put most of William's land out to grass this summer. There ain't no-one left to work it. But now you're back things might be different.'

Harry didn't have the heart to tell his mother yet that he planned to return to the army. He'd had his fill of life as a field labourer. His memories were still vivid of the days when there were too many mouths to feed and too many labourers and the gentry could get away with paying them next to nothing. Tenants and the landless were expendable. If one caused trouble, there were plenty of others to take their place. In a bad year, and there'd been a surfeit of them lately, the poor starved; in a good one they scarcely survived. The landowners didn't care as long as their profits came rolling in. Things might be changing now with the shortage of labourers. But it wouldn't last. The lords and nobles would always come out on top.

His mother was still talking, 'It's a right old pickle. Half the tenanted land remains unclaimed. You'll have seen the weeds yourself and the neglect and the crops dying in the fields. Wages have gone through the roof. By the time of the harvest they will have doubled...and more. The old gang-

masters, George Baxter, Jonny Mells and their crew, are promising folk good wages if they follow them to other villages. And believe me the likes of old Clavering are proper paralysed with fear.'

Harry knew what was going on. By moving from one manor to another, the villeins were threatening to snap the leash that bound them to their masters. By sticking together, they were forcing the landowners to pay them more rather than see their wheat and barley rot in the ground. But they'd get their comeuppance.

'The King won't put up with it. He'll pass laws that force folk to stay put and work the land,' said Harry.

'He can try. But once it's out of the bottle there'll be no forcing the genie back. Who else is going to plough and sow and harvest if the tenants refuse? And even the King can't throw them all in jail if they stand shoulder to shoulder against him.'

Harry shrugged. He knew his mother wasn't the only one talking about the uprising of the peasants, but she was a force of nature, impossible to argue with. Harry had always come off second best in their discussions and quarrels. Yet it was hard to believe that uneducated people with all their superstitions and belief in magic and omens and the like would be able to dictate terms to the educated nobility. Some said the pestilence had made folk even more irrational and stupid. Many had abandoned the church altogether and embraced all manner of strange heresies pedalled by itinerant friars and preachers. They were burning women as witches and Jews for poisoning the wells. All nonsense of course, but fear drives out reason, and instead of restoring order, the authorities had encouraged them in their madness, given them licence to carry out their crimes. The pestilence had brought not just death but chaos too.

'Bad though it's been, this isn't the first scourge we've had and it won't be the last,' said his mother, topping up his cup with small ale. 'Humanity must learn to live with it and change. Cease to be ruled by dogmas and authorities; look at the world!'

She was quoting Bacon again, he could tell by the little smile playing on her lips.

'And how do we change?' he asked.

'For a start by being less dependent on the labour of the poor.'

'What do you mean? Slaves?'

'Of course not. The peasants are treated no better than slaves as it is. We must listen to the ideas of the philosophers: Roger Bacon, Raymond Lull... people like them. We need better engines. Better ploughs and carts and mills and ways of harvesting and winnowing. Look at the engines you now use on the battlefield. You fought in France with longbows and cavalry but I hear the army also used cannons.'

'Yes. They made a lot of noise and frightened the French horsemen,' said Harry with a laugh. There had been much talk about the new weapon at Crécy. The first use of gunpowder on a battlefield, they said, and while the cannons hadn't contributed much to the outcome, Harry had seen some of the devastation they could bring. The way the cannonballs destroyed horses and their riders was nothing short of terrifying.

'Soon there will be but cannons and no more longbows nor crossbows. And one day man's labour on the land will be replaced with far better engines too.'

'Driven by gunpowder?'

'Maybe. Or fire and water perhaps. Look at the great churches we have built. And the water mills. And the eyeglasses and optics and mechanical clocks. There will be many more transformations to come.'

Harry smiled and gave in to her arguing. 'Well, they won't come this summer. You'll need help in the fields. I can stay till the harvest's in. After that we'll see.'

They talked till the light faded, which, with the summer solstice only weeks away, was a late hour. It was a warm night and he dragged his straw mattress out into the yard as he had done many times as a boy. There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that he felt he could have counted every pinprick of light in the Milky Way, given the time and the patience to do it. His mother's words still sounded in his head. The deaths won't be in vain, she'd said. The pestilence will bring change. We can't go back to where we were before this started.

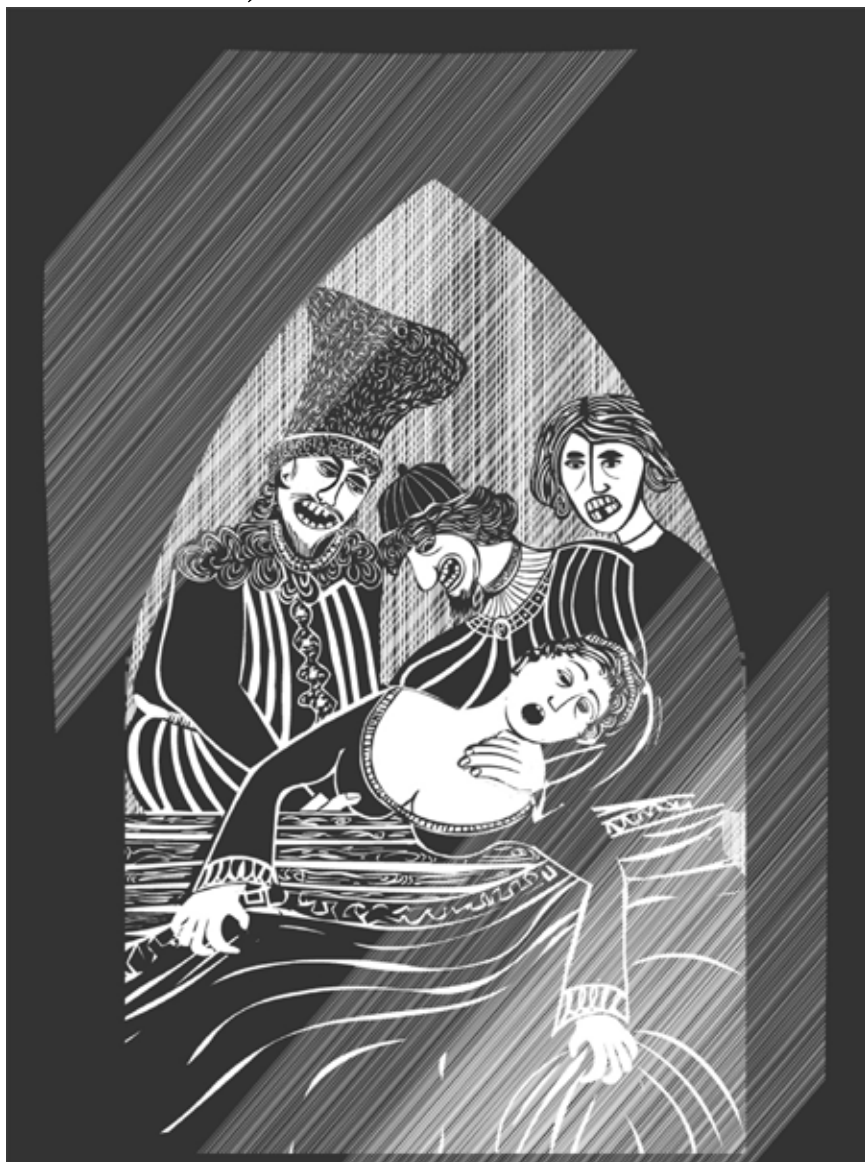
The screech of a little owl pierced the night air. Harry thought of the hundreds of deaths he had witnessed these past three years, from war, starvation and disease. To many it was God's vengeance on the evils of mankind. That didn't make much sense to him. The scourge had fallen on the virtuous and the rogues in equal numbers. But if it wasn't God's doing, then why had He allowed it to happen? Some even spoke of the Armageddon of the Book of Revelations. His mother would have none of that. Her faith in the future remained as unmovable as her defiance of present injustices.

In the night sky to the south he recognised the shape of Orion the great hunter, tilted forward, his club raised above his head as if pointing northwards across the heavens to where the Plough shone out. The ancient hunter and the

machine that had tamed the land. If Elizabeth was right, new machines created by man's inventiveness would bring about unimaginable change. From his present perspective that was somewhat hard to believe. But he felt that it was better to have faith in the future than to live a life of constant fear and superstition. Feeling his groin and neck every night for signs of the buboes. Watching the dying and the dead and wondering when it would be his turn for the dance of death. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* Not because thou art with me, O Lord, but because fear kills the mind.



JACKANAPES



The night of Thursday, March 21st 1450, was a defining moment in the life of Ellen Pritty and, as it transpired, in the lives of many of the other residents of Wingfield and its castle.

The castle was unusually crowded that early Spring evening, following the return of the Duke of Suffolk and his entourage from London. The evening meal was not a joyous affair as the duke had many vexatious matters on his mind and the future prosperity of those who had supported him appeared far from secure. Ellen and the other servants and vassals of the estate worked hard to ply the extra diners with food and drink and despite the sombre atmosphere there was no shortage of drink taken.

The duke retired early, no doubt to discuss with his advisers in private the implications of recent events. In the words of one of Ellen's companions, 'he's headed for the rocks in a leaky old hulk'. It had all happened so shockingly fast. The duke had reached the pinnacle of power as Lord Chamberlain and then Admiral of England. His family, the de la Poles, had done very well under the Bolingbrokes and two years ago the king had created him the first Duke of Suffolk. But the *boy king* Henry VI, the last of the three Henrys, had brought the country to ruin.

He'd come to the throne as a year-old baby, crowned king of England and France. But over the next three decades his advisers and he contrived to lose most of the hard-won English possessions in France and practically all the wealth that his father had built up for him. With law and order breaking down across the country, Henry withdrew to his private chapel to seek solace in God, leaving his French queen, Margaret, to run the country. One way or another, as the king's closest adviser, the duke was blamed for the sorry mess. Only a few weeks ago his enemies had had him locked up in the Tower, where he would have been executed

but for the intervention of the king and queen who ordered instead that the duke should go into exile: banned from England for five years from May 1st.

The life-saving decree didn't please many in London, where the duke was popularly known as Jackanapes, and universally disliked. One city merchant called him a 'poxy, jumped-up monkey, who has filled his pockets at the expense of the common folk.' An unruly mob forced the duke to take refuge in his London mansion in St Giles. The rioters had come for a lynching and they forced their way into the house, but Jackanapes managed to evade them through a back door. The crowd seized his horse and a couple of his servants were badly injured, but the duke and his entourage escaped. Two nights later here he was in Wingfield.

By one o'clock that night there were but three men still at table, all of them the worse for drink. Ellen knew two: the master huntsman, a greying man of forty or more, who had been in the duke's service for countless years, and the arrogant young son of a sheep farmer from Hoxne. Both were known in the village as roisterers. The third she had not seen before. He was a knight who had attached himself to the duke's household at the royal court, a blond, stocky fellow in his late twenties, with a red fleshy face and a loud high-pitched voice. Ellen took an instant dislike to him.

The dishes had been collected up and washed and one by one the kitchen and serving staff departed. Before he too retired the steward ordered Ellen and another girl, Martha, to stay on to serve the three drinkers. As her friend was anxious to get home, because one of her boys was poorly, Ellen volunteered to do the late-night shift on her own.

'You sure you can manage, Elly?'

'Don't you be silly, Martha. There ain't nothing to do here.'

You get off to your lads.'

'Oh thank you. I'll look after you next time.'

It was a fateful decision.

As she tidied away the plates and goblets, ribald laughter and bursts of song from the great hall reached her ears. Voices were raised and then she became aware that they were calling for her.

'More wine, wench,' squeaked the blonde knight.

'Two bottles,' shouted the cocky lad.

Ellen brought the claret to the table and silently but with a smile filled the men's glasses.

The old huntsman slurred a toast to the others and slapped Ellen's bum as he did so.

'Nice pair of globes,' said the knight, pawing her breasts.

She pushed his hand away, firmly but not roughly. In an instant Blondie was on his feet and she felt a stinging slap on her left cheek. Her blouse was ripped open and she found herself lying flat on the table while the farmer's boy threw her skirts over her head, urged on by the knight. As she screamed, a napkin was forced into her mouth. She was slapped again, harder this time. Wine was running across the table and soaking into her clothes. Someone held her legs apart and there was a fumbling and a thrusting and the pain as the young man pushed his pole into her. He didn't last long; she felt the stickiness. The old huntmaster took his turn but he'd drunk too much to get it up and he cursed and fingered her brutally to hide his shame from the others.

'My turn,' demanded the knight in his falsetto. 'Let me show you, lads.'

Ellen struggled and clawed under her skirts, but she was rolled over on the table and the brute shafted her from behind, slapping and beating her as if he were urging a horse to the gallop. And the other two laughing and holding her down and reaching down to grab her breasts. A goblet crashed to the floor, then another as the table trembled under the battering. The painful pounding seemed to last forever but at last her attacker let out a high-pitched howl and collapsed over her body with a laugh like a whinnying pony.

They spat on her and called her whore and went off crowing drunkenly, leaving her curled up on the table, hugging herself. Slowly she rose, wiped her face and rearranged her torn clothes as best she could. She fetched a cloth and cleaned the table carefully, picked up the bottles and glasses and broken pieces and stowed them away. At last she doused the tallow candles in the hall. Only then did she make her way home.

* * *

Now Ellen was from a humble background with little or no education. She was 18, robust but pretty enough to attract the attention of the lads in the village and adjacent towns. She had long, dark brown hair, brown eyes, a small nose and a smile that lit up her face. Though scarcely more than five feet tall, she was by no means short of courage or determination.

Consequently, the following morning, without telling another soul about the rape, she took her plaint straight to the duke's reeve. With her she carried her soiled and torn garments and, having told her story and named names, she demanded that the reeve give her leave to take her case before the

judges.

The reeve prevaricated. 'The decision is with the duke.'

'Then I'll ask him.'

'But Duke William is engaged with matters of state. And besides you have little evidence. I mean to say, it is your word against the three accused. And they are all men of... of substance.'

'Let them answer in court.'

'The duke will decide.'

'When?'

'In good time.'

Ellen heard nothing from the reeve. When, three days later, she returned to press her case, she was told that the duke had dismissed her plaint on the grounds that the three men were of impeccable background and integrity, while she was a mere serving girl. If she took her complaint further, she would be dismissed and her family might suffer the consequences.

And so Ellen embarked on alternative strategies.

After pondering her options, she decided that there was nothing to be gained from revealing the crime, even to her own family, so she hid her torment and embarked on a plan of revenge. She obtained discreetly some seeds of the castor oil plant and leaves of golden dewdrop and pummelled them to a fine powder. That evening when she served at dinner she was disappointed that, of her three assailants, only the old huntmaster was present. But she later reflected that

luck had been on her side; to have poisoned all three at the same time would have been fitting retribution, but sooner or later the finger of blame must have pointed at her. And she had no wish to die.

As Ellen placed the plate of venison stew before the master of the hunt she caught his eye and saw that he flinched slightly as he recognised her. She watched with satisfaction as he tucked in.

By the following morning the next step had taken shape in her head. It was her task to change the laundry in the ducal bedrooms. In the room of the duke's eight-year-old son, John de la Pole, she found what she was looking for. On a shelf beside his bed stood the first bound, handwritten manuscript of *Canterbury Tales*, written by young John's celebrated great grandfather, the poet and diplomat, Geoffrey Chaucer. Ellen picked up the tome, surprised by its weight, and dropped it in her laundry bag. For good measure she took a fine rondel dagger with decorated grip and pommel, also said to have belonged to the author. They were young John's proudest possessions, and she knew he would instantly notice their disappearance and raise a hue and cry.

As Ellen was leaving the apartments of master John, she became aware of two women talking in the adjoining room. She recognised the voices of the duchess, Lady Alice and her lady in waiting, Mary.

'Of course I worry, Mary,' said the duchess. 'The people are enflamed against the king and their anger has spread like a fire through the woods. They won't rest till they have William's head.'

'Then you must leave the country this instant, madam.'

'And we shall. We are going to France.'

'But when?'

'The duke has made arrangements for his departure. It is likely he will go ahead of us. Young John and I... and of course you, will follow.'

Ellen listened, scarcely daring to breathe. There had been saucy talk in the servant's quarters about Mary and Lady Alice. One of the bed-chamber maids said she had seen them spooning. But the girl was a silly goose who liked to imagine things and gossip about them. Ellen didn't set much store by it, having never seen anything untoward.

The duchess was speaking again. 'If I tell you it shall be a great secret between us, Mary.' Her voice dropped and Ellen pressed her ear closer to the wall. 'At the end of April,' continued the duchess. 'Two ships and a pinnace are leaving Ipswich for Calais. The duke will travel in disguise as a merchant. He will be welcomed by the queen's family in France.'

'Your secret is of course safe with me, madam.'

'William will leave the castle with a small entourage under cover of darkness on the 29th. Until then life goes on as usual. It is essential that no-one suspects a thing.'

'You have my word, madam.'

'Thank you, Alice.'

'One other matter, madam. I hear there will be no hunt tomorrow.'

'Indeed. Why is that?'

'It appears the master of the hunt has the shits and dare not

leave his privy.'

'Then we shall give him a wide berth,' chuckled the duchess.

Later that morning, as she made her way to Hoxne for market day, Ellen pondered the things she had overheard. If the duke and his family left for five years' exile in France, would there still be employment for her and the other servants at Wingfield? It was the usual case of the lord of the manor saving his skin and leaving the rest to face the consequences.

Meanwhile more immediate concerns took her attention. In Hoxne she sought out the town house of the sheep farmer whose son had raped her. It was a comfortable residence quite close to the church. She loitered by the door until she was satisfied there was no-one at home. As she had hoped, the servants were busy at market. The door was not locked and she entered the house and, quickly getting her bearings, climbed the steep stairs. She located the second largest bedroom, guessing that it was most likely to be that of the farmer's son, and placed her package, a cloth wrapped around the book and dagger, under the bed in a place where the servants would be expected to find it. She left swiftly.

At midday when she arrived back in Wingfield the castle was abuzz with news of the theft. The servants were assembled by the steward and asked one by one whether they had seen anything suspicious. Ellen answered as calmly as she could. She told the steward that she had visited the ducal apartments to collect the laundry but had seen no-one save the duchess and Mary. No-one seemed to notice that she was sweating profusely.

'Did you see the tome and the dagger when you was in the room, girl?' said the steward.

'No, sir but then I wasn't looking out for them, was I?'

'Indeed so. It's my bet the theft occurred after you left. No doubt some educated man coveted the book.'

'Well, I didn't take it, sir.'

'Of course you didn't, girl. No servant would steal a book when there were gold coins and precious jewels on offer in the room.'

Three days passed. The health of the master of the hunt grew worse as he weakened further from the flux, compounded by the failure to keep food in his belly. At the same time rumours began to circulate amongst the servants that the stolen manuscript and dagger had turned up in a house in Hoxne. The sheep farmer's son was arrested the following day and thrown into the castle prison. Although he protested his innocence, most agreed that, after a prolonged sojourn in the dungeon with daily torture and little food, he would plead guilty at the next assize and his father's farm was likely to be forfeit.

Ellen felt some satisfaction at the news but knew that she would have to act soon to entrap her prime target, the blonde knight. As part of Jackanapes' inner circle he would doubtless be leaving with his lord at the end of the month.

She had considered divulging the duke's escape plans to his enemies. But it was a risky strategy, plagued with difficulties. She couldn't write a letter herself, being illiterate. And she couldn't trust a scribe or anyone else with the secret. Precious days passed as she wrestled with the problem.

And then she thought of John Paston, a wealthy Norfolk landowner whose fortunes had suffered greatly in recent years from the depredations of supporters of the Duke of

Suffolk. Paston and many other powerful figures in the region wanted to see the back of the duke.

Ellen's mother had worked for John Paston's squire Thomas Tillingham at Gresham and Thomas's brother James lived in Diss, a mere ten miles away from Wingfield. The Tillingham connection with Paston was perhaps a tenuous one, but Ellen finally persuaded herself that it offered her best chance. She waited patiently until her next labour-free Sunday, which was the 21st of the month, only a week before the duke's prospective departure date. That morning she walked to Diss. She found the house after asking directions from a choirboy in the churchyard. James Tillingham and his wife Rose had themselves just returned from church and after a somewhat awkward introduction Ellen was welcomed into their home. She took her time; talked about James's brother and of the years her mother had worked in Gresham. But once she mentioned John Paston she knew she had hit her target.

'John stayed the night with us last week on his way to London,' said Rose Tillingham.

'Yes, it's a bad business,' said James. 'Robert Hungerford has laid claim to Gresham manor and forced the Pastons out. John is seeking redress from Parliament.'

'Hungerford and his knaves wouldn't dare raise a finger against the Pastons if it weren't for you know who,' said Rose.

James smiled ruefully. 'Indeed, Ellen, your lord the duke has been no friend to John and his family.'

So Ellen told the story of the secret she had overheard, leaving nothing out.

The Tillinghams listened wide-eyed.

'He sails on 30th of this month, you say?' said James.

'Yes.' It was apparent that they believed her account.

'John Paston must know of this,' said Rose to her husband.

'I will write to him this instant,' said James.

Ellen got a lucky ride most of the way back to Wingfield from a willing young farmer with a cart, who chatted merrily to her about the cold Spring and the planting of his carrots and turnips. On her return she heard that the master of the hunt had died. The news gave her no pleasure, but neither did it weaken her resolve. She would not rest until her third and most hated attacker had suffered at her hands.

* * *

Jackanapes duly departed on horseback on the night of April 29th. He took with him a small party of followers and servants, including the blond knight. When news of his departure circulated the following morning, it was quite apparent that no-one – other than the duchess, her lady in waiting and Ellen herself – had been privy to the plan. The gossips were at a loss to explain their failure of intelligence and their inadequacies were further compounded by the fact that no-one knew where the duke had gone.

For four days there was no news. And then a grisly rumour circulated that a headless body had been discovered on Dover beach and next to it, impaled on a stake and staring out to sea, the head of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. The following day a messenger arrived with the news that the duke's body was being borne in a cortege to the castle for burial. The messenger gave a report to the duchess of

the events that had led up to William's death. This is roughly the version that Ellen and the other servants heard later from the steward:

The duke sailed for exile from Ipswich on April 30. His vessel was accompanied by another merchant ship and a small pinnace. They made their way around the Kent coast till they stood off Dover. It was there that a fleet of ships bore down on them. The lead ship of the group, named the Nicholas of the Tower, sent out a boat and conveyed the duke and two of his companions back to the Nicholas. When he came on board the master saluted him with the words, 'Welcome, traitor!' There was a scuffle in which one of the duke's companions, a young knight, was thrown overboard. The duke was taken onto a small boat where, in sight of all his men, one of the Nicholas's crew produced a rusty sword; after half a dozen swings and saws of the blade, he finally severed the duke's head. His body was brought to land and thrown up on the sands at Dover. The rest of the duke's entourage were allowed to depart unharmed.

Which of the duke's political opponents had hired the Nicholas and its nefarious crew was never known. The event was the cause of much unrest, particularly in the south of England, where Jack Cade's followers, unjustly they always claimed, were accused of the crime. It was one of the many grievances Cade's rebels cited when they ran riot through the streets of London later that month.

The identity of the duke's supporter who had been thrown overboard, presumed drowned, was however revealed in due course by eyewitnesses at the scene.

When she hears the name, Ellen Pritty is pressing tablecloths with a flatiron in the laundry room. In an instant she returns to that moment, the epicentre from which everything flows: the empty kitchen, the dining hall echoing with

drunken calls, the flickering candles, the smell of red wine, the torn clothes, the pain. And for the first time since her suffering, she weeps.



COMEDY IN THREE ACTS



Since I went no grasse hath growne on my hele
Nicholas Udall

On the evening of Epiphany 1550 a woman and two men are walking along the quay at Ipswich. She is small with a pretty though weary-looking face and a shock of dark curls. Wrapped in a grey cloak against the cold, she carries a bulky pack on her back. Her companions, also bearing large bundles, walk alongside her. The taller of the two is over six foot and his pock-marked, handsome face glows red in the cold. The other is a short, stout fellow, wearing a floppy, soft-fabric hat, who walks with a pronounced limp, throwing his left foot out to the side with every stride in a somewhat comical manner.

His name suits him: Toby Rolley. The woman is Jessica Smithson, wife of William Smithson, her tall companion. Looking straight ahead, she addresses both men.

'Well, lads, we have a bed for the night and the prospect of a hot meal. That beats sleeping in the hedgerows and ditches.'

'And that'll be a one-night-only affair, you'll see. Tomorrow they'll find we're not actors and they'll throw us out,' says William.

'Oh, Will, must you always talk of nothing,' says Toby. 'I seen you on the stage, my boy and don't you forget it.'

'Hah. What you mean? That Thomas Becket play we done last year?'

'A fine performance it was.'

'Three lines, that's all I had and you done nothing but play the fool.'

'And a right good fool too, even though he made up most of the words,' says Jessica.

'Thank you,' says Toby, bowing.

'*And* it were illegal too. We should never have done it,' says Matthew.

'Don't give me that William, my boy. You knew full well that old King Henry had gone and declared St Thomas a traitor and smashed up his shrine at Canterbury. But there weren't many who agreed with him. You said yourself it was a crime. And don't you forget, if you hadn't been at Thomas Becket's fair you would never have joined the uprising. We come together with our grievances and sung about them and before we knew it we was marching on Norwich. Besides, there plenty you done before and since what's illegal. Pulling down fences, fighting 'gainst the King's army. What about that?' 'Always got an answer, 'int you, Toby?' Matthew shrugs and turns to Jessica. 'What about you then, wife? Women can't go prancing about on the stage.'

'But she can play the citole and I can jig to the tunes.' Toby gives William a push behind Jessica's back. 'Come on, old gloom-monger, this is our chance. We've survived so far but we can't keep running for the rest of our lives. And what better way of slipping through the net than joining a group of players? I'll wager a shilling you ain't got a better idea.'

'But for Chrissake, I can't act.'

'And how many actors d'you think that has kept off the stage?'

Though they talk like old friends, the three have not known each other for many years. William and Jessica were married in Wymondham only a few short months before the rebellion. And before the wedding they'd met just once. Jessica moved from her home in Attleborough, where her father was a respectable haberdasher, to William's family

smallholding outside Wymondham seven miles away. At about the same time, the illegal enclosures carried out by Sir John Flowerdew and other landlords brought Toby and William together. Nights of ripping down fences erected on common land and regular skirmishes with Flowerdew's yeomen built the lasting bonds that young men call friendship. It was Toby who introduced William to Robert Kett. The very same Robert Kett who was hanged in Norwich just before Christmas and whose maggoty head even now looks down from a spike above the castle gate.

The three continue their journey, climbing up from Stoke Bridge into the heart of the old city, past the ruins of Wolsey's College and the gloomy and empty Franciscan Priory. In the shelter of the buildings there is some respite from the bitter east wind. They arrive early at the Moot Hall, their destination. But this is no night for lingering on the streets. They enter straightaway. Inside they are warmly welcomed by Richard Earl, the leader of the little troupe sometimes known as the Earl's Men.

Earl is just as Jessica remembers him. The three of them had chanced upon a lively performance of *The Visit of the Magi* three days ago in Aldeburgh and afterwards they'd met Earl and his players. He is striking to look at, with bushy moustaches and piercing eyes... extrovert, slightly mannered, accustomed to being the centre of attention. And his charm, she suspects, is largely directed at people who can help him get what he wants.

The same production of the *Magi* is to be repeated tonight in the Moot Hall to mark Three Kings' Day. Jessica knows well enough that they have been invited for the simple reason that Richard Earl had taken an instant shine to Toby. And Toby was revelling in it, which came as something of a surprise to Jessica, since she knew her friend as a no-nonsense, rough Norfolk yeoman with little time for the preten-

sions of cultivated gentlemen. And for all his congenial ways and easy conversation, Earl was every inch a gentleman. Toby himself was not without education; he had a profound knowledge of the mystery and morality plays and could recite *The Summoning of Everyman* by heart. He was a fine singer too. But he had no Latin or Greek and his English was proper crafted in Norfolk, as they say.

Yet from the moment Richard and Toby met that first evening, the two young men delighted in each other's presence. Such was their rapture that three hours passed with a good deal of talk and laughter and local cider drunk and so wrapped up were they in each other's company that scarce a word was shared with anyone else in the gathering. And when Richard heard Toby sing and saw him perform one of his popular stage jigs, he declared that this was the very actor he had been seeking for a new interlude in the modern idiom by Master Heywood. Thus the invitation was extended to the three friends to join the Earl's Men in Ipswich.

Even William, who had a tendency to see the bleaker side of things, didn't object to a decent meal and a bed for the night. They had been on the run for four months, ever since the disaster at Dussingdale, outside Norwich, when the King sent John Dudley, Earl of Warwick and an army of 14,000 men against Kett's rebels. No-one had really seen it coming, despite a general feeling that, ever since they had set up camp on Mousehold Heath in early July, events were running out of control. Once Kett had authorised the taking of the city there was no going back. The Duke of Somerset, the King's Regent, sealed their fate when he ruled against the rebels and from that moment on fighting was the only way out. The peasant forces saw off a disorganised assault by a royal army led by the Marquess of Northampton but the next offensive by Dudley's men was an altogether different affair. The rebels were outnumbered and outgunned: well-armed trained fighters, including the hated Landsknecht

mercenaries from Germany, pitted against a committed band of peasants and farmers, fiercely loyal to Kett but equipped mostly with pikes, long bows, a few muskets and a couple of cannon. The battle was fierce but before long it turned into a rout. It was the cavalry that made the difference; Kett's army had no horsemen. William's brother Samuel died and three of Toby's cousins along with thousands of others. The rest ran for their lives. Or in Toby's case, limped. The spur of a broken branch from a tree, brought down by a cannon ball, lodged deep in his thigh. Without William and Jessica he would never have made his escape.

The Great Devil Dudley kept up his remorseless pursuit. Returning home was out of the question, especially for alleged ringleaders like William and Toby. Those that did go back were arrested immediately and many were tortured and hanged. So the remnants of Kett's army dispersed through the lanes and fields of Norfolk and Suffolk to survive as best they could. They joined the great body of vagabonds and masterless men. If they evaded Dudley there was always the threat of an arrest for vagrancy and three days in the stocks or being branded on the forehead with a V for vagabond.

William wanted to emigrate to Holland, stow away on a boat from Yarmouth, but Jessica and Toby persuaded him that if they stuck together, they would find a new life. The fact was that Jessica loved Toby. Loved him perhaps more than she did her husband, not in a carnal way but because he brought such joy and pleasure into her life. Throughout the summer months in their turf-roofed hut on Mousehold Heath above Thorpe Wood, Toby had kept them entertained with his songs and his recitals. He encouraged Jess, as he always called her, to play the citole and he would sometimes join her on the tabor and sometimes dance a wild jig by the campfire with much stomping and clapping, leg twisting and cartwheeling such as never failed to leave her in stitches of laughter.

Life in the rebel camp was not easy. But they had common cause: a sense of outrage over the illegal enclosures that had driven so many poor folk to destitution and even to starvation. Kett was a fine leader. He made sure there was plenty of work for everyone, providing food and putting up defences and looking after the prisoners. But it was a life of hardship and rumour and constant uncertainty. Kett and his brother William were forever reassuring their followers that their cause was just and that the king would come to recognise their rights, but the mood in the camp swung backwards and forwards from day to day.

Jessica's William was one of Kett's inner circle, having known him in Wymondham. William was a fine archer and, amongst other tasks, he was charged with training 50 bowmen. They cut arrows from ash trees on the heath and practiced daily, but there was a shortage of arrow heads and some of the longbows were badly worn. William spent much of his time trying to get hold of new equipment from the blacksmiths and fletchers of Norwich and further afield in Yarmouth and North Walsham. As a result, Jessica and Toby passed many summer evenings together when music was their common joy. Toby wrote songs about the uprising and about all the main protagonists, not just Robert and William Kett but Major Codd of Norwich and Captain Miles. They were saucy and seditious ditties but the rebels loved them and soon they were being sung every evening across the Mousehold Heath camp.

Richard Earl is lured by the extravagant, creative side of Toby's personality, wild, irrepressible, call it what you will. In no time the two are in deep in discussion, Richard giving Toby a tour of the Moot Hall with an arm about his shoulder, introducing him to the other senior players, showing him the costumes, reciting lines with a flourish. And as they sit down to supper, Toby is placed to Earl's right and the conversation is all about the troupe's latest project: *The Four Ps*, Rich-

ard calls it. The play is an interlude recently written by John Heywood. There are four characters: a Pardoner, a Palmer, a Potheary and a Pedlar who argue about which of them is the most important. The pedlar suggests a competition whereby each must tell a convincing lie to be won by the best liar.

‘Toby here shall play the Pedlar,’ Richard declares to all around him. ‘And I shall be the Pardoner.’

II

There’s a raucous crowd in attendance in the Guildhall in Lavenham for the latest tour of the Earl’s Men’s. Toby in the guise of the conman trickster, Matthew Merrygreeke, returns to the stage at the end of the play to resounding boos for the villain of the piece. He takes a bow and the boos turn to laughter, cheers, whistles and stamping as he leads the cast in the final song and dance. The crowd claps to the sweet rhythm of the citole; Jessica playing, out of sight near the edge of the stage, plucking the instrument with her slender, graceful hands. Toby dances faster and faster as the rhythm increases. The other players fall away one by one, gasping for breath and wiping sweat from their brows till Toby is alone on stage, prancing and leaping and somersaulting. He takes the final bow to more cheers and handclapping as another performance of *Ralph Roister Doister* comes to a triumphant end.

More than three years have passed, difficult years for the Earl’s Men. There have been many highlights. From Norwich to London *The Four Ps* has been an outstanding success. Toby’s performance as the Pedlar, in particular, is one of the reasons why bookings have been so good for this year’s tour. Toby is now established as a leading and probably the most popular player of the troupe, his reputation boosted in no small part by the crowd-pleasing comic jigs he performs

in the interval. He is known in East Anglia as the Gimpy Fool. The injury he acquired at Dussingdale has become his price-less hallmark. Toby has only to walk on stage with his comic limp and the audience is in fits of laughter.

But there have been plenty of setbacks too. A mysterious conflict between Richard Earl and his old patron resulted in an order to cease performing until a new licence was issued by royal prerogative. The matter was eventually resolved with the help of William Cecil, a cousin of Richard's, but by the time they were back on the road, two of the leading actors had left to join the Duke of Suffolk's Players. And now with the death of the young king in the summer, their future was blighted with more uncertainty.

The good news was that the newly invested first Duke of Northumberland, the Great Devil Dudley himself, had finally fallen victim to his unbridled ambition. By supporting his daughter-in-law Jane Grey as heir to the throne, he had backed the wrong horse. Queen Mary wasted no time in throwing him into the Tower and then signing the execution warrant. The bad news for the Earl's Men is that, as a devout catholic, Mary is none too well disposed towards actors. There has already been an official warning against *plays and interludes containing naughty and seditious matter*. Earl immediately dropped the *Tower of Babylon*, an anti-papal interlude, from their repertoire, though there was a feeling that this action might have been too little, too late.

The struggles have noticeably taken their toll on Richard Earl himself. His moustaches are flecked with grey and he looks a good deal more than three years older. He is drinking more than ever. Some of the players are beginning to show their discontent openly, talking about his high-handed behaviour and rudeness when directing rehearsals.

The exception as always is Toby. Toby can do nothing wrong

in Richard's eyes. Ralph Roister Doister, school-master Nicholas Udell's comedy, is still playing well on this year's tour. With its themes of adultery and lewdness, in all likelihood it qualifies as naughty, under Queen Mary's definition, notwithstanding the final prayer and song which restore the moral status quo. However, it is the ideal vehicle for Richard and Toby who in the roles of Ralph and Matthew, delight in the gasps and cheers of the crowds as they play out their nightly trickery.

'That was marvellous,' says Richard, still dressed in the foppish doublet and hose of the pompous Ralph Roister Doister, embracing Toby as he leaps off the stage.

'A good crowd tonight,' says Toby.

'They loved the fight with the maids. Especially when you pulled out Walter's padded breasts.'

'I wondered if I might have gone a bit too far with that.'

'Not at all. It's what they come to see. And what they pay for.'

William is standing by the street door watching. As the members of the audience file out they drop coins into the bucket he is holding. He nods his thanks from time to time but his expression remains impassive. His eyes are fixed on Toby and Richard.

William has been given the title of stage manager, partly because his acting duties are minimal, limited to short, walk-on parts, but also because he knows how to oil the wheels with local guilds and innkeepers and, in his own words, keep the show on the road. However, the relationship between William and Richard has deteriorated over the years. The way Richard speaks, his precision with words, his gestures and elegant manner have always grated with William. What it comes

down to is that Richard has always given him a nauseous feeling of inferiority.

The past three years have not been the happiest for William. Every night his dreams take him back to Mousehold Heath. He misses the excitement of life with the rebels, the sense of purpose and the righteousness of their cause. He misses Robert Kett and the manner in which he inspired so many to stand up for what they believed in. For two glorious months, for that's all it was, the rebels lived together in harmony and community. Kett's governance was just and the people loved him. Those two months of comradeship even justified the horrible ending in William's eyes. But sometimes his dreams were nightmares: Warwick's army lined up in battle array, the cavalry coming down on them, the cries and the crashes and the gunfire, bodies exploding as the cannonballs hit, ditches filled with bodies and blood and his brother dying by his side, half his face shot away.

And after the battle there had been fear and discomfort and the grim cold of winter as they made their escape from Dudley's mercenaries. Yet even those harsh months were better than this itinerant life with a bunch of mannered mummies. What was the point of their enterprise? The whole undertaking seemed to him frivolous and unmanly. William's misery grew steadily worse because he had no-one to talk to. His friendship with Toby waned against the backdrop of Toby's obsession with Richard and their lispings, affected antics. Was he jealous of Toby's happiness, he wondered? And as for Jessica, she seemed so struck with the delights of the performing business, with looking after Toby and playing her citole, that she had little time for him.

Later the players sit down as usual to eat together. All but for Toby and Richard who are not here tonight. William and Jessica are sitting side by side, eating in silence.

'He'll be red hot with drinking by now,' says young Walter

Kelly, who's not averse to a beaker of ale himself, though his voice has not yet broken.

'Master Richard has a poor head for drink,' says Roger Deacon, the cook.

'And a good nose for a fight when he's drunk.'

'Toby'll keep an eye on him,' says Jessica.

That provokes gleeful laughter and the usual ribald jokes. *Toby can't take his eyes off him. He'll give him more than an eyeful.* Jessica blushes.

'Take no notice, girl,' says George Woods, one of the old guard who has been with the Earl's Men from the outset. 'This lot are full of bravado when they're talking behind his back. But let them try saying it to his face.'

William gets up from the table. The players' eyes follow him as he makes his way to the street door and leaves. Jessica goes after him. Finds him standing by the Market Cross.

'I'm going back, wife. I can't take no more of this life,' he says to her.

'Back? Where? To Norfolk?'

'That's right.'

'But there's nothing for you there. Save perhaps the gallows. Squire Flowerdew has filched our land and possessions. What you going to live on?'

'There'll be a life for us there now Dudley's lost his head. I heard they stopped the persecutions. They need us to work the land.'

'Don't you bet on it, William. Things haven't changed. Mary Tudor was no friend of Robert Kett. And on her lands at Kenninghall she's been every bit as harsh with the common folk as old Flowerdew.'

'Better than being a vagabond.'

'We're not vagabonds.'

'Depends who you talk to. We're under surveillance wherever we go and there's talk of new reforms and laws against players and minstrels.'

'But this is our life now, William.'

'Not mine. Like I say I'm going back. And I take it you don't want to come with me.'

'No William. Not to Wymondham. We could have stayed there and raised a family. Maybe bought a little more land. But you wanted to follow Master Kett and his brother to Norwich. Me too. I believed in what we did, and I still do. But we failed and it has changed us. Now the players are my family and I can't abandon them.'

'So, you'll stay with Toby?'

'Toby and the others.'

'Very well. Then I shall release you from your wedding vows.'

'I understand. There will come a time when you will want a family. But I shall not marry again.'

The next day William leaves. He shakes hands with Toby who seems shocked by his decision, but the two of them can find little to say.

III

The Moot Hall is full for tonight's performance. Everyone is talking about *The Taming of the Shrew*, the new play by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with Will Kempe in the role of the fool Grumio. Nigh on forty years have passed since Richard Earl and his troupe last played here and the old brick and timber building now has a new staircase and porch opening onto Cornhill.

'40 shillings! That what the town's paid for this 'ere show, Toby Rolley. That's twice as much as they paid the Queen's Men this summer,' says a small woman in her early sixties. Her curls are grey and her face wrinkled with age but Jessica's bright eyes still reflect her lively curiosity in the world around her.

'Then that better be a good 'un, Jess. We parted with eight pence to get in,' says Toby.

'Six,' says Jessica.

Toby is sitting on a wooden box that she has brought with them, a crutch is propped up against it. Toby is now 67 and in good shape for his age, though his gammy leg still troubles him and over the past couple of years his memory has been trickling away.

Jessica and Toby have lived in Ipswich ever since the Earl's Men disbanded after Richard's tragic death. Neighbours and friends know them as brother and sister. Jessica found work, teaching the citole and the lute to the empty-headed daughters of local merchants. She still teaches a little because they are always hard up. Toby finally got a job as a cooper's journeyman not far from their house near the docks. It was four years before he went back to performing. He took to tumbling and doing jigs at nearby inns to earn extra money.

Some thirty years back he did two short tours with Walter Waller's players. The Earl of Leicester's Men offered him a contract after that but he turned them down saying he'd never work for a Dudley as long as he lived.

Jessica believes that his heart went out of acting after he discovered Richard's body in the innyard in Sudbury. For years Toby blamed himself. They'd had a row about something so unimportant that he never recalled what it was, but Toby walked out. Richard carried on drinking heavily and arguing, inflaming everyone with his arrogant jibes as he always did. It was early morning before Toby realised he hadn't come back and, after a frantic search, he discovered the body in a corner of the innyard with a knife between his shoulder blades. They never found the culprit.

That was the end of the Earl's Men. It was a long while before Toby recovered from the shock of losing Richard, and Jessica had to take him under her wing. After they moved to Ipswich, it was she who found shelter and supported them both. Toby suffered from a series of ailments: severe constipation, dropsy, palpitations, back ache, itches, sleeplessness, cramps and joint pain in his injured leg. It lasted for the best part of a year, but just as Jessica was reaching the point of despair and contemplating running away, Toby recovered. And almost as soon he fell in love again and his old spirit returned. To be precise he fell in love many times because Toby now believed with all his being that one could be in love with several people at the same time, feel the same passion for each of them and not betray anyone in the process. It helped that many of his loves were itinerant actors, always moving on, or better still sailors, since when one ship sailed, another would arrive to replace it. He never spoke to Jess about his loves, though he would happily talk for hours about Richard and their years on the road. He would always retain a special place for Richard.

And tonight when Will Kempe makes his first entrance as Grumio with his master, Petruchio, Toby is spellbound and the memory of Richard Earl is never far away...

Petruchio: I trow this is his house.

Here, sirrah Grumio; knock, I say.

Grumio: Knock, sir! whom should I knock?

Is there man has rebused your worship?

'Ha,' laughs Toby. 'If only Richard and I had had such lines to play with. What would we not have done with them?'

And from then until the interval his face is alight with joy. He keeps nudging Jessica's thigh and shouting his appreciation. And he even falls off his box at Master Kempe's line:

Ay, sir, they be ready; the oats have eaten the horses.

'Only one thing wrong with this play, Jess my love,' he says, as the tumblers come on for the interval.

'What's that, Toby?'

'There ain't enough lines for that Grumio. If I were to speak to the playwright, what was his name did you say?'

'Shakespear. Will Shakespear.'

'Then, Will, I'd say. Write another and give the fool a proper chance to speak his mind to the silly arses what employ him.'

'You can tell him now. That's him over there. He was playing Hortensio.'

'Then he's a better writer than an actor. But I forgive him, Jess. If the second half is nearabouts as good, he has written a fine play.'

Jessica nods in agreement. She looks distracted, as if she has some weighty matter on her mind. And as Toby struggles up from his box to go and talk to the players, she speaks.

'I learned this morning that William had died.'

'How?'

'A lawyer came, a notary. Told me William had died of consumption and he'd left me some money.'

'Much?'

'Five pounds, ten shillings.'

Toby whistled and rolled his eyes gleefully.

'And you'll be keeping your hands off of it, Toby Rolley. I don't want it all going to the sailors' benevolent fund.'

'I'm too old for them capers, Jess,' he says with a laugh.

'Pull the other one.'

'But why would William remember you in his will after all these years?'

'The lawyer says he fared well in life. Built up a little land-holding outside Wymondham. The land went to a nephew, since he didn't marry again nor have any children. But the lawyer fellow told me that William often talked of late about Mousehold Heath. Said they were the best months of his life. I think he wanted us to remember the time we three spent together.'

'As if we could forget it,' says Toby. Then off he wanders to speak to Will Shakespear.

Jessica left alone thinks of her life and loves: of William buried in his coffin and of Toby, drifting into old age, his memory slipping away as if seeping down a drain. Yet today he is enlivened by the play and his enthusiasm makes her smile and reminds her why for all these years she has loved a man she can never possess. In that moment she feels complete calm with the knowledge that she has given Toby the security and stability that has allowed him to be himself. They still play music together and he dances just for her and tells her there is no finer player of the citole in the whole of England. She is now William's widow, for they never divorced, and Toby's 'sister'. And that's how it will stay.

'I talked to that Shakespear. Nice fellow,' says Toby returning to his box after a short absence.

'What did he say?'

'Blowed if I can remember. Oh, and I had a word with Will Kempe too. He told me about his new jig.'

'Won't be as good as the ones you used to improvise I'll wager. Will Kempe is a lucky man that you aren't forty years younger. He'd have some stiff competition then.'

'That's right, Jess. Shame you didn't bring your citole along tonight, we'd show 'em how to cut a caper.'

There is something about the way Will Kempe plays Grumio that reminds Jessica of Toby with Richard when they were together, on and off stage. Grumio acts dumb and silly like a rustic fool. Though a thorough charlatan, he is funny, lively and emotionally wise, and he always remains loyal to his master, Petruchio. They are not by any means equals, however. The abuse Petruchio heaps on Grumio – *villain, peasant swain, whoreson, flap-eared knave* – makes it perfectly clear who is the master. Petruchio can dispose of his fool

any time he likes, just as John Flowerdew could dispose of the peasants by fencing off their grazing land.

Kempe's return to the stage has Toby on the edge of his box again, cackling at the naughtiness of the lines...

Petruchio: Well, sir, in brief, the gown is not for me.

Grumio: You are i' th' right, sir; 'tis for my mistress.

Petruchio: Go, take it up unto thy master's use.

Grumio: Villain, not for thy life! Take up my mistress' gown for thy master's use!

Petruchio: Why, sir, what's your conceit in that?

*Grumio: O, sir, the conceit is deeper than you think for.
Take up my mistress' gown to his master's use!
O fie, fie, fie!*

After Grumio makes his last exit in Act IV, Toby loses some of his interest in the play but he is still full of praise for the performance after the players have taken their final bows to joyful applause.

'Wonderful. But I must tell the playwright to put in more lines for the fool.'

'You already did. Don't you remember you spoke to Master Shakespear earlier,' says Jessica patiently.

'Oh, did I? Yes, and, didn't I tell you, he was kind enough to agree with me.'

As the two of them walk home along the quay, Jessica is thinking about the play. The ending disappoints her. Katherina's submission is too abrupt and too pleasing to the men. The earlier Kate had Jessica's respect. What woman would not cheer at the lines...

*No shame but mine; I must, forsooth, be forc'd
To give my hand, oppos'd against my heart,
Unto a mad-brain rudesby, full of spleen,
Who woo'd in haste and means to wed at leisure.*

Toby interrupts her thoughts. 'You remember when we first came here all those years ago?'

'Yes, that cold January evening. You, me and William.'

'William. I wonder where he is now.'

'I told you, Toby. He's dead.'

'Dead?'

'Yes.'

'William gone. And Richard, too.'

Jessica nods gravely. She's learning how to dampen down Toby's anxiety about his lapses of memory,

'Do you remember the jig you did that evening for Richard? The one you used to do later as the Pedlar?'

Toby laughs and he launches into the Pedlar's jig, right there in the street, with Jessica clapping to the rhythm. He never forgot a dance step.

DUCK SHOOT



So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power,, that ceaseth only in death.

Thomas Hobbes

I remember that I had been surprised but most pleased when Josias invited me to go shooting with him in his boat. It had brought back memories of long-ago adventures on the marshes with young friends and a borrowed, heavy musket. We had next to no experience of guns or fowling and if we came back with even a single teal or a widgeon it was cause for much rejoicing. But I remembered too that the marshlands at dusk offered rare pleasures. They were wild and secretive places, full of possibility. Dark spirits moved amongst the reeds, otters and roe and fallow deer emerged from the shadows and the cries of the birds and the slap of the water added to the twilight mystery.

It was a fine evening for it: cool, overcast sky and a fresh wind from the west. There had been heavy rains for most of October and the estuary was flooded. With the floods come the duck, said Josias. He practically lived on the marshes and he knew all the rivers and dykes like his hand, back and front. His boat was an ancient craft, small, flat-bottomed with a couple of narrow oars, ideal for weaving through the reeds. We pushed off from the reed-beds near the old shed which he used on occasions for tying and drying the bundles and storing his gear. It was my first taste of shooting on a boat and, as the evening light began to drain away, I felt the surge of excitement and trepidation that comes with a new endeavour.

Josias was a reed-cutter through the winter months and a thatcher in the spring and summer, a job that took him away much of the time. He was a tall, wiry fellow, with straight, flaxen hair and a stubbly beard; his face wrinkled and weathered by the biting easterly winds, so that it was hard to guess his age; I reckoned he was a couple of years older than me. I was 34 at the time. I'd met him years earlier at the congregation in Cookley and got to know him a little better when we were building the pulpit for Samuel Manning, back in the days of the Commonwealth. You wouldn't say we were

friends exactly; Josias was of the sort who mostly kept themselves to themselves.

He had a quiet, poetic way of talking, which made some as didn't know him think he was soft. But far from it; he was as tough as old boots. As a hardened captain who had risen through the ranks of the New Model Army, he could stand up for himself when he needed to. The local lads soon learned not to cross him. When he talked about the marshes though, his gentle voice breathed fresh life into them.

'Easy to get lost in the reed-beds while you twist with the dykes,' he said as we rowed smoothly into the heart of the waterland. 'You'll find hidden meadows and little banks of thorn and shallow pools and they all have their chosen residents. Shank and snipe love the pools; curlew head for the mud banks; bearded tits hide in the thorn bush and the reeds are alive with water rails and reed buntings.'

As he spoke the thrilling, bubbling cry of the curlew filled the air; the birds were flying in from the mud flats above the river. We rowed on for maybe half an hour. Josias kept looking up at the sky and cupping his ear to catch the sounds. He pointed out a pair of marsh harriers hunting. We came to a small lagoon in the midst of the reeds and he indicated an inlet on its southern side. We let the boat drift across and he shunted it stern first into the reeds. He slashed away at the reeds and some scrubby blackthorn brush and told me to cover the boat with the foliage till it looked like a floating island. Then, with Josias crouched at the back with an oar and me peering out of the camouflage from the bow with the modern flintlock musket, we sat and waited.

Now we just watch where the ducks are going and head that way, nice and quiet,' said Josias.

Moments later he pointed out four shovelers overhead, flight-

ing into the furthest recesses of the pool. We heard them splash down but we couldn't see them.

'Off we go,' said Josias. 'But don't shoot till we raise them.'

The boat drifted across the open water; Josias paddling almost silently with a single oar until we coasted round a bank of reeds and could see the ducks clearly. Slowly we edged towards them. I had one of them in my sights.

'Wait,' mouthed Josias. We drifted closer and closer. Suddenly one of the birds caught wind of us and lifted from the water. My duck followed and as it rose into the air I breathed out gently, steadied the gun and fired. The recoil near blew me out of the boat and there was such a cacophony of flapping and quacking that at first I thought I'd missed. But the duck fell back into the water and the others disappeared with grumbling cries over the reeds.

'Good shot,' said Josias, paddling to pick up the bird.

We hunted for a couple of hours, weaving in and out of the reeds to follow the movement of the incoming birds. The ducks had their distinctive way of flying in, ranging from the comic to the composed. I loved the cry of the mallard, circling overhead, choosing their spot of water and the flash of green from the teal as they slashed down, feet splayed. Then, as the light started to fail, the rain, which had held off all evening, began to fall, first a light drizzle and then in torrents. It was time to head for home. There were seven ducks in the bottom of the boat: two shovelers, three mallards, a teal and a widgeon. I'd shot two, Josias had bagged the rest, one of them an astonishing shot with his pistol as the bird flew low over the reeds.

We chucked out all the brush and reeds and rowed as fast as we could through the narrow channels back to the old

shed. As the wind got up the reed heads tossed and weaved and the rain lashed in our faces. By the time we reached the hut the stems of the reeds were bending and twisting as though a whirlwind were passing through them and across the marsh came the low howl of wind and rain. Josias soon had a fire lit and we were drying off nicely and eating our bread and cheese. But the rain kept coming and we decided to settle down for the night.

We got talking about the congregation at Cookley. Some people call us Independents, which just means we don't belong to any established church. We didn't accept the rule of the Presbyterians under the Commonwealth, nor the so-called Church of England now. Josias is something of an occasional member of our community because he's away most of the summer with his thatching work. We meet mostly in Samuel Manning's house, where we built the pulpit some years back. Samuel has been minister for close on thirty years. During the Commonwealth he was an influential figure, but since the return of the King and with the power of the Anglican bishops restored, things have got more uncertain for all of us. Most dissenters refused to accept the draconian new laws and many, Samuel Manning included, were expelled from their livings. Of course, that doesn't stop the minister; he goes on preaching and we carry on worshipping in our own way, running our own affairs.

'It's a rum old way to show your respect to God,' said Josias. 'Hiding away from the authorities in private houses and fearing for your liberty. The constables made a raid on the meeting at Yarmouth last Sunday. We'll need another whip round to pay their fine, I reckon.'

The rain was still driving against the hut and it was getting cold. We wrapped ourselves in the blankets that Josias provided and sat by the fire and talked. He asked about my family, my father in particular who is a prominent figure at

the dissenters' meetings. I told him what I knew, which, given that the old man has lived and worked in the same village all his life, didn't take a lot of telling.

'I've had three fathers,' said Josias, staring at the fire.

I sensed he wanted to say more and encouraged him with my questioning and it wasn't long before I was listening to his remarkable story.

'I was born into the nobility,' he began, with a rueful smile. 'But unfortunately for me, it was the bastard line. My mother was a maidservant at Henham Hall and she was pretty enough to come to the attention of the lord of the manor, Sir John Rous, member for Dunwich. In quick succession she lost her job and gave birth to identical twins: Josias and Enoch.

My brother died of typhus at the age of four. By that time my mother, Judith was her name, had long been unhappily married to Barnaby Peck, a draper from Halesworth, and had borne him two more children, a girl and a boy. Barnaby was a dour man, a Presbyterian and an elder of the church with little conversation other than his ceaseless quotations from the Bible. He was exceedingly ugly and may not have found a wife under normal circumstances, certainly not a pretty one like my mother. Yet he never ceased to remind her of her sin and his forgiveness.

Barnaby beat me constantly. I was the outcome of my mother's sin and I needed to be reminded of the fact every day of my life. But in a strange way he helped to mould my future in a positive manner. Because I hated him, I tried to do everything in a way he would find objectionable and that very quest shaped my identity. He was a Presbyterian, so, in spite of being dragged to his church every Sunday, I became a fervent Independent and, if I really wanted to annoy him,

a Fifth Monarchist. He was a respectable man of business; I sought out the poets and craftsmen, the singers and vagabonds who were the very people he despised. He was a Royalist; I a staunch Parliamentarian.

When I was twelve my mother died giving birth to his fourth child. And from that day I planned my escape. I continued my education, which was rudimentary enough, since my stepfather refused to pay for better tutors, and I also undertook various jobs to earn money. Slowly I managed to build up some meagre savings and soon after the civil war broke out I stole Barnaby's horse and his sword and set off to the north to find the Eastern Association army.

It was at Boston that I first encountered Colonel Cromwell, as he then was, and 'Black Tom' Fairfax, commander of the Eastern Association. A week or so later an engagement took place at Winceby, near the coast, against a battalion of Royalist horse. We were outnumbered and in the enemy's first volley of musketry Cromwell had his mount shot from under him. As he rose from the ground he was immediately knocked down again by another blast. I saw it happen from close quarters and dismounted and gave him my horse. After no more than half an hour's fighting, in which, being without a mount, I took no part, the enemy was put to flight.

Cromwell sought me out after the skirmish and returned my mare. He told me she was a gallant nag, though of course nothing of the quality of beast he was used to. He offered me a spare saddle, since he said that mine was a little nippy on the arse. And he talked about the kind of horse best suited for a cavalry charge; he favoured a hunter of some 15 hands with a good engine and quick to the gallop. There wasn't much he didn't know about horses.

It was at that very moment that Oliver Cromwell, unbeknownst to him, became my third father, and the first whom

I admired. Indeed, I think I already worshipped the ground he walked on. Cromwell was everything that I had come to revere at that time. He seemed to know that grace had been conferred on him by God, though there was nothing intolerant about his belief. He was a born leader who talked easily to men at every level. I once heard him say: *I'd rather have a plain russet-coated captain who knows what he fights for and loves what he knows than that which you call a gentleman.* Ironsides, they called us and it was true, our fighting spirit grew out of the steeliness Cromwell instilled in us. In short, he trusted us and made plain men like me captains of horse.

He loved a joke, too. He got up to all sorts of pranks, especially before a battle when he seemed almost intoxicated with anticipation. His enthusiasm was contagious. But he also knew that a fighting force must have the strongest discipline. We were heavily fined for swearing and drunkenness and the men accepted his severity; they didn't mind rules if they were fair and consistent. Besides Cromwell was one of us, a man of spirit who fought for our interests.

We were trained to watch him like a hawk in battle. And there was something in his love of falconry, in its intense concentration, that perfectly explained the way he had us charging and regrouping and counter-charging, always finding the weakness of the foe at a critical moment. No-one better defined the joy of hunting than Cromwell in the heat of battle. He was alive, awake to every slightest possibility and there was always a faint smile playing on his lips and joy in his eyes as he drove us into the fray.

At that time, a year or more before the formation of the New Model Army, most of the Parliamentary forces were made up of ruffians, ill-paid, ill-equipped, ill-fed and ill-led. It was Cromwell's vision and his example that changed the fortunes of the Parliamentarians. It began at Marston Moor on the long evening of July 2nd.

I'll never know why Fairfax chose to begin the attack at seven in the evening in a thunderstorm, but it sure enough surprised the enemy. Cromwell led the cavalry on the left wing; we were massed together, short-reined and short-stirruped. I was wearing an old buff coat of thick leather – I couldn't afford the armour – and sweating under it, with the rain running off the outside. We drew the Royalists towards us and charged. Within minutes we'd routed their front line and were through them. As we regrouped Cromwell pointed out Prince Rupert's lifeguards galloping towards us. I chopped down one fellow with my sword and swung to meet another, but the hand-to-hand fighting was brief. They broke through but were halted by the Scots horse in our second line. As we came together again I saw that Cromwell had received a sword wound to the neck and he withdrew for treatment. But he was back for the counter charge and we broke the enemy's line once again.

The decisive moment came less than two hours into the battle. By now the rain had stopped. Cromwell learned that our right wing and centre were in retreat and led us immediately to bear down on the enemy from behind. There was fierce hand-to-hand fighting, but we prevailed and their line scattered. The bloody battle of the foot soldiers continued at the centre of the moor, but as the light failed the victory was ours.

The moor was covered with the injured and the dead. I found a young friend whose leg had been shattered by a cannon shot. We tried to amputate at the thigh but he died in our arms. We must have buried over 4,000 bodies at the edge of the woods. Each man took his trophies from the dead. My prize was the colours of a royal infantry troop. I still have it.

After Marston Moor, Cromwell and Fairfax pushed through the New Model for the entire army, based on Cromwell's vision of well-organised and disciplined troops. It transformed

our fortunes to the point that every man thereafter felt that we had God on our side. I was promoted to captain; in theory that should have almost doubled my weekly pay but money was short and pay days were few and far between.

We travelled west and then east, carrying all before us and mopping up the Royalist resistance. Turning north again, Cromwell's speed of travel was extraordinary. Before Naseby the entire army covered 70 miles in four days. I missed the battle; I'd taken a sword wound to the leg at the siege of Islip and it had festered. After the great victory my colleagues were quick to tease me – captain of the baggage boys, they called me. And Cromwell himself, who loved a joke, said it was lucky for me that they'd won because I'd have been hard pressed to run away from Prince Rupert on one leg.

It was almost a year before the King surrendered, but the war had already tilted decisively in our favour. We defeated the remaining royalist cavalry at Long Sutton in the west country in a charge of 120 men and broke them at sword point even when the enemy attacked us again with 400 fresh horses. The charge showed the courage that the New Model had in attack and our superior discipline and tactics.

As the war came to an end, most people were hard pressed to know what had changed. The King still reigned, though held under house arrest by the Scots, and he seemed in no hurry to negotiate terms with his victors. The mood in the army became soured by different factions arguing for political reform. Soldiers who had risked their lives in battle still had no vote and no rights in the kingdom. There were those like the Levellers, who wanted the King's blood from the word go, whilst the Presbyterians and Calvinists saw their chance to impose their church on the entire nation with the King's consent. The fact that we hadn't been paid for months didn't help matters. Calls grew stronger for a march on London from our base in Putney to make direct demands to Parlia-

ment. The House of Commons debated disbanding the army. The mood was shifting daily with a majority now saying the King could not be trusted. But my faith was still with Cromwell. I believed he was charting a new course for the country before our very eyes.

However, the daily pronouncements of Parliament and the negotiations with the King as relayed to us led to our growing dismay. It was obvious that the peace couldn't hold. Very soon we were putting down rebellions in the west country and in Wales. And then the Scots came down with a large army. We met them at Preston and put them to the sword though we were outnumbered two to one. Once more Cromwell's brilliant tactics won the day. But there was something different about him now; something had changed in those intervening years since we first took on the Royalist forces. I don't know whether it was the politics or the power. By now he was the dominant figure in both Parliament and the army. King Noll is what the men called him, jokingly enough but there was a distinct shift as Cromwell became more powerful and more feared.

As for me, perhaps like all sons I began with time to see my adopted father in a different light. The execution of the King was the turning point. It may have been necessary, inevitable even. Charles's refusal to compromise made him a magnet for all sorts of subversive factions. But it was a black deed and there was no majority in the country calling for the King's head or an end to the monarchy. What's more, unlike Cromwell himself, I couldn't come to the conclusion that God had called for it. After the execution all that Oliver talked about was God's will but it was no longer quite certain whether God or man was leading him. His bond with God was a tough one to understand. He always said he was God's agent but however humble he made it out, I think he felt that it lifted him above other men.

The more power he had, the more we saw him as a man of property with a landowner's fear of disorder. That's why, I reckon, he turned against the Levellers and rejected the prospect of a republic. A lot of the men were disillusioned by that. They felt Oliver had abandoned the 'Good Old Cause' and many left the army or deserted. I too was beginning to think that perhaps my fighting years were over, but my discharge was overtaken by events. The Irish wars took precedence; all leave was cancelled and we were shipped off to Dublin.

I don't think Cromwell was well throughout the nine months or so that followed and much of the time his spirits seemed low. I had witnessed his anger before: he was capable of sudden, vicious rages, which took him to the brink of losing all control. But such moments were rare before he arrived in Ireland. Many reasons have been cited for what happened: Ireland was not to his liking, it was the only time in his life that he left his country, he was surrounded by Catholics, whom he despised, and he didn't understand or take to the people. But none of that explains the fearful acts of that day and night in Drogheda when three thousand or more were put to the sword. I was shocked by the butchery. I fought, of course, but when it came to the slaughter I stood and watched in horror. It was quite out of keeping with Cromwell's unusually merciful record as a soldier and it was done in blind fury. Some said after that he had conceived the massacre as a warning to other towns to surrender. He didn't like siege warfare. He didn't have the patience for it.

The army suffered over the months that followed. The weather was foul and the country sickness cut through the ranks. And then we came to Wexford. At least at Drogheda there had been stiff resistance. When we took Wexford the enemy was in disarray and I waited for the signal from Cromwell to cease the killing. I waited and it never came. The men lost control and he gave them licence. I watched two boats, vast-

ly overloaded with terrified escaping townsfolk, sink in the middle of the harbour and drag their passengers down. I saw priests and friars thrown down wells and butchered in their churches. In horror I witnessed the deaths of women at the market cross, massacred as they begged for their lives.

Later there were many acts of compassion and of justice more typical of the man, but, as I later told Cromwell to his face, Drogheda and Wexford had destroyed my taste for soldiering. He gave me some words about a just and righteous cause and lawless rebels in the eyes of God.

The campaign went on deep into the winter months, even though half of us were fitter for a hospital bed than sitting on a horse. But Cromwell was intent on pursuing the Irish while the fear of God was upon them. It paid off for him in terms of popularity with the people back home. On our return to England we were feted and a holiday of thanksgiving was declared for our victories. But I watched Cromwell carefully and I'd say that after Ireland the optimism drained out of him. By then he was the supreme power in the land, King Noll. But he became like a constable, intent only on keeping his fellow Englishmen from each others' throats

As for me, within weeks I was back in Suffolk. Back for good. That was ten years ago and I shall fight no more. I learned the thatching trade from old Rob Elmy, a good, God-fearing man, whom I like and admire, but I was never tempted to make a father figure out of him. Besides I married Ruth and, as you know, we have two young daughters. So, I am busy learning to be a father myself.

My three fathers taught me much: that you should never trust a gentleman; that the cloak of religion conceals much cruelty 'and that a great general is not a god.'

Josias stopped talking, yawned and he was asleep in sec-

onds. I lay awake for a long while, listening to the wind and the rain. Cromwell and the Commonwealth had passed. In the end he had become King in all but title and his critics and the satirists revelled in what they saw as his hypocrisy. In Suffolk, with our long tradition of dissent, we still loved him. Cromwell gave us freedom to worship and released us from the yoke of the landowners and we mourned his death. In the end he served the nation well and brought healing at a time of great turmoil and suffering. But he left no next in line, save a weak son whom nobody loved. He didn't live long enough to establish a succession and his legacy was lost. With the return of the monarchy we are condemned to fight our battles for rights all over again. There were many in Suffolk who opposed the return of the King and with good reason. Young Charles has already shown his true colours for us Independents.

Next morning the wind had died down and the sun was rising over the sea as we set off. I'd slept enough to feel refreshed and alert. We walked along the bank of the estuary watching it come to vibrant life. The sandpipers, godwits and oyster-catchers were busy on the mud flats. The silver birch and rowan shone gold and red in the slanting light. Josias dropped off one of the ducks outside a hovel belonging to a tinker woman he knew. A gift. We sold two more as we passed through the village.

*

That duck shoot was more than three years ago, but, like I said, I remember every detail as if it were yesterday. It was fitting that the memory should come back to me as I sat half listening to Minister Manning's sermon. He took his text from Isaiah: *He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.*

In the pew in front of me sat Josias's widow, Ruth and her daughters. The elder of the two girls, she was maybe ten or eleven, was holding her mother's hand, sobbing. On Ruth's left was a grey-haired man, wearing a charcoal-grey cloak – I'd not seen him before but I reckoned it was her father.

Josias was the first in our district to die of the Great Plague. He had been working in Woodbridge and fell sick on his return. The house was marked with a red cross and news of his death spread like wildfire. The people were fearful; tales of the horrors that had stalked the streets of London had been circulating for months and now the menace was here, on our doorstep.

Because of the precautions against the plague, there was no committal at the graveside. The body had been buried two days prior to the funeral service. And the number of mourners was restricted to ten including Samuel Manning himself. To my left sat Rob Elmy with his shoulder length, ash coloured hair and Lady Brooke from Cookfield Hall who had been a great friend to Josias and had brought him plenty of work in the neighbourhood.

Minister Manning spoke of Josias as a man of diligence and piety who had overcome the hardships of his early life to become a captain in the army of the Commonwealth and then – with a nod to Rob Elmy – a skilful thatcher, with a reputation throughout the county. Having sat through many of his over-long orations, we all knew that Samuel Manning loved the sound of his own voice. But he was a man of mercy and courage, whom we respected as our spiritual father. He talked too of Josias's generosity and kindness, his life in the church and his love of his family. Fittingly he addressed his final words to Josias's daughters.

'Your father showed us how to live honestly. You are both young. But you are old enough to remember him for the rest

of your lives as the father who revealed to you the way and taught you to walk in his truth. *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.*'



TOM BROWN



I never wonder to see men wicked,
but I often wonder to see them not ashamed.
Jonathan Swift

Early one August morning in the fishing village of Slaughden.

Even at this hour the sun's heat threatens a sweltering day, with scarcely a breeze off the sea to stir a seagull's feather. The coast is in the grip of a rare heatwave and the humidity is rising too. Two centuries on everyone would be throwing themselves into the sea to cool down, but today the good citizens of Aldeburgh remain buttoned up and baking under their waistcoats and top coats, their stays and petticoats and gowns.

Slaughden sits less than a mile from the town on the ridge between the North Sea and the river, a bedraggled row of poor, mud-faced houses, the homes of fishing folk. Low tide approaches and the mud, half covered and half dry, is laced with soft, slimy channels where the dark waters ooze out to the river. A putrid smell rises off the salt marshes beyond. It is a no-man's-land, belonging neither to sea nor shore.

A skinny lad of twelve or thirteen years enters one of the hovels, possibly the shabbiest of them all. Inside it is cramped and comfortless and smells of grime and body odour and tobacco. A man in his early middle age, wearing working clothes that are little more than rags sits slumped at a table smoking a pipe.

- *Kippers, skipper*, sings out Japh in a voice so shrill it all but sets the cracked and filthy window panes rattling.

He ducks out of reach as the 'skipper' swings a fist at him and lets out a string of vile curses. He never utters much that isn't curses. Treats his boys like slaves. Good for drudgery and beating and nowt else.

Japh eyes the kippers he's just placed on the table. He hasn't eaten since early morning the previous day and then only bread and dripping and a bit of dried herring that one of

the fishwives chucked at him.

- Git them nets aboard, weasel. Yer got ten blasted minutes whiles I eat, else I'll whip yer heathen arse.

The boat sits on the shingle bank alongside the house. Other vessels are perched on the spit but most have already put to sea. Japh hauls the nets into the battered hull, the tar blistering and peeling off its planks. He moves in pain; some of the cuts and bruises that cover his back and buttocks are festering and for weeks he has walked with a limp, the result of a blow to the knee from an oar swung with malice and without provocation by his cruel employer.

Japh or Japheth isn't his name; least not the one he grew up with in London. But it belongs to him now, just as he belongs to that devil Tom Brown, who beats him and curses him and makes him call him 'skipper'. It is some sort of joke of Brown's to name his apprentices after the sons of Noah. Ham and Shem came before. And gone they are... both dead. Like them Japh is a parish apprentice from London. A laughable title to foist on the destitute. If you have no work there are two choices: the poor rate or the workhouse. Though for most there is no choice, especially the children of paupers, the orphans and the foundlings. They fetch up in the workhouse regardless, and the parish officers are all too ready to shift them out as fast as they arrive. That's what the workhouse clearing men do. Sell them on like slaves for a shilling or two with no questions asked. And in the hands of men like Tom Brown a parish apprentice is worse off than a slave.

Japh has suffered four months of beating and abuse from his new master, enough to knock out what little spirit there is left in him after the trials of the workhouse. But something of his cockney sprightliness and sharp wit still shines through. The fishermen's wives notice it. They take a liking to the boy.

Single him out for a bit of foolery and an odd titbit to eat. Brown sees it and takes his revenge. He grins with pleasure as he lashes the wretched child with his knotted rope.

But while the boy fears Brown mightily with his wild temper and swings of mood, it is as nothing to his dread of the sea. His first sighting of the ocean on his arrival in Slaughden filled him with abject terror, and four months of fishing haven't whittled away one jot his horror of putting to sea. At the mercy of the wind and the waves and confronted by that brooding immensity he is gripped by panic every day. Of course, he can't swim. But even if he could he would be paralysed by fear. The sea is a monstrous wilderness in which our puny lives have little meaning. Rarely does anyone speak of it save the wretches whose living depends on it. Like the mountains, the sea is unvisited and undesired. It will take another generation or more before the poets reveal the sea of boundless mystery, of fathomless beauty, the sea of romance.

This morning the sludgy ocean is quiet, nagging away with a relentless, deep surge, and the toil of the day passes like all the others. There is practically no wind for the sails and the rowing is hard. Japh is parched; the heat and the work dry him out but there is no water on board; only a couple of bottles of beer which the skipper drinks himself. The dearth of fish provokes Brown to lash out with his rope and curse the lad. When they return mid-afternoon with a meagre haul, Japh is weak with hunger, his legs will scarce support him. But he is packed off to town to sell the fish. On his way he eats a raw codling and drinks from the river, happy to be out of the reach of the scourge for a few hours. Though he can't free himself from thoughts of punishment: if he comes back with unsold fish or poor returns from the catch, the skipper will whip him without mercy.

Tom Brown is the third generation of fishermen from his fami-

ly to live in Slaughden. His grandfather, also Tom, witnessed the great sea battle of Solebay from his fishing boat and it marked him for the rest of his life. Some said it drove him mad. The warships, some 150 of them, haunted his dreams. Clouds of smoke billowing from burning fireboats; the thunder of the guns; the crowds gathered on the cliffs; the blazing vessels; the bodies in the waters, burnt and limbless. Four ships went down that late afternoon and near four thousand sailors met their death. Tom brought the story back to Slaughden and he told it in the Mariners for the rest of his days. Few believed that his version of the battle, a distant view from a tiny fishing craft, bore much relation to the truth. Old Tom's dreams embellished the tale further till it took on the stature of a myth, though one that few wanted to hear. He continued to tell it alone in the alehouse, or on the beach to some unsuspecting stranger, until his own life was cut short, when his boat went down in the storm of 1690, and he too vanished under the waves.

Between the two Toms, grandfather and grandson, came James, an honest, hard-working man with a tendency to forgetfulness, earning him the nickname 'Nutty' Brown. Nutty enjoyed lively company and a pint or more of cider and he and his wife Nell from Melton were well-liked. Nutty had a good voice and was a popular turn in the Mariners with his shanties and their smutty double entendres... you know the like:

*I fired off a broadside until my shot was spent,
Then rammed that fire ship's waterline until my ram was bent.*

He enjoyed company did Nutty and the approval of others. For a simple fisherman he lived a decent enough life, until his luck ran out the day young Tom was born and poor Nell died in childbirth. Bringing up a child and bringing home their supper from the sea single-handed was never going to be an easy matter. And both tasks suffered somewhat from

neglect. But no-one blamed Nutty for the boy or for the man that young Tom became. He was a withdrawn, shifty and lazy child, trusting no-one. His cruelty was apparent from his early years. If he found rabbits still alive in his traps he tormented them. He tortured the stray dogs that roamed about the village and took a delight in frightening and beating smaller children. Soon Tom was shunned by every family in Slaughden. *He has the devil in him*, they said.

Nutty tried his best but there was no arguing with the boy. Tom got into trouble with the law for poaching and stealing chickens and when Nutty berated him for his crimes the lad cursed him and ran away. As he grew stronger his anger with other boys soon turned to violence. One day, in a vicious quarrel with his father, he struck the old man such a fearsome blow that it knocked him cold. The horror of being attacked by his only son broke Nutty. In two years he had drunk himself to death.

Tom was a drinker too, but he drank alone. He was often to be seen slumped on the shingle bank either boozing or sleeping off the effects. He drank alone, fished alone and lived alone. And he looked on all men as his enemies save for a few felons who drifted in and out of the district. It may have been from one of these that Brown chanced to hear of the apprentice dodge and set off to London. From that day on he scarcely needed to work, for he owned a slave who put food and drink on his table.

The first was Ham, a sickly child, too young and frail for the fishing trade even without the meagre diet and the daily lashes he received from the skipper's knotted rope. Ham's constant cough only hardened Brown's heart and provoked further beatings. The villagers saw the piteous bruised and freezing creature and turned a blind eye to his plight; some of the hard men even joked on hearing the screams of the wretched boy, *Ah, old Tom at his exercise again*.

The lad was freed from his pain and hunger one freezing February night. Brown found him lifeless on his straw mat the following morning. There were mutterings but little more and Brown was soon off to London to lay his hands on another slave to do his dirty work.

Shem was a boy of healthier stock, a thickset, ginger lad but Brown wasted no time in breaking his spirit. The work and the beatings did the trick. Shem became a walking ghost. He died from a fall while at sea – or so his owner claimed: *playing the fool on the main mast and he fell into the hatch with the fish. Broke his head.* The inquest raised questions; the jurymen at the coroner's court were sceptical. But they settled on death by misadventure, a tragic accident. And within a month Tom had found himself another poor London apprentice. The burden of suffering had passed to Japh.

* * *

This wretched tale of life dredged from the sea bears no resemblance to the world at large in one particular respect. It is a world of men and boys: fishermen, parish bigwigs, jurymen and young apprentices. The only women who feature in the story are a dead mother and a few fishwives at the margin.

Enter Lottie Barley.

Lottie is a young widow. Widows are common enough in Slaughden. Many fishermen along the coast died in the great gale of December 1740. Lottie's husband Jack survived that storm but drowned at sea four years later. He left her childless, which was perhaps as well. They never had much money and after he died she grew poorer every day, finding a little work with other families where she could.

Lottie Barley takes a shine to Japh's quick wit and winning smile. She gives him food from her meagre table and treats

the worst of his wounds whenever she sees the boy, which is none too often, Brown makes sure of that, working him every hour of the day. Very soon she sees how the land lies; his master is deeply sensitive to any interference from the village and if he gets a whiff of it he'll take it out on the boy. She learns to keep her friendship with Japh a secret.

That Brown is a brutal fiend is by now well known to the Christian souls of Aldeburgh and Slaughden. Yet, whether it is the horror of dealing with such a depraved man or because they prefer to pretend that savagery of this nature should not disturb the peace of their town, they do nothing about it. Lottie tries her best to persuade folk that something must be done. She talks to her neighbours in Slaughden. She appeals to the Aldeburgh church wardens and the parish clerk and several of the aldermen.

- His frame is weak; he'll not bear it much longer. We'll have his death to answer for, just like the other two.

But though they nod sagely and agree with everything she says there's no appetite to intervene. Where will the boy go? The London workhouse won't take him back. At least he has work. He's learning a trade. Thousands are worse off.

Despite her constant fear that word of her 'meddling' will get back to Brown himself, Lottie persists.

One evening she spies young Japh mending the nets. It's now November and the spring tides have come, along with a fierce, cold wind from the north. He's in a pitiful state, shivering as he works.

- I got a fish pie from last night. Come you over and have a bite.

He looks around. The coast is clear and he follows her.

She feeds him and warms him in an old shawl. He lets her examine his cuts and bruises.

- *You got to get away, Japh. I'll make a plan. Will you come with me?*

He nods. Like her he knows the consequences of running away. If he's caught there'll be no end to what Brown will do to him.

- *Tomorrow I'll tell you. We'll go together. To Ipswich. I'll find work.*

Still shivering he grasps her hand.

- *Thanks, Lottie.* A smile creases his gaunt cheeks. But his eyes are on the lookout. Soon he leaves. It is the last she sees of him.

The morrow the wind is strong but most of the fishermen, Tom Brown included, still put to sea. Japh fights the terror in his heart. He has witnessed rough seas before but this is the worst: a freezing wind from the north and a fearsome swell. The herring are running and the skipper follows them. Then sensing he'll get a better price for his catch in the markets of Ipswich or Southend he steers the boat south. The wind increases to gale force and beyond, the boat is shipping water. In terror Japh curls up in the bowels of the vessel, insensible to the lashes from the knotted rope.

A day passes and Tom Brown returns alone; the fish are dead, of Japh there is no sign. *He lost his grip; the torrent swept him overboard.*

Led by Lottie the women gather round. They howl at him. *You have drowned the poor boy, you evil brute.* Such is the clamour and the anger of the women that the burghers are

obliged to act. They summon Tom Brown to the town hall. He pleads his innocence and tells his tale, even claims affection for the lad. But the mood has changed; the mayor decrees that never again shall Brown engage a workhouse apprentice. *Three dead boys bear witness to your neglect*, he says.

And there's an end to it. The town turns its back on Brown; ignores his brooding presence. He wanders the shore and the salt marshes, amongst the wreckage of abandoned fishing boats, muttering unintelligible words to himself. To watch him scurry through the alleys of Aldeburgh is to be reminded of a shadow, or a stealthy animal. He walks at night too, because he sleeps badly; that is to say his sleep is thin, never deep enough to lift the burden of weariness from his heart and limbs.

Though scarcely 40, his beard has turned snowy white and his gaunt eyes blink, darting from place to place as if expecting a menacing aggressor to materialise at any moment. He knows every face in the village and the town, and he shuns them all. He talks to no-one and most of the townsfolk have learned not to talk to him, though they whisper to each other after he passes. Lottie alone speaks to him whenever she sees him. She always asks the same question: *Tell me how he met his death. How did you kill him?* And he always steals away in silence.

She watches Brown take his boat out alone. He may be gone for a day or two. If he catches fish he sells them in the markets of Lowestoft or Ipswich, never Aldeburgh. Lottie knows his hiding places, anchoring amongst the mud banks where the tide sucks the waters through the slimy channels. She shouts at him from the shore. *How did you kill the boy?* Some days he'll sit for hours, dull and motionless and she wonders if his soul has left his body.

The fishermen cease to notice him. Latterly he's rarely seen

to cast his net or bait a line. Sometimes anchored, often drifting on the tide like flotsam. His mind becomes unhinged. Ashore he either skulks in silence or lets out shouts and screams and whimpers. For his safety and that of others the magistrates decide to lock him up and cursing and groaning he is confined in a parish bed.

Less than a year later he is dead. Buried in a pauper's grave.

According to Edward Fitzgerald, a great admirer of George Crabbe's poetry, the poem 'The Borough' was modelled loosely on the lives of people who lived in Aldeburgh and whom Crabbe met or heard about either during his youth in the town or when he returned briefly as parish curate in 1781. The poem was composed later in 1801 when Crabbe was curate at Rendham, only ten miles from Aldeburgh, and published in 1810. Tom Brown, who became Peter Grimes in the poem, lived in the mid 1700s and as with Grimes his apprentices died in suspicious circumstances. The rest of the story of his life and deeds remains pure conjecture.



MRS SUTTON



There is nothing beautiful or sweet or great in life
that is not mysterious.

Francois-René de Chateaubriand

No-one who has ever visited the town of Bungay would be disposed to describe it as a vibrant municipality. But I was born there and, in the dying years of the old century, it was in Bungay that I experienced the greatest joy of my life, and endured my most wretched suffering.

I am sitting by the river today, a little more than two miles from the house in which I lived at that time. Twenty-five years have passed and the world has changed beyond recognition and yet, as I watch the rooks nesting in the tall trees across the river Waveney, I recall those winter days with perfect clarity.

He loved trees. He was brought up in the solitude of a medieval castle buried deep in the woods of Brittany. The forest of oak, pine, larch and cedar was his childhood home; *I became what I am in those woods and I will die amongst them*, he said to me. Nature was always at the heart of his being. He was a romantic, as we now say, both in his writing and in his life.

But if I am to tell this strange story, I must start at the beginning... in the house in Bungay where I grew up. My father was a clergyman of some considerable learning. He ensured that I had a good classical education. By the age of 16 I could read the Latin texts and converse fluently in French as well as play the harpsichord and piano proficiently. My mother, now very frail and living with us at Ditchingham Lodge, was then like all mothers perpetually attentive to the opportunities for her daughter to marry well.

It was never clear to me why René came to stay with us. He had been a captain in the French army and, wounded in a clash with the revolutionary troops, was smuggled across the sea to Jersey to escape the Terror. Many of his family, including his brother, were not so fortunate and died on the scaffold during those terrible years. René's exile took him to

London. There he lived a life of wretched poverty, working at his writing and earning a pittance from translation work and private French lessons when he could get them. Late in 1797 he came to Suffolk, having found work in Beccles translating twelfth century manuscripts from the old French for a new history of Suffolk which the Antiquarian Society was then compiling. It was in Beccles that he heard about and then met my father. René was already engaged on his translation of John Milton's Paradise Lost, a poem to which father had devoted many years of study.

I remember vividly the day he arrived at our house. A slight young man with dark, unruly hair, an aquiline nose and piercing eyes was ushered into the sitting room by my father and introduced to my mother and me as François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand. When he spoke it was with a soft and slightly nasal French accent but his English was very correct. I answered him in French and he smiled approvingly. At some point he noticed the piano and asked me to play. I chose first a sonata by Pergolesi and then played and sang *Già dagli occhi il velo è tolto* by Mr Mozart. He leaned against the piano, listening with his eyes closed and at the end of my recital he made me blush with his lavish compliments. We talked about my studies and the books I had read, and in my enthusiasm I believe I asked him to provide me with some notes on the Divine Comedy.

I called him René because the full François-René seemed somewhat awkward in English and I preferred the more unusual second name. He smiled whenever I said it, as if the way I pronounced the name gave him pleasure. He was 28 years of age and had already seen a great deal of life, both in the army and during his extensive travels through north America. I was 16 with precious little experience of anything or anywhere. And yet there never appeared to be a gulf between us and not once did I feel that he was talking to me in a condescending manner. Whatever the subject we

always seemed to converse easily and, from the beginning I believed that he took pleasure in our exchanges.

For the first few days I saw relatively little of him except at family meals. He spent many hours working in his room or engaged in long and impassioned conversations with my father in his study. They talked a good deal at luncheon and supper too: about *Paradise Lost* and Homer and Isaac Newton and mathematical theory. They discovered that they had both been to America and revelled in the excuse to recount their adventures and air their views about the newly independent colony and the opportunities of the New World.

Slowly our friendship grew. With his love of music René frequently asked me to play and sing for him and he would wipe away a tear when I sang the songs of M. Rameau which he said reminded him of home and his brother and sister. He helped me translate passages of Tasso which I read out loud to him. We discussed *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which he admired greatly and encouraged me to read in his own French edition.

In the mornings, if the weather was clear, René would ride along the Waveney either with my father or alone. He was what one might call a spirited rather than an elegant horseman, which probably contributed to his accident. Late one November morning he was returned to us lying flat on his back in a farmer's wagon, covered in mud, badly bruised in the ribs and right shoulder and with a sprained and very swollen ankle. He made little of the incident except to say that he had made the mistake of going faster than the horse and had been pitched over its neck into a tree.

During his recovery I spent more time in his company. I picked some flowering sprigs of viburnum from the garden to scent his room. I played and sang for him and we read together. Once he could support his weight on his ankle again,

we took short walks down to the river. Crisp, bright December days with early morning frosts, as I remember them. One day we had walked a little further than usual and, as we crossed the field from the river, I could see that he was tiring and I let him lean on my shoulder.

‘Without woman, man would be rough, rude and solitary,’ he told me.

I laughed.

‘You don’t believe me?’ he said. ‘But I promise you that in a world without women I would ignore all the graces, which are but the smiles of love.’

We walked in silence for a while, but then he asked me suddenly, ‘What in your opinion is love?’

In my surprise I nearly dropped him in the mud. ‘It doesn’t lie and hide in darkness,’ I said quickly, remembering the first lines from the Bible that came to mind.’

‘Good. Very good. But that is what it isn’t. What is love?’

‘Trust, perhaps.’

‘Yes. Yet all kinds of men and women fall in love. And not half of them are good or trustworthy.’

‘Then what do you say it is?’

‘It is the incorruptible aspect of man’s nature. It speaks of his desire for eternity, to never cease to be. Through love man has a glimpse of primeval happiness which runs along the heart and through his being.’

‘And have you loved?’ I asked.

He looked me in the eye and smiled and said, 'Yes.' And then he added, 'And my desire is to live perpetually in a world made up of all that I have seen and loved.'

My mother soon noticed the growing attraction between us and urged me to be more reserved. I obeyed with reluctance. From that moment, I persistently declined his requests for me to sing for him. However, we continued to discuss my studies and he compiled a list of books that I should read. I was very young and it was understandable that I had misgivings about my self-possession and above all my appearance. But René left me in no doubt that I was beautiful and he told me that no man could resist my charms.

He read passages to me of the book he was writing about his impressions of America and his views of life with the native Natchez people with whom he had lived for several months. He called it a romance and it appeared to me to be a strange but beautiful poem in prose with such sentences as:

*Je suis tombé dans cette espèce de rêverie connue de tous les voyageurs: nul souvenir distinct de moi ne me restait; je me sentais vivre comme partie du grand tout, et végéter avec les arbres et les fleurs. C'est peut-être la disposition la plus douce pour l'homme, car alors même qu'il est heureux, il y a dans ses plaisirs un certain fond d'amertume, un je ne sais quoi qu'on pourrait appeler la tristesse du bonheur.**

When later I was able to reflect on those weeks of my life I came to believe that I had loved him first of all for his words and his stories. His sensitivity to nature, his melancholy, but above all his prose, like a flash of lightning illuminating his emotions; all drew me to him as a moth to a flame. But there was friendship, too and laughter and there were times when I could not decide whether I cherished him most as a lover, a friend or a teacher.

The dreaded day of his departure drew closer. On the eve of his return to London, we dined at the normal time. It was a dismal meal with long silences. Repeated and ever more futile attempts by my father to enliven the conversation only succeeded in making matters worse. René seemed to be held in a trance. He hardly uttered a word throughout the meal, though from time to time he would raise his eyes from his plate and cast a look of abject melancholy in my direction.

To my surprise, after the dessert, my father took me into the drawing room, leaving René alone with my mother. I asked him why.

‘Your mother wishes to speak to François-René to sound out his intentions,’ said father.

‘Intentions?’

He coughed in embarrassment, which surprised me. Father was never embarrassed.

‘She... I mean, we have come to the conclusion that you and François-René have formed a deep attachment. Is not that so?’

‘Well, yes. But I...’

‘And, though I confess that the moment has been hastened somewhat by his imminent departure, your mother is resolved to invite him to make his home with us as our son-in-law.’

‘What!’

I was genuinely shocked at father’s words but perhaps not altogether displeased; yet scarcely had the word passed my

lips when there was a scream from the dining room, followed by a cry of alarm from René. We rushed in to find my mother lying unconscious on the rug by the window and René standing over her.

'Help her, she has fainted,' he gasped, before rushing from the room in a state of confusion.

It was moments later that mother opened her eyes wide, stared at us in dread and dismay and uttered the horrific words, 'He is already married.'

The weeks that followed were torment. His name was scarcely mentioned again in our house but his unseen presence filled every nook. My mother was ill for several weeks and took to her bed, my father hardly spoke a word except to read us passages from his beloved Book of Psalms. I suffered the pains of a young girl deceived, but even in my darkest moments I could not bring myself to believe that he had acted out of depravity. His love for me was real. I was for him part imagination, part tangible. He was an exile, a stranger and I had given him the opportunity briefly *to live in a world made up of all that he had seen and loved.*

* * *

For twenty-five years I had not heard word from the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, but I had, naturally, heard much about him. His fame as the pioneer of the romantic movement extended far beyond France. No book earned him greater influence and notoriety than his novella, René, about a sensitive and passionate young man at odds with society. When I read it I was both shocked by the theme of incestuous love and amazed at the extent to which the story was drawn from his own personal experience. I recognised many of the events as he had described them to me, particularly his experiences in America. And, of course, I puzzled over what exactly had

led him to choose the name René for the hero.

There were other stories about René which circulated in the gossip sheets and newsletters and eventually came to my ear. I had already discovered that he had married Céleste Buisson de la Vigne just before his exile in London. She was a young woman from an aristocratic family from Saint-Malo. They had never met before the marriage and saw little of each other after, which gave some credence to the scurrilous stories about the succession of love affairs he indulged in after his return to France. Given the English fondness for saucy tales of French misbehaviour, however, I was inclined to take most of these accounts with, as they say, a pinch of salt.

Eight years after René left Suffolk, I married Samuel, then a naval captain, now Rear-Admiral Sutton. He had served with Admiral Nelson in the Copenhagen and Trafalgar battles and after our marriage I discovered that, at the time René was with us in Suffolk, Samuel was engaged patrolling the North Sea. And one of his duties was to transport the Duc d'Angoulême, the future Charles X of France, later to be René's greatest patron, from exile in Edinburgh to Saxony.

Samuel is now a magistrate and a deputy lieutenant for the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. We have two grown sons; the older, Samuel is 17 and he wishes to make a career in the army and to serve in India. Which brings me to the second part of my story.

René's fame was not solely the result of his remarkable literary achievements. He had always been a man of political ambition, but his strongly held convictions were often at variance with the times. Like many other writers and poets he had initially been sympathetic to the Revolution in France but the years of the Terror horrified him and he reverted to his earlier support for the royalists. However, when he eventually

returned to France from exile he was reconciled with Napoleon Bonaparte and appointed secretary of the legation to the Holy See in Rome. After Bonaparte was crowned Emperor Rene transferred his support to the king in exile. With the Restoration he became a peer and a state minister but his inevitable criticism of King Louis XVIII led to dismissal and he joined the faction supporting the present king, Charles X. To cut a long story short he has recently been appointed French Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

The news that he was in London reached me three weeks ago at Samuel's mother's funeral. I was talking to an old friend of my father's, who is vice-dean and precentor at St Paul's Cathedral. He chanced to mention that he had met René at a reception at the House of Commons.

The prospect of seeing René again after all these years filled me with equal amounts of curiosity and trepidation. But a few days later I suggested to my husband that René might be helpful to young Samuel's career and that I might travel to London with the boys and meet him. Samuel was supportive and it was agreed that we should make the journey the following week and stay with a cousin in Lambeth.

On our third day in the metropolis I summoned the courage to pay an unannounced visit to the French Embassy. The two boys and I took a carriage to the residency in Kensington. As we waited in the carriage my message to the ambassador was swiftly answered and we were soon ushered into his office.

I was still in mourning for Samuel's mother and I felt somewhat self-conscious in my sombre dress. My legs were trembling. He entered the room and stared at me in amazement.

'My lord, do you remember me?' I said.

He seemed lost for words but he gave me a sweet smile and led me by the hand to a seat. Then sitting down beside me he finally spoke with tears filling his eyes.

‘And you, madame, do you remember me?’

He was heavier, thicker jowled, but his dark, curly hair was still boyishly out of control and his eyes every bit as beautiful. I smiled and was overwhelmed by the realisation of how much I had loved him. He still held my hand clasped between his palms.

‘I am in mourning for my mother-in-law, sir,’ I said, gesturing at my dress.

‘And your own mother and your father, how are they?’

‘My father died some years ago, my lord. My mother lives with us. These are my children.’

I withdrew my hand and took a handkerchief to wipe the tears from my eyes. I was alarmed that the boys should witness such an outpouring of emotion. But, pulling myself together I spoke in French, telling him briefly of my marriage to Rear-Admiral Sutton and doing my best to describe my current situation.

He took my hand again and held it against his heart. I think he realised my confusion.

‘Perhaps if I take your address, madame, I could visit you tomorrow,’ he said.

I nodded and gave him my arm as he led me to the carriage with the boys following. I could feel their bewilderment. I arranged matters so that I was alone when René visited my cousin’s house the following morning. We sat opposite each

other at the breakfast table and I served tea in a rather awkward manner. But before long we were recalling the events of those long-lost days in Bungay: our walks and our reading and the music I played. I looked into his face and saw the young man I had loved during those winter days. But then he broke the spell by asking me what my mother had said after his hurried departure. I felt myself blush and ignored his question.

'I came to London to make a request,' I said. 'I was hoping you might take an interest in the future of my children, whom you met yesterday.'

'What can I do, madame?'

'Samuel, the older boy, wishes to go to Bombay. I know that Mr George Canning is your friend and that he has been appointed Governor-General of India. If he were to take my son with him I can assure you that Samuel would be eternally grateful to you. And so indeed would I.'

'Nothing would delight me more, madame,' he said. 'How can I deny one who received a poor exile at her father's table, who paid heed to my suffering and who would perhaps have offered me the prospect of the greatest happiness. I will speak to Mr Canning. And I am confident your son shall go to India.'

I nodded my thank you and after a short silence he spoke again.

'Charlotte, I hope I may call you Charlotte, how do you see me today? My fortune has changed but have I changed.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'You don't even look older.'

'But when we met yesterday, you called me my lord. That seems perhaps a little... distant.'

'Not at all, my dear René. When I spoke of you to my mother and father during your stay with us, my lord was how I always referred to you.' I didn't add that I would have delighted in calling him my husband, too.

René paid three more visits to the house in Lambeth to report on the progress of his conversations with Mr Canning. On the final occasion he told me that he had the Governor-General's word that Samuel would be found a place in Bombay. I was touched by his diligence, knowing how busy he was with the affairs of state.

'When I first met you,' I said. 'no-one knew who you were. Now there's scarcely a soul in the world who does not recognise the name of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand. It is for this reason, for the sake of posterity, that I want to return these to their author.' I handed him my precious parcel of letters that he had written to me and a short prose poem in his own hand.

'Keep them to remember me,' he said.

'No, they are yours, my lord.' A tear welled in my eyes. I asked him to leave and he kissed my hand and bade me farewell. 'Farewell. Farewell.'

The next day I returned to Ditchingham.



EMIGRANTS



Enclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave.

John Clare

A letter from Uncle Henry came that morning from Canada. Sarah read it aloud to her mother. It was a long letter, but this was the part that most engaged them:

We are having a good early summer and the wheat and other crops look well. The climate, as I've told you, is a little more extreme than England. The winters are a degree or two colder, but summer makes up for it: long periods of sunshine but plenty of rain for the crops too.

I know that you would find the farming a bit hit and miss compared to Suffolk. We run a heavy drag over the land and sow in the autumn and that's about it, bar fighting off the crows, till harvest time. But the yields are healthy and there's no difficulty finding a market for the grain.

I bought two young horses last week, spirited little nags. We built a new stable for them out back, so the place is beginning to look more like a proper farm.

If you changed your minds about coming over here, you wouldn't be making a mistake. I only wish I'd done it twenty years back. You can tell my old friends in Debenham that there's plenty of land and work in Canada and no fear of being sent to the workhouse. And prices are low; meat costs near half as much as it does in Suffolk. If I miss anything in England it's you... and maybe a decent pint of Suffolk beer.

When Uncle Henry emigrated two years ago, he was granted a 100-acre block of farmland north of Lake Erie. Each time he wrote, which was infrequently, the news seemed ever more optimistic. Yet, soon as Sarah read the letter, she knew they were in for another barney. Whenever the subject of emigrating to British America reared its head, it always led

to a bitter family row. They were split down the middle on the matter. Sarah's mother, Margaret, had for some time been strongly in favour of taking the loans on offer from the parish and boarding a ship from London to join her brother-in-law. Sarah too was eager to start a new life and Uncle Henry's tales of farming by the great lakes fuelled her determination. With falling wages and next to no work there was precious little to keep them in Suffolk.

But her father, William, was dead set against it. Like her little brother Luke, he believed in staying put in the old country and fighting for their rights. And as the main breadwinners, you would normally expect the men to have the final say. Yet William's health hadn't been good of late and he often struggled to put in a full week's work on the land. And Luke was a hothead with wild ideas, constantly on the wrong side of the overseers who hire for the landowners. As a family they got by, but without much meat on their plates these days; supper for the most part was potato, bread, cheese and pickle. And there were very few of the luxuries such as new clothes or bed linen.

As the days and months passed life had got harder. Sarah was nearly thirty and not yet married. Her mother was frequently reminding her that she herself had bred three children by the time she was Sarah's age. But the prospects were few. Eligible young men weren't queuing up to marry into a poor family and those that showed an interest didn't interest her. Sarah felt herself stuck in a swamp from which there was no clambering out. No escape except a new start and the route that thousands were taking to North America.

Her father arrived back from the fields a little earlier than usual that evening. Sarah heard his cough as he entered the kitchen. His farmer's lung playing up again. She stayed in the bedroom, out of the way, while her mother delivered news of the arrival of the letter.

'Home early, William,' said Margaret.

He didn't reply. Got himself a drink of water.

She tried again. 'Work all right?'

'Hot.'

'It's a-warming up.'

'That it is.'

'There's a letter from Henry on the table. Come this morning.'

William started to read the letter while Margaret immediately chose to pour salt in the wound. 'There's fifty odd folks left today from Debenham, Pettaugh and Winston. Gone down to Bury then London docks by cart. Bound for Ohio. They all took loans from the parishes. About six shilling a head, so I was told.'

'Don't give me that talk, Margaret,' said William sharply. 'The government don't know what to do with us, so they bundles us off to America and Australia like convicts and it's us what takes the gamble on surviving. Well, I'd rather be a pauper here than waste away in some far-off wilderness.'

'Henry in't wasting away, is he?'

'Henry's a good deal younger than what I am. And I wouldn't believe all the guff he writes neither. He's not going to tell you if he's losing money, is he?'

'Whyever not?'

'Cause he's a proud man like me.'

‘But not half as stubborn.’

William muttered something about ‘going to read in peace’ and left the kitchen still grasping the letter in his hand. Slamming the door behind him as he went out into the yard. Sarah listened to her mother preparing the evening meal, grumbling to herself, the pans banging.

They weren’t the only family that was struggling. Far from it. Ever since the wars with Napoleon the landowners and farmers had been cutting back on wages and the cost of food had near doubled. The labourer is the servant of the season – or so they say – cast off, when the task is done. Even when the work was there at sowing or harvest time, the overseers would take on strong, active young men at no more than five shillings a week which just about kept them from starving, never mind their families. And now, with the new ploughs and threshing machines the big farms were reducing the numbers of workers they employed every year.

If that weren’t a bad enough state of affairs, there’d been a drying up of just about every other source of income too. The women used to earn a bit extra from home spinning of wool, but not anymore. The factories and mills in the north had taken the trade. The poorer families had been especially hard hit because the money that came in from spinning and knitting was a vital supplement to the family income at times when agricultural labourers were laid off. Sarah and her mother had tried to earn a little extra from brewing beer and making pickles, but it came as no surprise that every woman in the parish had had the same idea.

Sarah went to help with supper. It was hot in the kitchen with the cooking of potatoes and the sun coming through the little window that faces south-west. Margaret didn’t say a word and Sarah wasn’t going to let on that she’d overheard what her father had said. They worked in silence, heads down, the

sweat rolling off their arms and faces.

Finally, Sarah spoke. 'You heard from Luke?'

'No.'

'Wonder if he got work today?'

'Doubt it. 'Spect he's moping about with those so-called friends of his. It's a flat time of year. Apart from the cattle and hogs there won't be much call for workers till harvest time.'

'He was talking about going to Nottingham to find work with the textiles.'

'Then we'll just have to hope it's all talk as usual. He can do better if he puts his mind to it.'

Henrietta started vigorously mashing potatoes as if she was taking her frustrations out on the spuds.

'21st June tomorrow,' she sighed suddenly.

'I know, Ma.'

They all knew. The longest day. And it was 13 years ago that night Sarah's brother John had been killed. Stabbed in the back in Stowmarket in broad daylight. They'd never found his murderer. In the end it was put down to a feud between families, though no-one told them which family it was they were supposed to be feuding with.

John had been the one Sarah looked up to. He was five years older than her and though he'd teased her all the time, she hadn't been too fussed by it, because with John there was no malice. He used to laugh at everything or, rather, he found laughter wherever he went. No-one had had more zest

for life than John. Naturally, he was on her mind today...and every day. Like all her dead brothers. Hugh, John, Oliver and the one with no name.

Hugh, her brother, who died of smallpox when she was eight and he was ten.

John, her brother, who was murdered, when she was 15 and he was 20.

Oliver, her brother, who died of the flux, when she was 17 and he was five.

And her little brother she never knew, who was stillborn, when she was 18.

That's why her mother made such a special case of Luke. Why she forgave him everything. And who could blame her? He was the only one left. The only son.

Luke was 19, nine years younger than Sarah. He had always been a spoilt lad: given everything his father and mother could afford; excused for his laziness and later for his drinking and the trouble he got into with girls. Allowed to duck out of school, shun church and shy off work without the slightest excuse. Luke wasn't bad, certainly not in Sarah's eyes. And he definitely wasn't stupid even though his education had been a bit hit and miss. But he'd never learned discipline and he didn't know how to control his temper.

Sarah sensed something in the air that evening, even before the four of them sat down to supper. Luke arrived in a restless, sulky mood. Margaret, as usual, made allowances for his failure yet again to find work.

'It all evens out in the end: good luck and bad,' she said.

Luke mumbled something about the overseers having their favourites and he'd never get in their good books.

'They're playing the old farmers' shift,' said his mother. 'Shunting labourers backwards and forwards between the farm and the parish. At harvest time they're all crying out for us and then come late autumn they kick everyone out and there's nothing save the poor relief pittance or the work-house. Afore you know it they'll be hiring them Irish vagabonds and throwing us all out to the colonies.'

William scowled. 'Don't give me talk of vagabonds, Margaret. The farmers ain't stupid. They want to keep the best workers. It's the idlers they'll let go.'

'You mean the so-called undeserving paupers, don't you, Father?' said Luke with a sneer. 'Them indolent, poaching, drunkard ne'er-do-wells who are cynically exploiting the parish rates, according to them thieving Tory landowners.'

'That's not what I'm saying, Luke, and you knows it,' said William.

'That's right,' said his mother. 'There are some as are like that. But most of the folk round here are good workers.'

'So, what are the new Poor Laws for then?' said Luke.

Sarah gave him a pleading look, hoping to avoid another lecture, but it was too late.

'I'll tell you if you want to know,' he continued. 'They're forcing us into the workhouses to starve through the winter and then, when they need the workers in summer, they come along and fish out those who have survived and pay them less than what it takes to live on. And any poor labourer who refuses to accept low wages will find himself cut off by the

parish board too. No relief for the unemployed who don't help themselves. That's what the bastards say.'

'Don't you use language like that at this table, Luke.'

'But the boy's right, Margaret. The way the landowners and the government have got it rigged we're made to feel like unwelcome guests in our own parish.'

'I'm not arguing with you, William. I just say it's time we got out.'

'And I say it's time to fight. To show the bloodsuckers we can stand up to them,' said Luke.

'Well, to my way of thinking, that ain't a fight what you're ever going to win, little brother,' said Sarah, finally allowing herself to be drawn into the squabble.

And so the argument rolled on through the meal, until Sarah got up and went to bed even though she wasn't tired and it was still light outside.

* * *

It was much later when Luke came into the bedroom. She pretended to be asleep but she had been lying awake thinking of Canada and trying to imagine Uncle Henry's farm. She noticed that Luke got into bed with all his outdoor clothes on and again the feeling of foreboding came over her again. Sarah and Luke shared a small room, the beds pushed apart as far as the walls would allow. She could hear him breathing and shuffling about under the blanket.

It was an hour or more later, that Luke got up and crept out of the bedroom. She heard him tiptoe down the stairs and open and close the door out into the yard. Sarah dressed

quickly. She left the house quietly and peered about the yard in the semi-darkness. No sign of him. All was quiet; the cottage and outbuildings bathed in the soft light of a mid-summer's night, a breath of air rustling the leaves. Then she caught sight of him coming out of the shed, carrying a hay fork. That had her really worried. He headed for the village common where he was joined by others. She recognised most of them: Georgie Lummis, Peter Polter, Edwin Culley, young men of Luke's age; some younger. Plenty of them were armed with farm implements: axes, crowbars, spades. They were on the warpath all right. More arrived until there were 60 or 70 gathered around the pump. Most of the lads of the village were there. Sarah hung well back out of sight, hidden behind a newly erected haystack.

After a time the group got on the move, heading south, down the Ipswich road. It was well after midnight but the sun had set only a couple of hours earlier and the glow from the west and light from the moon and the stars made it easy to follow them. It wasn't long before she guessed where they were going. The Jessup place. There'd been talk lately of Malty Jessup buying a new threshing machine. And if she'd guessed right, big trouble lay ahead. There had been several local incidents of machine breaking and barn fires in recent months. A farmer from Diss had been badly burnt in a fire only a week ago according to the Suffolk Chronicle. The unrest and rioting was an ugly symptom of the backlash against the destruction of traditional ways that the new machinery had brought. Some people called them the Swing Riots, after the threatening letters sent to farmers signed by the mythical Captain Swing, named after the swinging sticks used in hand threshing.

The mob moved forward in eerie silence. They turned off the road, up the track to Malty's farmhouse. Across the yard stood a big old barn, newly extended. That was where the machines would be. The lads headed straight for it. One lit a

faggot of twigs with a lucifer. Then another and a third torch flared. They forced the barn door. Bales of hay were aflame. The timber walls caught. A couple of cart horses made a panicky escape. Shouts came from the house. Malty and one of his boys running towards the scene. Protesting loudly. But what could they do against such a mob? The barn was now well ablaze, flames and sparks rising into the night sky and lighting the scurrying figures on the ground. Sarah could feel the heat of the conflagration from where she stood, part hidden behind a beech hedge. The attackers began to disperse, slipping away into the night. One of them passed within a few feet of her. She froze and held her breath.

She didn't notice Luke leaving, but by now she'd almost forgotten about him in the brutality of the destruction. She headed back towards the village taking lanes and tracks at random to avoid stumbling upon any of the rioters. Now and again she heard chants in the distance: Bread and Blood and Long Live Captain Swing! Some of the bolder protagonists celebrating their night's work.

More people were awake now; some heading towards the glow in the sky to the south, though it was far too late to save the barn and its machinery. Sarah walked along the banks of the Deben stream and down Water Lane. She didn't want to go home in case she encountered Luke, so she climbed up to the centre of the village and entered the church, which was always open.

She slumped into a pew and, in a trance-like state, staring at the tall, gothic chancel windows as the palest of light began to filter through them into the nave. There she fell asleep. For how long she didn't know but she was woken by the sound of the porch door opening. It was the vicar, Reverend Smalley.

'Sarah! What brings you here in the middle of the night?'

George Smalley had been vicar of St Mary Magdalene's for twenty years or more. Apart from his bad breath and annoying high-pitched laugh, he was a nice enough soul, well thought of in the parish and a good friend of Sarah's mother, who was the only member of the family who attended church every single Sunday.

'I...I couldn't sleep and I...'

'I'm not surprised with the goings on round here last night. Have you heard? Farmer Jessup's barn has burned down.'

Sarah burst into tears, abruptly overwhelmed by the shock and tension of the night and her fears for Luke. She found herself pouring out her story to George Smalley, who was sitting next to her on the pew and holding her hand.

When her somewhat disjointed tale ended, the pair of them sat in silence for a while, the vicar still clutching her hand and glancing up at the beams of the church as if he was consulting with the Almighty.

'You don't know where Luke is now, do you, Sarah?'

'No. Unless he's gone home. What will happen to him?'

'I don't know. They tell me the Jessups have identified some of the perpetrators and the parish constable and his men are out looking for them.'

'And if Luke is...'

'Listen, Sarah,' said the vicar, as if suddenly urging himself to come to a decision. 'I think the best thing is for you to go home. And I'll come and see Margaret and William in the morning, first thing. I promise.'

Sarah nodded and got up to leave.

‘And one other thing,’ said George Smalley, ‘It might be better if you don’t tell them you’ve spoken to me.’

* * *

George Smalley was true to his word. He arrived at the cottage well before seven o’clock. William and Margaret received him with some surprise and great anxiety. It had been a sleepless night for Sarah and her parents too had been up for several hours waiting for news of Luke. He hadn’t returned or been seen since the attack on the farm, which was just as well since the vicar informed them that Maltby Jessup had identified Luke and a dozen others. John Corder the petty constable and his men were even now rounding up all the lads that they could find.

The consequences of arrest were severe. Trials in the assizes for riot, arson and assault usually brought heavy sentences. Those convicted faced imprisonment and even execution. But the most likely outcome, according to the vicar, was transportation to Norfolk Island or Van Dieman’s Land for a stretch of 10 to 15 years.

Margaret was distraught. The idea of Luke being transported as a common criminal appalled her. The shame for him and the family. It would be a sin to allow it to happen. George Smalley tried to console her and, before he left, he took her to one side and spoke privately to her for some time.

‘What did the old Bible thumper want, Margaret?’ asked William, after their guest had gone.

‘He asked me to come to the church at lunchtime to pray for Luke with him.’

'Hmm, much good that will do.'

'Don't you be so hard, William. He's doing his best to help us. And if praying can save Luke, then I'll be on my knees every day from now till doomsday.'

'You think I should go and look for the boy?' said William.

'No fear. It's best he keeps out of the way if he can.'

Sarah was puzzled by what she had heard. Luke had disappeared into thin air, or so it seemed. Where had he spent the remainder of the night? Where was he now? He had no money to speak of and nothing but the clothes he was wearing. How long would it be before he was forced to give himself up? And then there was the Reverend Smalley. Sarah had a nagging suspicion that he knew quite a lot more than he was letting on.

Margaret set off for the church a little before midday. Sarah and her father moped about the cottage and yard all afternoon filling in the time with long-put-off chores. William had cried off work and he busied himself sweeping out the barn and mending a hinge on the gate. Sarah sewed the seam of an old dress and weeded the vegetable patch. All the time they were both looking out for Margaret's or Luke's return.

In the middle of the afternoon a young lad arrived with a message from the vicar. Margaret would not be back till later that evening. That was it. No explanation. No further information.

'What's old Smalley up to?' said William to Sarah. 'That's a long old prayer session they're having.'

'Shall I go to St Mary's and ask?' said Sarah.

'Best not. Leave 'em be. I'm sure there'll be something they're cooking up, though I'm blowed if I know what it is.'

It rained heavily later in the afternoon and the wind got up and drove them inside. Bridey Gillings, their nearest neighbour, came round for a gossip with Margaret. She told them eight lads had been arrested and were being held in the parish lock-up. According to her, young Harry Aldous and Wesley Spall were the ringleaders. She didn't mention Luke, probably more out of embarrassment than sensitivity. William didn't encourage her to stay long. As she was leaving, Bridey said something about understanding them wanting to get prepared for the big journey, which made little sense to neither William nor Sarah.

When Margaret returned it was early evening and Sarah and her father were sitting at the table about to eat. Bread, cheese and pickles.

'And what's bin going on, Margaret?' said William.

She sat down opposite them. "Well, I've plenty to tell you. And that depend on you, William, whether it be good news or bad.'

'Have you heard anything about Luke?' asked Sarah.

'He's safe for now. He's gone away.'

'Gone? Where's he gone to?' said William.

'Taken a boat to Hull. Then he'll go on to Liverpool.'

'What's he going there for?'

'I sent him. And I give him the money to book tickets on a ship sailing for Quebec.'

'Quebec? What you saying, woman?'

'We're taking a booking for the four of us. The ship's named the City of Waterford. It leave on the 17th of July.'

'But...'

'It ain't no use arguing, William. You heard what George Smalley said. If the boy stays here he'll be transported. 15 year on the other side of the world. We'll likely never see him again. We got no choice, man. We go with him or we lose our son.'

'And where'd you find the money for this jaunt?'

'From the parish funds. I borrowed 30 shilling. The vicar arranged it, on the quiet like. He's the only one, save us, what knows about Luke.'

'30 shilling. And how ever we going to pay that back?'

'If Luke's transported we'd still be accountable for all his expenses. This way we stay together and we take our chances as a family.'

William put his head in his hands. Margaret leaned forward and put an arm round his neck. The fight seemed to have gone out of him.

'It'll come out all right, my dear,' said Margaret tenderly. 'We can sell what bits and pieces we got. What with the money we borrowed, that'll see us through till we get settled.'

Sarah thought she saw her father's shoulders shake. A sob. He wasn't an emotional man, but his love for his son and love of his native soil had been so turned against each other that his mind was in turmoil.

Over supper the full story came out. When Margaret had got to the church George Smalley had taken her up the stairs above the Galilee porch to the tower room and there was Luke. He had spent the best part of the night hidden up in a derelict hayloft. In the early hours, not long after the vicar had talked to Sarah, George had caught sight of the boy walking towards Aspell where he was intending to take refuge in the woods. George persuaded him to come back to the church and he gave the lad breakfast. He knew that sooner or later he'd have little choice but to persuade Luke to hand himself over to the constable, but he was anxious for Margaret to have a last chance to talk to her boy.

After that, events took over. Both Margaret and George seemed to relish the craziness of the plan they devised. And it worked like a dream. With the vicar's support the parish guardians had no reservations about offering a loan to William and Margaret. News of their forthcoming emigration naturally spread round the village like wildfire. Everything rested on getting Luke out of the parish quickly and undetected. And fortune or the Lord smiled on them in the unlikely shape of old Swanny Cock, the coal merchant from Bungay. Luke made his escape, for sixpence and no questions asked, under a pile of empty coal sacks on the back of Swanny's cart. From Bungay it would be half a day's trip down river to Lowestoft. And in Lowestoft he'd be spoilt for choice of boats to take him north to Hull.

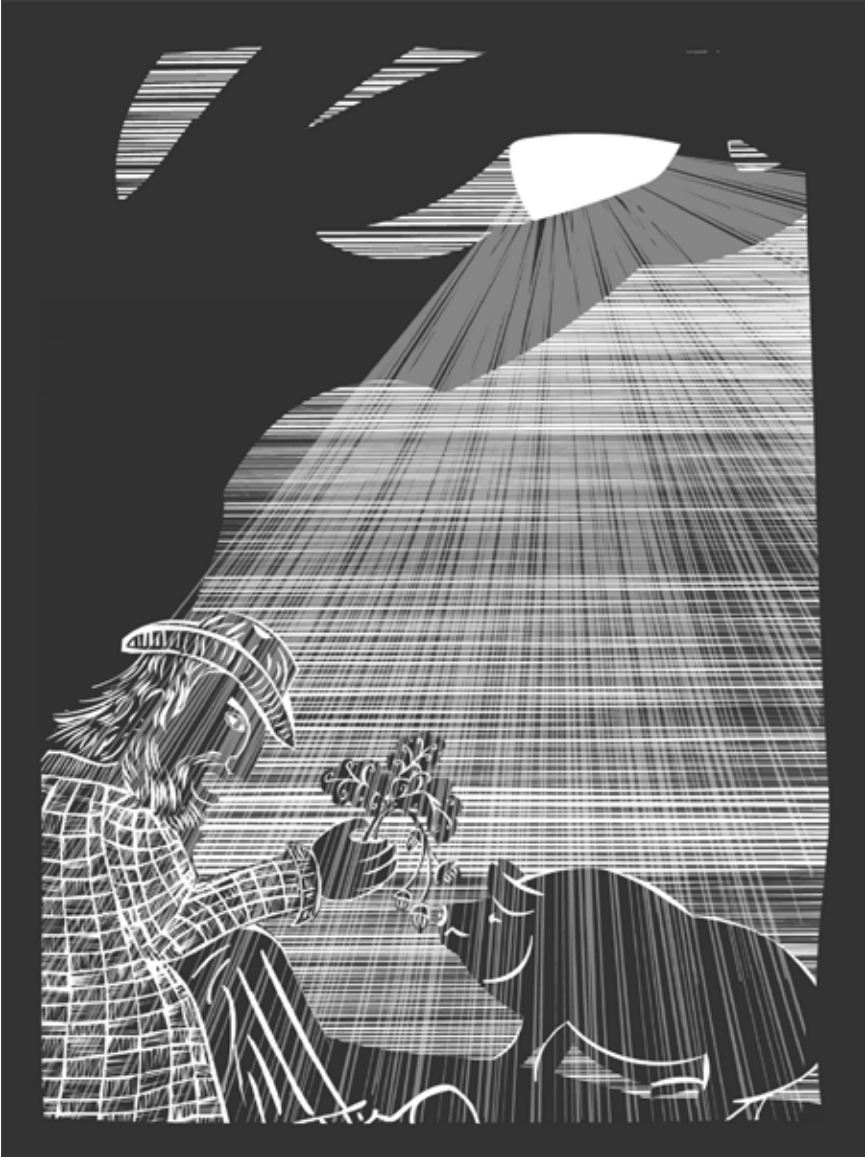
Afterword

William, Margaret and Sarah were united with Luke in Liverpool two days before the City of Waterford set sail for Quebec. Soon after their arrival in Canada they leased a smallholding near London, Ontario, some twenty miles from Uncle Henry's farm.

William suffered a stroke of apoplexy a year later but recovered to see Luke begin his successful career with the railways and survived to witness the birth of his first grandson. Sarah became a teacher. She never married and lived with Margaret until her mother died age 96.



PIGMAN



The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground...
Alfred Lord Tennyson

Among the many old towns and villages of Suffolk there are few that cannot furnish the curious visitor with a ghostly tale or an account of some mysterious haunting. Most of these stories have their setting in ancient buildings of the gothic or Italianate style with creaking doors, shadowy galleries and dimly lit staircases. There may also be a long drive leading up to the house, running through dank, lonely woods, or perhaps a windswept coastal path along the cliffs, visible on a moonlit night from the upper casement windows.

I was disappointed therefore when I moved to S, to discover no such stories. The village is a large one towards the east of the county and has its share of ancient farmhouses and halls. There is a gothic manor house and an old chapel, which could convincingly accommodate some ghostly business. But no-one, not even the oldest inhabitants of the area, could recall any history of a haunting or mystical intervention.

I should, of course, explain my interest further. I retired to this pleasant corner of rural Suffolk three years ago from Cambridge where I was a doctor of natural sciences at Magdalene College. In my retirement I continued my studies in a pleasant, dilettante fashion largely through correspondence with former colleagues and students. But I have also pursued a growing interest in the paranormal both through my reading and in my communication with many of my celebrated contemporaries, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Herbert Wells, William Crookes, young Ernest Rutherford, and many others. We share a fascination in the discoveries of modern alchemy, mesmerism, spiritualism and the workings of the occult in general.

Which brings me to my story, a story that came to its strange conclusion only three days ago. It concerns a character who lived in the village all his life and died here shortly after I arrived. Erasmus Grabham was his name; however he was known to everyone in this corner of Suffolk simply as Pig-

man. He owned a wood which abuts my cottage. It is called the Big Wood, though even in the days of Pigman it was of moderate size only, perhaps 30 acres all told. The wood is now somewhat smaller, but I'll come to that later.

Pigman lived in a ramshackle shelter near the middle of the wood and, of course, he kept pigs. I'm told there were up to thirty of them, piglets, sows and at least one old boar, all running wild in the wood, rooting amongst the acorns and digging up the undergrowth. Pigman controlled his herd through grunts and whistles and some sort of sixth sense. The pigs never roamed beyond the confines of the wood and were no trouble to the villagers, many of whom enjoyed a stroll along the footpaths that Pigman faithfully maintained. There was some concern locally about what would happen to the Big Wood when Pigman passed on. His family had owned the land for many generations, but he was the last of the line. There were no children nor relations and, as far as anyone knew, no-one had been lined up to inherit the land. Pigman never discussed these matters. He talked to few people and when he did, only a syllable or two passed his lips.

In spite of his lack of conventional manners, Pigman was well liked in the village, largely because of his evident love for his wood. He knew every tree, nurtured the new shoots, taking care to protect them from the pigs. At the same time he used his pigs to create clearings and let the light in. Other parts he thinned for coppice growth, which produced the firewood he sold in the village. Pigman understood that woodland needs open glades and dense understoreys, ponds and margins; he knew that old trees depend on their neighbours and that new growth is essential to maintain forest life. The result was a thriving wood of great beauty, with its spectacular variety of trees, notably oak, birch, hornbeam, walnut and sweet chestnut. And, of all the trees, there was said to be one which Pigman cared for above all others: a fine 200-year-old, maiden oak, which loomed over his shack in

the middle of the wood. He could often be seen sitting on an old log, staring happily into the branches of the mighty tree.

Then, one day, Pigman had an unpleasant adventure. He had been to the market at W to sell and buy some pigs and, on his way home with a cart full of porkers, he called in at a popular inn for a little refreshment. When he was ready to start on his journey again, his horse was unwilling to do so. Pigman applied the whip a little too vigorously, the horse leapt forward and the belly band snapped sheer from the shafts. Up went the cart, and out went Pigman and all his swine. The pigs were all eventually recaptured after giving the locals from the hostelry a good afternoon's run. But it was discovered that both Pigman's legs had been broken in the accident.

He never fully recovered from his injuries and remained on his home-made crutches or perched in the back of his cart for the rest of his life. No longer able to look after the pigs properly, he reluctantly decided to sell them. Without his herd Pigman became a shadow of his former self. Before long he put the wood up for sale, too. A buyer was soon found – I shall call him John Lancaster. He was from farming stock: the family owned a substantial estate near Sudbury, but Lancaster himself had been a captain in the Indian army and had only recently returned to the old country. It was rumoured in the village that the contract for the sale of the woodland contained just two conditions. The first was that Pigman should have the right to continue living in his shack for the rest of his days. And the second that Lancaster and his heirs would look after the wood and, crucially, cut down no trees other than in the interests of proper husbandry and the continued health of the Big Wood.

Although he was one of my closest neighbours, I never had a conversation with Pigman. I saw him from time to time going to and fro in his cart, conveyed by the old nag that

had broken his legs, but he took no notice of me. Those who didn't know him would easily mistake him for a tinker with his flat cap, his battered, brown jacket and unruly moustaches. He died scarcely six months after I arrived in the village. I remember the date well, April 15th, because it was the very day that Aleister Crowley, renowned occultist, magician, poet, painter and mountaineer, published the Book of the Law, the sacred text that served as the basis for his mystical religion, Thelema. But I digress. There was a big funeral service in the church for Pigman, which I attended out of curiosity. The vicar gave a fine eulogy, expressing the village's thanks for the maintenance of the Big Wood and voicing, with some justification, the general disquiet over its future.

The new owner Lancaster, who had made himself scarce up to this point, arrived on the scene three days after the funeral and the first thing he did was to demolish the Pigman's shelter. Contractors came in from Sudbury and started clearing the ground and the trees for the foundations of a new house. A very large house it turned out to be. There were mutterings in the village as more trees were felled, but most of the resentment came from the fact that Lancaster did not hire a single local artisan or workman in the building of his mansion.

The building rose to three storeys, a modern, squarish construction with big sash windows and a gabled roof. A large verandah ran along one side of the house with a substantial balcony above it and there was a Scottish round turret at the north-east corner. More trees came under the axe as Lancaster extended his garden and opened up views from the verandah to the river valley. After a year the house was completed and the new owner moved in.

To say that he was not well liked in the village by this time, would be an understatement. But things went from bad to worse when Lancaster started fencing off his land, ostensibly

to keep out the deer. The villagers, allowed access to the wood from as far back as anyone could remember, were up in arms, even though the most vociferous were the ones who never walked further than to the end of their own garden and back. I kept abreast of the changes in the Big Wood because, like others, I found a gap in the deer fence and continued my occasional walks mainly out of curiosity. The loss of trees was shocking and appeared in places to be almost wanton. A vast lawn had been created on two sides of the house and extensive outbuildings were being erected at the back.

I never encountered Lancaster on my walks and, in fact, I spoke to him only once. We were introduced to each other at my solicitors' office in F by one of the partners. I was struck above all by his small, sharp teeth in regular rows beneath a white, stubby moustache; they gave him the appearance of some predatory river creature like an otter, sleek and watchful and vicious if provoked. His face was red and his white hair swept back and held in place by ample quantities of macassar oil. He fixed me with his piercing dark blue eyes, shook hands and showed not a trace of interest in anything I said. When eventually I steeled myself to ask politely about his plans for the wood he told me abruptly that it was none of my concern and walked out of the room. I did, on that same occasion, ask my solicitor about the contract for the sale of the land and the supposed condition for protecting the trees. But he said that his firm had not handled the sale and he had no knowledge of the contract.

A year or more after Pigman's death rumours started circulating of strange goings-on in the wood. Dogs refused to go near the place and there were many accounts of horses being spooked on the bridleways near the margins, especially close to the coppiced areas and to the large pond at the south end. Billy Leggett, one of the old characters of the village, claimed to have heard, one night around 10 o'clock

when he was returning home, a horse and cart making its way through the Big Wood. He didn't see anything, but said he heard a grunt and a whistle that could only have come from Pigman himself. Billy's story was roundly discredited on account of the four or five pints of cider that he regularly consumed in the White Horse before his homeward walk. And no-one else ever heard the horse and cart.

Later that year, in early October, I was taking an afternoon stroll on the now neglected path through one of the remaining thickly wooded areas. As always I was keeping an ear out for anyone who might challenge me, when suddenly I heard scuffling sounds coming from behind some elder bushes to my left. I stopped and listened. Whatever animal it was had probably heard me and moved on. But beyond the bushes I found a scene of devastation as if the floor of the forest had been attacked by a drunken ploughman, The undergrowth had been dug up and the bare earth exposed over an area of some ten square yards. The only previous time I had witnessed such a scene was in the Pyrenees when I had been told it was the work of wild boar. But wild boar in Suffolk? They hadn't been seen in England for 200 years. And then I thought of Pigman's pigs.

My story was added to others that made the rounds of the village. Sounds of sawing and chopping of logs were heard emanating from the heart of the wood; flickering glows were seen just like the small fires that Pigman used to light. By the end of the year there was hardly a soul in the village who didn't believe that the ghost of Pigman was stalking his old domain.

Naturally, I took a special interest in these stories, noted them down and shared them with my correspondents. One writer suggested to me that these phenomena were 'subliminal uprushes' from unknown psychical faculties. Another said I should seek a medium to call up the spirit of Pigman and

enquire what message he was anxious to bring us.

Over the winter and following spring the mysterious occurrences appeared to subside and life in the village returned to more practical considerations of ploughing and sowing and Christmas, Easter and May Day festivities. Pigman and his wood were all but forgotten.

But then a rumour reached the village that Lancaster had felled the maiden oak – Pigman’s Oak as everyone now called it. As soon as I heard the story I naturally wanted to see for myself. I took my usual route though the fence into the Big Wood but on this occasion I ventured further than usual. The old oak had stood close to Lancaster’s new house, which I had previously tended to avoid for fear of an unpleasant encounter. Peering through the bushes at the edge of the lawn I saw that there, sure enough, was the massive oak in full leaf lying where it had crashed to the ground. It had been felled away from the house and some of its branches had already been sawn and stacked, but others lay twisted and broken under the immense weight of the tree. I was astonished by its size. The girth of the trunk was, I guessed, more than 15 feet and the branches spanned at least the length of a cricket pitch. Later I learned that Lancaster claimed he had cut down the tree because it was diseased and posed a threat to his house.

The loss of the majestic tree concentrated the anger of the entire village on the new owner of the Big Wood. Somehow Pigman’s Oak had become a symbol for the local community; one that stood for natural beauty and surging independence versus individual greed. Someone called the tree, ‘the emblem of the village’. The new village parish council voted unanimously to challenge the felling of the oak and the vicar was delegated to bring the matter to the attention of the Rt. Hon. Ernest Pretyman, the local member of parliament.

From that moment events began to spiral out of control. The following week the *H Times and East Suffolk Advertiser* picked up the story and, in the course of its investigations, uncovered the tale of Billy Leggett's encounter with the phantom horse and cart. Billy had evidently enjoyed embroidering his story further for the newshound and after a lurid description of Pigman and his cart careering through the Big Wood the report ended with the solemn words... *'We do believe that the great mass of ghost stories of which the world is full has not been built entirely upon the inventions of the ignorant and superstitious. This strange occurrence may not relate to the occult or the paranormal but if there a rational explanation we should like to know what it is.'*

Other newspapers and scandal sheets took up the saga. Over the weeks and months that followed, Pigman's ghost was a prime topic of conversation in inns and church halls across the eastern half of the county. Everyone had a theory about the haunting of the wood and the reason for the return of Pigman's spirit. More stories, most of dubious derivation, began to circulate. The affair stirred up such strong emotions that the vicar finally felt obliged to preach a sermon on pagan superstitions and the dangers of yielding to witchcraft. It had the effect of calming things down for a time... but there was more to come...

* * *

The storm took us all by surprise. It swept across east Suffolk last Tuesday night bringing violent winds and unseasonably heavy rain. After securing the doors and windows of my cottage I was unable to sleep and spent the night attempting to read by gaslight. I was constantly distracted by the strong blasts of the gale battering the walls of the cottage and the alarming crashes and groans that accompanied them.

It was about four in the morning when I went to the sitting

room window, which overlooks the Big Wood. It was pitch black outside and the branches of a laburnum bush were lashing the window panes. I was about to return to my book when a strange glowing light flickering through the trees caught my eye. It lasted no more than a few seconds, growing slightly in intensity and brightness and then fading completely. I stared out for some time but saw nothing more.

By morning the wind had died down considerably and the rain had ceased. I ventured out to inspect the impact of the storm. The lane that skirts the wood and leads down to the village had turned into a muddy torrent. I noticed immediately that the roof of the outhouse used by the gardener to store his tools had been partially torn off and was flapping in the wind. There was, however, no damage to the cottage itself that I could discern.

With a feeling of some relief I was about to return to the house to continue my studies, when I remembered the light that I had seen in the wood and decided to take a look for myself. I put on a stout jacket and waterproof boots and set out on the same path that I'd taken several weeks earlier to view the felled maiden oak. The way was less muddy under foot than I expected but the brambles and bushes had encroached further and I had to find my way around a couple of trees that had been uprooted in the storm. It took me the best part of half an hour to reach the edge of the lawn. And there I was stopped dead in my tracks.

At first sight I thought the house had come under a bombardment of mortar fire. The middle of the roof had caved in as if some mighty weight had crashed down upon it and the upper storey of the building had more or less collapsed. Bricks and wood and glass lay strewn across the lawn. I approached nervously, walking past the stump which was all that remained of Pigman's Oak. There was not a sound from the house.

I entered the building. I had no idea whether Lancaster or anyone else was in residence, but if someone had slept there last night there was a chance they might be seriously injured. When I reached the main porch, I heard a rumbling and crashing from the side of the house and witnessed part of the turret collapsing into the verandah roof in a huge plume of dust. The building was far too unstable for me to explore alone and I set off immediately to get help from the village.

By late morning I had returned to the scene with George Sturt, the village constable and three local lads, one of whom was a volunteer with the fire brigade at H. It took them two hours to reach the upper storey of the house and find the body of Lancaster in his four poster bed, crushed by the collapsing main beam of the roof.

I meanwhile was inspecting the house from the exterior, having been told firmly by Sturt that I was not under any circumstances to risk life and limb by entering the building. The damage was extensive: crumbling walls and crushed windows. But I could come to no opinion concerning the cause of the damage.

Finally, the fire brigade lad, I think his name was Horace, came down to tell me the news of the discovery of the body.

'Cor he 'ad a right scary look on his face,' said Horace. 'As if he'd see'd a ghost.'

I asked him if he had any theory about the cause of the tragedy and he gave me a long, slow look and said:

'Well... I seen plenty like it afore, sir. Roof stoved in like. Big hole through the middle where the walls have come down. But this 'ere's a rum ol' business, that's for sure.'

'And why is that?'

'Well kin yew see a tree or owt else that might have caused it?'

'Er, no I can't'

'And I reckon that makes it a bit different, don't it, sir?'

The opinion that the destruction of the house could only be explained by a falling tree, uprooted by the storm, immediately took a firm hold in the village. And the 'logical' conclusion from that diagnosis was, of course, that it was the ghost of Pigman's Oak that brought about Lancaster's death.

Last night in the White Horse all the talk was of Pigman's revenge.



1939



What we have feared assumes dimensions and a name.
The long shadow emerges from the wall the smoke is flame.
M. Jean Prussing

Six months later, on the day when the world chose to throw itself into madness, Mattie Pallant would remember that afternoon on the shores of the Stour. The terns and sandpipers had returned from their winter migrations and sand martins were swooping joyously through the air at invisible flies. The mingled cries of the waders, which she always heard as plaintive goodbyes, intensified the peace and beauty of the estuary. After the morning's rain the soft, musky scent of cherry and blackthorn blossom was at its sweetest. As a scientist she knew that the moisture in the air traps the molecules, holding them closer to the ground and enhancing the heady odour they release. But that knowledge took nothing away from the serene pleasure she felt. She frequently walked the paths of the Shotley peninsula near her home, from Pin Mill on the Orwell to Holbrook Creek on the banks of the Stour. Long walks helped her think and she had a good deal of thinking to do.

Her thoughts were destined to be frequently interrupted that sunlit afternoon. She was startled when an enormous jack hare bounded across her path no more than six feet away. Moments later two young gypsy lads galloped towards her on their ponies, laughing and shouting. Riding bareback, they brushed past her without an attempt to slow down. One of them gave her a shrill wolf whistle.

As she was crossing a stile she heard a voice behind her and she turned quickly, thinking perhaps it was the gypsies returning.

'I wonder if you can help me? I seem to have got myself rather lost.' A tall, dark-haired young man dressed in slacks and a green sports jacket was approaching. He explained that he had set out from his aunt's cottage after lunch and had completely lost his bearings.

From his description Mattie recognised the cottage. 'It's no

distance from where I'm heading. I'll show you if you like.'

He was perhaps a year or two older than her. Well spoken, with an attractive, melodious voice. His name was David Barrington.

'Do you live around here?' he asked.

'Yes. At least my parents do. A place called Danes Hall.'

'I'm just an interloper from London,' he said. 'I'm here to investigate the excavation near Woodbridge. The Saxon graves. No doubt you know all about them.'

'Not really.' Mattie's mother knew Edith Pretty who owned the land on the banks of the Deben where the ancient burial mounds were sited so Mattie had heard something last summer about the discovery. But she hadn't paid much attention largely because she had been away in Cambridge most of the year. David explained that as a keen amateur archaeologist, he had a hunch that the new dig this year might uncover something truly remarkable. His job as a journalist with the BBC had not unfortunately led to an official assignment to the excavation.

By the time she had directed him to his aunt's house and said goodbye, Mattie knew rather a lot about the Sutton Hoo dig and had already floated the idea that David might like to come to Danes Hall for supper. She had been brought up in a household where inviting people to supper was what you did. When the Pallants talked about 'friends', they meant people who responded to invitations to dine or stay for the weekend. Whenever they were both in residence her parents entertained almost every night and Mattie was used to inviting colleagues from university, if only to have someone of her own age to talk to.

The house, built for Geoffrey and Klara Pallant before Mattie was born, was large and intensely private, fenced and walled off from any unwanted trespassers. Designed by a fashionable architect, it contained eight bedrooms, a large dining room, a conservatory and a ballroom. Three acres of woodland and garden overlooked the river Stour and included a tennis court, squash court, stables and kennels.

Mattie's father Geoffrey had inherited wealth but he was also joint owner and chairman of a thriving silk-weaving company just outside Sudbury. Klara Pallant had been born Klara Schlegel to a Swiss hotelier and his Polish wife, both long dead. Like her mother, Klara was a catholic, though not a noticeably active one. She had lived in England since the age of 12, but still retained a trace of central European accent.

That was more or less the sum total of Mattie's knowledge of her parents and their respective backgrounds; a state of affairs which, at least for the first 18 years of her existence, she had found perfectly satisfactory. She had grown up accustomed to entertaining herself, since neither her mother nor her father was interested in games, story books or any of the pursuits of childhood. 'Papa' as she called her father, was frequently away on business and when he was home he spent more time with his dogs than he did with Mattie. Her mother, who insisted Mattie call her Klara, was too preoccupied with entertaining her guests to pay Mattie much attention. In her early years, at primary school, Mattie had made friends who were occasionally allowed to visit and run riot in the grounds of Danes Hall. Later she was sent to boarding school in Southwold where she forged a resilience and independence out of her loneliness. While intimacy with her parents was out of the question, her mother had begun to show a little more interest in her as she grew into adulthood. But over the past year, since she had been at Cambridge, things had changed.

Mattie traced her awakening to two events which happened in quick succession. The first was the matter of her birth certificate. When she had gone up to Cambridge her father had given her the original document. At some point during her third term she had managed to lose it and rather than own up to the loss she applied to the General Registry Office at Somerset House for a copy. Only it didn't exist. There was no record of a Helena Mathilda Pallant, born July 18th 1919 or indeed at any time in the adjacent months and years. All possible explanations were equally bizarre: Somerset House had lost her records, or she had been born unregistered, or with a different name, or perhaps even in another country; in which case the certificate her father had given her – she had failed to inspect it in any great detail – was a fake. All she remembered was that it stated she had been born in Sudbury on what she had always believed to be her birthday. She paid a visit to the local Registrar in Sudbury but again came away empty-handed.

Despite feeling deeply troubled, Mattie didn't mention this discovery to a soul. Whilst the bond with her parents had never been strong, it had nevertheless provided some sort of mooring and now she felt cut adrift. The obvious solution was to speak to her father, and with some misgivings, she eventually wrote to tell him she had lost the certificate. Without alluding to her subsequent enquiries, she explained she needed a copy in order to register for her examinations. A week later a new birth certificate arrived from her father, with a note urging her to be more careful in future. As far as she could tell, it was a first-class forgery.

The second jolt in her life was provided by her encounter with the 'nutshells' of the pioneering forensic investigator, Frances Glessner Lee. Glessner Lee, Fanny to family and friends, was the daughter of an wealthy American industrialist. Brought up in a massive granite mansion in Chicago, Fanny from her early years developed an obsession with

making miniature scenes or dioramas on the scale of a doll's house. Nothing particularly unusual in that, one might think. But in Fanny's models the occupants of the miniaturised rooms with their fabric curtains, floral wallpaper and finely crafted furniture were all corpses and the rooms murder scenes.

Fanny went on to ignite the nascent field of forensic investigation. Using her inherited wealth she endowed a legal medicine department at Harvard and established a new library. She gave seminars in homicide investigation and established herself as a figure in the new science, but it was through her 'nutshells' that she achieved her prominence. She believed that crimes could be solved by scientific analysis of visual and tangible evidence. If the setting were studied properly, by the methodical sifting of material at a crime scene in a clockwise spiral, the truth, 'in a nutshell', would be exposed. Her constructions were composites of actual cases created with extraordinary attention to detail. The nutshells showed tawdry, middle-class décor: seedy kitchens, tenements, boarding houses; the rooms filled with miniaturised kitchenware, food, working mousetraps and rocking chairs. The corpses accurately represented discolouration or bloating, present at the crime scene. Her vigorous investigations captured the dark side of domestic life and its tragic effects.

Mattie first heard of Fanny's nutshells from a chance conversation in a pub with a young doctor. Within weeks she had read everything available about her new heroine's work and was in correspondence with Fanny herself. At the beginning of her second year at Cambridge she changed her course of study from geography to human biology, determined now to become a forensic scientist.

Throughout the summer and autumn the birth certificate continued to play on her mind. What would Fanny Glessner Lee have done in these circumstances? Mattie had no talent for

building models but, over the following months, she turned her bedsit in Cambridge into an exhibit of her own biography as she knew it. She collected everything she could discover about herself, her parents and her upbringing. She trawled back in the records and proceeded systematically to the years after her birth, in Sudbury, at Danes Hall and at school. The collected 'evidence' was arranged around the four walls of her room in a chronological sweep from left to right, with her supposed date of birth – 18th July 1919 – written in the centre alongside the forged birth certificate and an empty space reserved for the real one.

The evidence came from many sources: carefully transcribed articles and newspaper stories, public records, scarce family photographs, records of conversations with distant relatives (there weren't any close ones) and observations from family friends. Everything went up on the walls. She constructed a family tree from the limited facts at her disposal and added to it from time to time as forgotten distant cousins entered the frame.

Mattie's research was discreet. She recognised the obsessional nature of her quest and the very thought of others knowing about it filled her with embarrassment: no-one was ever invited back to her flat. But her method was exceedingly thorough. She made countless trips to London: to Somerset House several times, but also to the newspaper archive in Colindale and to the Registrar of Companies, the Social Survey Department and the Land Registry. She went twice more to Sudbury and to the offices of the Bury Free Press in Bury St Edmonds.

Some early discoveries about her parents surprised and shocked her. Their marriage certificate revealed that Sabine Klara Schlegel was not Swiss but German, the daughter of Berndt and Erika Schlegel from Ulm on the Danube, in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Klara and Geoffrey had mar-

ried in Birmingham in 1910 and it was perhaps unsurprising that, in view of the Great War, Klara might later distance herself from her origins and assume a more neutral Swiss/Polish identity.

The report of the wedding in the Birmingham Daily Post suggested a lavish ceremony. Several notable personalities of the day were in attendance, wrote the reporter, among them Sir Austin Chamberlain, Edward Talbot, the bishop of Southwark and the writers Francis and Frances Cornford.

During the next vacation Mattie encouraged some of the longer serving staff at Danes Hall to talk about their early memories of the place. Mildred Garrod, the cook, became her most valuable informant. Mildred was from Ipswich and remembered the Hall being built. She had worked for the Pallants for most of the last 27 years. Mildred remembered that Mr Pallant had owned a large house in Sudbury which wasn't sold until just before the Great Depression. It was Mildred who showed Mattie where the visitors' book was kept. She recounted that Geoffrey had been a close associate of Sir Oswald Mosley in the early days of Mosley's New Party and the British Union of Fascists, but that they had later fallen out.

Mildred also provided the clues which led Mattie to her most distressing discovery: the existence of her elder brother. The birth to Geoffrey and Klara Pallant of George Wolfric Hubert on 20th August 1913 had been officially registered. And so had his death the following year at the age of 15 months. Little George lived his entire life at the Grange, Sudbury, the house his father had bought in 1911. Why had her parents never told her about him? And how many more secrets had they kept from her?

David Barrington came to supper at Danes Hall three days after their meeting. Mattie was impressed by his relaxed,

confident manner in company. He was evidently used to rubbing shoulders with the privileged classes and was soon chatting cheerfully to Klara and two of her guests, Bridget D'Oyly Carte and Peter Kerr, brother of the Marquis of Lothian.

'Mattie says you work for the BBC,' said Klara.

'Yes. But I'm a mere junior correspondent,' said David. 'Though I'm lucky enough to be working with the new high-definition television.'

'Ah yes, television,' said Peter Kerr. 'They say that we have invented the biggest time-waster of all time.'

'That's not what the great John Reith used to tell us,' said David. 'Inform, educate, entertain: that was his motto.'

'But it will take people away from the theatre,' said Bridget.

'What do your parents do?' Klara asked David, in a move to change the subject.

'My father works for the railways. My mother was a teacher, but of course she had to give up teaching when she married and then she and my father adopted me.'

'Adopted?' said Klara. There was a rather strained sound to her question, Mattie thought.

David smiled. 'I was born in 1918. With the war and Spanish 'flu practically everyone was an orphan.'

Mattie caught Klara's eye and in that second she knew the truth. Why hadn't she thought of it before?

'My real father was in the Royal Flying Corps,' continued

David. 'He disappeared over the Channel. My mother was heartbroken and then the pandemic carried her off. I was the lucky one. Adopted at the age of one by the best parents in the world.'

Mattie's mind was racing ahead. Adopted. That explained the mystery of the birth certificate. But why were her parents lying? Were they ashamed of her? All her certainties were swept away: she knew nothing about her birth family, their background or when or where she was born. And, since it was more than likely that the Pallants had renamed her after the adoption, she didn't even know the name her true mother had given her. Mattie Pallant didn't exist. The discovery left her alienated and angry.

She saw a good deal of David over the ensuing weeks and drew closer to him. They met whenever their visits to Suffolk coincided; he was still spending all the time he could spare from his job in assisting with the Saxon excavations. Mattie often stayed in his flat in Hammersmith if she was in the capital. They had a very brief affair until Mattie realised that David was more interested in young men than in her. But the friendship flourished, bound by affinity and laughter and all the other things that hold two people together including, for Mattie, the fact of David's adoption.

One cloudy summer's morning when they were walking by the Thames near Hammersmith Bridge, Mattie risked bringing up the subject of her own birth and the strange way in which the truth had been kept from her.

'I don't know what to suggest, other than having it out with your parents,' said David.

'I can't do that. Not yet anyway.'

'Why not?'

'Because it would cause more distrust and deception. And I want to concentrate on my studies.' It was a partial truth. The other unspoken element was that she was far too angry with her parents to deal with a confrontation.

'Then I have no idea what to suggest,' he said. 'There was no legislation on adoption when you were born, so records aren't reliable anyway.'

'And I don't know where I was born nor my mother's name.'

'Exactly. There's not much choice, I'm afraid. Sooner or later you'll have to have it out with your parents... I mean your so-called parents.'

'I will,' she said. But she held back. For the first time in her life she was aware of both her privileged existence and the precarious foundations upon which it rested. Her past seemed now almost as much a work of imagination as her future. She felt trapped. On one level her room in Cambridge had become everything. Her life recorded. And yet with so much detail now, so many items, she found she couldn't focus. Applying Fanny Glessner Lee's clockwork spiral made her dizzy and slightly nauseous as she encountered the same old information. It felt more like disorientation than clarification.

One morning after the end of term she was lying late in bed, putting off the moment of getting up and starting her day. Reading at random some of the newspaper articles, transcribed in her neat, small handwriting and pasted to the wall by her bed, her eye was caught by a name in a piece in the Financial News.

Geoffrey Pallant's company had encountered financial difficulties for several years after the Depression. His business partner and financial director had been dismissed in 1934

after rumours of fraud and the company was forced to re-structure and borrow on the London banking market the following year. With the support of the merchant bank Kleinburg & Co., finance was secured and the firm renamed Sudbury Silk Ltd. A few eyebrows were raised in the City when it was leaked that the source of the funding was the Dresdner Bank, now 80% owned by the new Nazi government in Germany.

All that she already knew. But what she was staring at was the name of Kleinburg's director who had facilitated the loan: Karl Ratzlaff. And it struck her because at first, in the dim morning light, she had misread the name as Carl Radcliffe. Radcliffe who in 1936 had become a director and joint owner of Sudbury Silk, with responsibility for the new parachute division. Mattie had met Radcliffe a few times at Danes Hall. a small, immaculately dressed man with bushy eyebrows and a nose like an eagle's beak. She found him rather likeable in spite of his addiction to bad English puns, delivered with just the trace of a German accent.

If, as she now suspected, Karl Ratzlaff and Carl Radcliffe were one and the same, then it appeared that Geoffrey Pallant was making something of a habit of forming close relationships with Germans who subsequently attempted to mask their identity when they arrived in England.

Mattie's forensic antennae were alerted. They led her to a line of enquiry into the murky world of finance and some surprising discoveries. A photograph in the Kleinburg report and accounts confirmed that Karl and Carl shared a single identity. As Carl Radcliffe he took a very active role in the affairs of Sudbury Silk. In 1936 he secured a large contract from the Ministry for Coordination of Defence to supply parachutes. Three months later the firm was made sole supplier to the government. The minister at the time was Viscount Caldecote, whose appointment was described as 'the most

cynical since Caligula made his horse a consul'. The following March Geoffrey Pallant was invited on to three advisory committees dealing with procurement and distribution of munitions for the Air Ministry and the Admiralty. That same year the accounts of Sudbury Silk showed a £40,000 donation to the Conservative Party, a surprisingly large contribution, thought Mattie, for a business that had practically gone bust two years earlier.

Radcliffe was also closely associated with the so-called Cliveden set, the circle of Lord and Lady Astor, whom the left-wing press dubbed 'the friends of Hitler'. The set included such prominent names as Lord Lothian and cabinet ministers, Henry Channon and A T Lennox Boyd.

The people Mattie encountered in this new line of research took her back to the Danes Hall visitors' book in which Klara kept a comprehensive record of all her guests. Viscount Caldecote appeared on three occasions in 1937 and 1938; on one visit he was accompanied by his sister and brother in law, the Earl of Glasgow, a prominent British Fascist. Carl Radcliffe was, of course, a frequent visitor. Henry Channon was there too, and so was Lord Lothian.

'Borrowing' the visitors' book became a routine whenever the coast was clear. Mattie systematically listed the names of all guests over the past three years, or at least as many as she could decipher. She researched all visitors individually and listed their names under categories: politicians, industrialists and bankers, journalists, scientists. She recalled meeting some of the guests: Lord Halifax, more than once, Dorothy Sayers, Unity Mitford, Stephanie von Hohenlohe, Viscount Rothermere. She remembered the last with particular displeasure: the aging Harold Harmsworth, his stern appearance accentuated by a bristling moustache and his slow late laugh that came after the humour had passed, as if he were savouring some private joke at others' expense. Amongst

Mattie's Cambridge set, Rothermere and his Daily Mail were hated for their overt support of the Nazis, particularly after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia and the emerging revelations of the vile persecution of Jews. She noticed that many of the politicians on her list were, if not actually pro-Hitler, at least strong supporters of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.

Other names stirred Mattie's interest. Many military and ex-military men had visited Danes Hall, including some of the top brass: Sir Cyril Newell, chief of Air Staff, Admiral Sir Charles Little, Basil Liddell Hart. But Mattie also uncovered more shadowy characters such as the founder of the antisemitic Right Club, Captain Archibald Ramsay and Major-General John Fuller, who had been an honoured guest at Hitler's 50th birthday celebrations. Klara had always insisted that her guests should include not only the good and the great, but also the bad and the grating and there was ample evidence that she had succeeded.

Notable was the number of scientists, who constituted the third largest category. Mattie devoted many hours to researching the careers and achievements of such celebrated brains as Elsie Widdowstone, Alan Turing, Arnold Wilkins and Robert Watson-Watt.

The weather was changeable in June and July and Mattie's summer was spent in what she called 'the triangle', travelling between London, Danes Hall and her operations centre in the Cambridge flat. In a hot spell in early July she swam every day at Harkstead. Later in the month she celebrated her twentieth birthday with a fishing expedition from Pin Mill on a boat belonging to an old school friend. It was a strange summer with the rumble of war from across the North Sea growing louder with each passing day.

She saw little of David, who was taken up with both work and

the excavations. In August he turned up unexpectedly on a borrowed motorbike and took Mattie to witness the miracle of Sutton Hoo. The remarkable discovery of the Saxon ship burial had been announced less than a week earlier and David was still in a wild state of excitement. The only tiny dark cloud in his azure blue sky was that the task of covering the story for the BBC had been given to some far less well-informed fellow.

David steered rather erratically through the streets of Ipswich and Woodbridge with Mattie on the pillion. She noticed people staring at them: was it the bike she wondered or the handsome man riding it? It didn't occur to her that it might be the pretty girl on the back with her flowing blonde hair... and that she was wearing trousers!

The site at Sutton Hoo was in a bleak, almost treeless landscape leading down to the river, broken only by a dozen or more burial mounds clustered together. The ship excavation was near the centre and David pointed out the features of the site whilst they watched work continuing. Close up the ribs of the ancient ship were clearly defined against the dark earth. David said it was almost certainly the grave of a Saxon king, possibly Raedwald who ruled in the Seventh Century.

Mattie was introduced to the archaeologist Basil Brown whom David had spoken of with great reverence, though he'd warned her that Basil was an odd soul, a man of few words. But when he did speak in his very working-class Suffolk accent, Mattie recognised in him the same fervour and thoroughness that she admired in Fanny Glassner Lee. He could be forgiven a little smugness that his vision had been spectacularly realised. Basil showed her some of the grave goods, crated away in a tent on the site, and said they would in time rewrite the history books. Even in their mucky, tarnished state Mattie could see something of the wonder of

the discovery.

Afterwards David persuaded her to take an excursion in the sunshine on his motorbike along the Deben to the coast. As they reached the estuary she noticed a sign to Bawdsey.

'Is Bawdsey Manor near here?' she shouted in David's ear. She tried to visualise the name in the visitors' book. Robert Watson-Watt came from Bawdsey Manor, she was sure of that, and maybe some of the others.

David stopped the bike. 'It's straight down that lane,' he said. 'But you won't get past the gates. Top secret, you know.'

'Why? What goes on there?'

'They call it a Radio Research Station. Bought by the Air Ministry three years ago. It's something new called RADAR and they are working with the Americans on it. All very hush hush.'

'Who would expect that sort of thing in the depths of Suffolk?'

'That's not the half of it. Less than ten miles up the coast at Orford Ness where there used to be a prison camp in the Great War there's now a centre for testing bomb ballistics and aircraft detection and the like.'

'Have you heard of Robert Watson-Watt?'

'Of course, he's in charge of the whole thing. Especially the RADAR programme.'

'And they can detect planes before they are visible?'

'Yes, even at night, I believe. But why are you so interested?'

'Oh nothing. He's been to Danes Hall, you know.'

'Well, we'd better not hang around here or we'll be arrested for espionage.'

War with Germany now seemed inevitable; everyone was talking about the 'waiting game'. Hitler, it was said, was possessed with the demon of destruction and wouldn't stop with Poland. As German troops massed along the Polish border, Britain called up the army reserves and mobilised the navy. Trial blackouts took place across the country. For days the Suffolk skies were filled with hundreds of planes on air-defence tests.

In the growing uncertainty, Mattie threw herself into the distraction of work. She read all the books on her reading list for the new term, made several visits to the new forensic science police laboratory at Hendon and still found time to read nearly every one of the Sherlock Holmes stories (she had recently learned that Fanny Glessner Lee was a big fan of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). Particularly intriguing was Holmes's highly contemporary analysis of trace evidence, such as tobacco ash, shoe prints and gunpowder residue to expose crimes.

One Saturday late in the month, after a sweltering couple of days in London, Mattie was waiting at Liverpool Street Station for the train to Ipswich, when she caught sight of Klara emerging from a nearby platform. Such was her surprise at the unexpected encounter that, instead of rushing over to greet her mother, she stood and watched her purposeful progress across the concourse. And then, driven by a feeling of suspicion, she found herself stalking her mother across London in the manner of a crime novel. Klara's bright red coat was easy to keep in sight as she took the tube to Tottenham Court Road station and marched through the doors of Foyles bookshop and into the poetry section.

Klara was no great reader, certainly not of poetry. Was she buying a gift perhaps? Mattie watched from behind a column as Klara took a book from the shelf, opened it and, with a quick glance over her shoulder, placed something between its pages before returning the book to its original place. And then she was off. Klara had descended a flight of stairs and Mattie was continuing her pursuit when abruptly she had second thoughts. She needed to look at the book. As her mother left the shop Mattie hurried back up the stairs. She was annoyed to find a stocky young man in a blue jacket barring her way to the poetry section. He turned his back but not before she had seen the book he held in his hand. She was certain it was the very one that Klara had selected. The man carefully replaced it on the shelf and departed.

Mattie examined the title of the volume – Selected Poems of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. She set off in pursuit of the young man. He walked swiftly south along Charing Cross Road, strode past Leicester Square tube and then turned right at the corner of the National Gallery into Trafalgar Square. By the time he was marching along Pall Mall she had a strong hunch where he was heading. Sure enough, he turned left into Carlton House Terrace and through the gates of the recently refurbished German Embassy.

Mattie stopped in front of the building and pondered her next move. There was no point in returning to examine Goethe's poems, she'd find nothing there now. So instead she took the first train to Ipswich.

By the time she arrived back at Danes Hall and established that neither Klara nor Geoffrey would return for 24 hours, she had reached her decision. She was pleased to discover that more than half the staff had been given the night off. Mildred, discreet as ever, carried out without question her urgent request to find a locksmith with her customary efficiency. Towards the end of the afternoon a man arrived on a bicycle.

To Mattie's satisfaction he had the air of a former safe breaker gone 'legit'. She led him directly to the door of her father's study and told him she'd lost the keys.

'Will it take long?' she asked.

'All depends what you call long,' said the man putting on a pair of spectacles like two magnifying glasses joined together. 'Ah yes. This one I'll have open in a jiffy. And the one at the top might take me five minutes. Will that do you?'

He took a little longer than his estimate and the bill was rather more than she had anticipated. But Mattie settled up with him instantly and entered her father's sanctuary. The curtains were drawn and she switched on a light. A large desk in the centre of the room was strewn with papers. Alongside it, on a table, were a short-wave radio and a Warwick microfilm camera like the one she had seen at the Colindale library.

She first directed her attention to the papers on the desk: reports, memoranda, maps; all of them, it seemed, of an official nature, some on government letterheading. In the midst of the papers was an unopened file headed: Codename: Suffolk. She opened it and stuffed it with the rest of the papers into the file. With her heart beating fast she was about to leave the office when she noticed a large filing cabinet in the corner by the curtains. It wasn't locked. She removed two more files at random and, with the thick bundle tucked firmly under her arm she left the scene.

Less than two hours later Mattie was on a train to Cambridge. Seated at a table in first class, she began her letter to her adoptive parents:

Dear Papa and Klara,

This is the most difficult letter to write but by the time you

read it you will no doubt know that someone has entered Papa's office and taken several incriminating files. I know a great deal about your espionage activities for the Nazi government. I have witnessed and recorded the handover of documents to your contact at the German embassy; I know the identity of some of your co-conspirators in Britain and I now have ample information on the specific type of secrets that you are passing on.

If you leave the country immediately, presumably to live in Germany, I shall not transmit the evidence I have accumulated to the security forces. Should you however attempt to continue your activities or bring pressure to bear on me, I have made independent arrangements for MI5 to be notified immediately, which would undoubtedly lead to your arrest and long-term incarceration.

As it now appears that Britain and Germany will soon be at war, it is unlikely we will meet again for some time. Please do not make any attempt to justify your actions in my eyes. I owe you gratitude for my upbringing and education but I cannot forgive your crimes.

*With love
Your daughter, Mattie*

Mattie read the letter and then re-read it several times. Finally, after staring out of the carriage window for several minutes, she added the following

PS I also know that you are not my parents and I should dearly like to discover the identity of my real mother and father and the story of my life before you adopted me. If, in spite of everything, you can help me with this, I shall be forever grateful. I know too that you had a child of your own who died.

The three days she had to wait for a reply were agonising for Mattie. She scarcely moved out of her flat and spent her time perusing the files that she had taken from her father's study. There was a great deal of sensitive material about advances in bomb technology, documents from Birmingham University on ballistic test results, procurement orders, and so on. The radar research establishment at Bawdsey Manor was the focus of much of the appropriated documentation. There were also strategic reports from Whitehall and the Air Ministry and the War Office, seemingly dull but no doubt of some interest to the Wehrmacht.

At last, the letter Mattie was waiting for arrived:

My dear Mattie,

How clever you are, sweet daughter. So much cleverer than those dummkopfs at MI5. I should be angry with you, my girl, for the agony and inconvenience you have caused us. But, as I have learned in England, life is a game and on this occasion we have been beaten fair and square and must take our punishment on the chin.

By the time you read this letter we will be in Germany. And if I interpret things correctly Herr Hitler's troops will be in Poland and we shall be at war. For the record, this is not the outcome that your father and I were working for. We believed we could help to build an alliance between Germany and Britain to defeat the terrible communist threat from Russia and the east. Now I fear the Chancellor stands alone against the forces that would destroy Europe, but he will prevail.

However, as you say, this is not a time for justification. Whether you believe it or not, we will miss you deeply. I know that you are strong and will succeed in this unforgiving world. We have made the provision, in addition to your trust fund, of registering Danes Hall in your name with the condi-

tion that you do not sell it until you are married (that was your father's notion).

As to your final request – and again I congratulate you on your detective skills – you will find the information you asked for with this letter. Geoffrey and I were of course broken-hearted at the death of Georgie and we were unable to have another child. But that, as you will see, was not the sole reason for the adoption. For better or worse we decided to keep this sad story from you. I now believe we were wrong to do so and it is my hope that you will at last be able to make sense of the truth.

Geoffrey and I send you our love

Klara

Mattie opened the small folded birth certificate held by a paper clip to the letter. It was issued in Ulm on July 18th 1919. The mother's name was Ingrid Ilsa Schlegel. There was no entry under the father. She noted with some relief that her registered birth names were, Helena Mathilda.

On the back of the certificate Klara had written in faint pencil: Your mother was my little sister. She was fifteen years younger than me. She never revealed the name of the father. Such was the shame of being an unmarried mother, even in the terrible years after the Great War, that my father proposed that I should take the child to England. I was happy to do so for various reasons. Ingrid took her own life two months later.

Mattie read the note twice more before placing the birth certificate on the table. So she was German.

Later that morning at 11.15 Britain declared war on Germany.



MACH



As the mist leaves no scar
On the dark green hill,
So my body leaves no scar
On you, nor ever will.
Leonard Cohen

Mach, we called her, pronounced May'ch. She was slim, of average height; elfin is such a cliché but it gives the idea. Black hair, a huge smile with a little flash of top gum as her lip drew back, an infectious laugh. She was a strange mixture of self-confidence and vulnerability. Not exactly promiscuous in her relationships, just indecisive. She tried them all and was invariably disappointed and moved on.

I think I was in love with her from the first: transfixed by her expressions and movements. I couldn't take my eyes off her. And she? She must have noticed, but she never showed the slightest interest in me. Oh, we talked and played music and smoked dope and swam in the sea. We were together in the crowd. It was a small community and all our lives were intertwined in that way. But I was never chosen; never once held her or kissed her.

Helen St Marie Machin was her name. She must have told me that at some time. For the rest her background was shrouded in mystery, but there were two things that everyone remembered about Mach. She was terrified of the atom bomb. And she never seemed to be short of money. I think her parents were separated or divorced: her mother living in Ireland or possibly America and her father, a moderately successful Fleet Street journalist and alcoholic, was the source of her income. The guilt seemed to extend to paying her off but never seeing her.

The absence of a functional father may have explained Mach's preference for older men. She arrived at the farm with Dan, a gnarled and tattooed roadie with a local band that was trying without much success to make it beyond the acclaim of fans from the county. Dan was soon sent packing but Mach stayed on. She took up with a farmer called Giles Fletcher-Davies, who abandoned his wife and family and came to live on the farm for a time. And so it went. There was a jazz trumpeter called Dante, a lecturer from UEA

whose name I forget and Barney, the landscape gardener. Barney was with her when we went to the Cambridge Folk Festival at Cherryhinton Hall to see Steeleye Span and the Reverend Gary Davis, who was then aged 75 and spat over us in the front row. I remember it as one of the best of days: it was warm, the sun shone, the music was good and everyone was happy. The old bus we used broke down on the way back and we had to sleep in it and get towed back in the morning. But no-one cared.

At least that's how I remember it. My memories of that period of my life have gone through many distortions. For me the whole experience lasted less than a couple of years. I arrived at the farm after college with my girlfriend and our two-year-old son. She was Suffolk-born and a friend had told her about the place. She decided that a bit of communal living might be good for us while we both decided what we wanted to do with our lives. She made up her mind in under six months and left me... and our child too for a time. In his early years Micky stayed with me and was happy running wild with his readymade brothers and sisters, looked after by an adoring extended family. As for me, I was in thrall to the band: playing bass guitar and writing the occasional, unsuccessful song. The band then was called Village Vice and later it became The Dukes of Wangford. And there was something magical about the music we played, particularly when we were all jamming and dancing together in the open air on those long, hot summer days.

As I remember, we didn't call it a commune at that time, just the farm. It was owned by Jonny Pellew and his sister, Beatrix. They were the children of the brother of a viscount or an earl of something. And, unlike the rest of us, they had money. Jonny was a pretty good lead guitarist and interested only in gathering musicians around him for the band. Beatrix was married to an ad man and turned up at the farm from time to time on her own or with her kids.

We were a small group; most of the year there were no more than 20 of us including the children. But in summer the numbers would swell. On the occasional weekend other bands would show up and folks would come with their tents. If the band played a gig, in a bar or a student union, everyone would go, the kids too.

Mach was one of the two female singers. She had a curious voice that started as an ethereal thin soprano and descended frequently to a low baritone growl. Naturally I thought it was beautiful. I wrote songs for her. She wrote her own songs, too, but they were all about the bomb and Jonny said they were too depressing for us to perform.

The band gave us energy, and a sort of focus. I realise that music, marijuana and misbehaviour was the popular view of how a bunch of hippies lived. But it wasn't altogether like that. We had a greenhouse full of cannabis, of course. And there was a bit of sexual freedom. But we were a close-knit and strangely traditional group; we respected and supported one another. Communal living didn't work without some responsibility. We prepared and shared meals; grew vegetables; ate a lot of beans and brown rice, bought our clothes at jumble sales, helped out with the children's schooling; joined in trips to the sea and boating on the Waveney and worked on repairs and maintenance on the farm. It was hard work at times, but the memories are of co-operation, friendship and freedom.

It all changed, however, when Kennedy showed up. I don't know where Mach found him but he moved in with her towards the end of the summer. Kennedy O'Malley was a larger-than-life character of the most unpleasant sort. He was probably around 40, a self-styled *art brut* artist. I'd never heard of art brut till I met O'Malley. But we heard plenty about it thereafter.

Basically, he was full of shit. For all his posturing there was little that was original about him, especially not his art. The paintings were all the same. They took the images of early Mayan and Egyptian art and then distorted them as if through the mind of a mentally subnormal ten-year old. George Dubuffet was his guru and most of Kennedy's ideas as well as his flamboyant observations about life and art came straight out of the mouth of the Frenchman. *Art is the most frenzied orgy man is capable of... There is no art without intoxication...* stuff like that which he never tired of spouting.

Soon after Kennedy arrived at the farm an exhibition of his paintings opened in a small gallery in Yarmouth. He insisted we all went along to the private view. It was a shabby little place: there were no drinks, the paintings were dreadful and poorly displayed and Kennedy treated us to a half hour lecture on *art brut* and his supposed friendship with André Breton.

O'Malley's inescapable, alcoholic presence loomed over the farm like a dark cloud. He was what we now call bipolar – in those days it was manic depressive. The manic periods were in turn exhausting, embarrassing and downright unbearable. Once, for example, he decided to paint a mural on one of the farm walls and decreed that the work required musical accompaniment, costumes, dancing and so on. He was furious when we failed to co-operate fully and went on a wild rampage of destruction, trashing several windows and Jonny's prized tractor, for which he was never forgiven. The depressive days were even worse, usually brought on by a cocktail of coke and champagne, all funded by Mach of course. He would sit glowering in ogre-like silence in his lair, refusing to speak or move.

Mach became steadily more withdrawn. She seemed to lose her exuberance and love of life and a new seriousness crept

over her. She stopped singing with the band; rarely joined us for meals and her conversation alternated between the pronouncements of the campaign for nuclear disarmament and praise of O'Malley's latest masterpiece. She appeared only in his presence as if she were glued to him. Some of the women at the farm said that O'Malley was controlling Mach, even hinted at mental abuse. I didn't see it, however. I was certainly angry with her for being infatuated with a narcissistic showman like O'Malley but I took consolation in the fact that it would soon end like all her other relationships and life would return to normal. And perhaps I paid less attention to her in those last weeks, not only because I was intent on avoiding her lover at all costs, but I had a new girlfriend, with whom I was infatuated, while Micky was going through a difficult period and missing his mother.

But then they were both gone. One morning the old Austin Cambridge Estate was no longer parked in the farmyard. Their room had been cleared apart from some of the junk O'Malley had collected for his paintings and sculptures. Without warning or leave-taking they vanished. And I never saw Mach again.

* * *

More than forty years have passed since I left the farm. I have had a moderately successful career as a writer and, thanks to a quartet of popular historical novels, I am one of the few lucky authors who earn enough to live on. I married the woman who translated my novels into French and we were happy for a time but have now lived apart for some years. We didn't have children. Micky, now a senior lecturer at Birkbeck, and his wife Naomi have two sons and a daughter and my grandchildren regularly come to see me in Suffolk. I live in a big barn conversion on the coast, some 20 miles away from the farm. After I left I never once returned to the place, though I heard stories from time to time, particu-

larly about the band. Nor, in spite of my best intentions, did I keep up with any of my old friends.

But a month or so ago, on an impulse, I went to Jonny Pellow's funeral. A lifetime of drink and drugs had finally caught up with him, though all who gathered to bid him farewell agreed that he must have possessed one of the strongest constitutions known to man to have lasted so long. He was buried in a painted cardboard coffin in the woods of a natural burial ground, piped and strummed to rest by a saxophone, a tuba and two guitars. They played the band's signature song, *Somebody to Love*, and Jonny's best-known composition: *Rude Boy Tango*.

A wake of sorts was held at the farm, where Jonny had continued to live till his death. It was strange to see the place again; it hadn't changed a great deal, though Jonny had sold off all the agricultural land and outbuildings and the farmhouse itself was somewhat run down. A small group of us gathered in the big kitchen. Local cider, Jonny's daily staple, and an array of other drinks were served and some sandwiches too. Nothing fancy. Apart from Jonny's family, there were only two people I recognised from my era. In the way that you do at funerals, we talked about our lives back then and the intervening years. I learned that Janie, who used to sing with Mach, had died. I believe I may have said that I was thinking of writing a short memoir about my stay on the farm.

Later when I spoke to Otis, Jonny's son, he brought up the subject again. Otis had been a child of seven when I last saw him. He was now a lawyer in pudgy late middle-age but I could still see the cheeky little lad in him. He asked after Micky and we relived some memories of their upbringing on the farm.

'I hear you're thinking of writing about it,' he said.

'I haven't got any plans. But I might do a short piece in Jonny's memory,' I said, improvising.

'Well, if you're looking for background there's a whole lot of old rubbish that Dad kept in the bunk room. Books, photos, songs. Three cases of the stuff if you want it. But you'll have to be quick: we're selling the place and we'll be chucking it out in a couple of weeks.'

I told him I thought I could manage without it. The last thing I needed was more junk. But over the next few days I thought more and more about the farm. I told Micky about the funeral and he said I should definitely write something. Of course, he had different memories from mine. None of the hardship or money worries and plenty of sunshine days playing in the haystacks and riding on tractors. In the end curiosity got the better of me and I rang Otis and said that I'd like to take a look at Jonny's collection of memorabilia, as I called it.

I went back to the farm about ten days after the funeral. Otis wasn't there, but a caretaker/dog-minder showed me into the room where Jonny had stored his stuff. I wasn't quite prepared for the extent of it: one wall was covered ceiling to floor in musical instruments: guitars, banjos, harmonicas, a soprano sax; the other three were lined with posters of the band's gigs and fading photographs, most of the band in its various incarnations. But there were other images of life on the farm and people I recognised, though I couldn't name all of them. I suspected that most had been taken by Beatrix, who went on to become a professional photographer. I took from the wall a picture of Micky and the other children swimming in the river and one of a group of us standing by the broken-down bus after the folk festival. There was a lovely shot of Mach picking mushrooms, sunlight glinting through her hair. I took that too.

Then I started on the packing cases. A musty, unwashed

smell drifted out of them, which I attributed to the old clothes and printed tee shirts; a goatskin Afghan coat was probably the main culprit. There were books, sheets of music, more photographs, recordings on tape, spools of 16mm film, an *Are You Experienced* LP, autographed by Jimi Hendrix. There seemed no limit to the objects that Jonny had collected and I was in no doubt that each told a personal story. Several songwriter's notebooks were crammed with compositions which Jonny had written for the band over the years. I looked in vain for a trace of anything I'd written.

After two hours or more of rummaging I had a rucksack full of trophies from the farm. I kept comforting myself with the thought that I'd throw most of the stuff away once I got home and took a second look at it. It was time to go. I was just beginning to replace the rest in the empty packing cases when I noticed a small brown notebook lying at the bottom of one of the boxes. I opened it at random and read:

*I used to think I was the target,
Thought they had me in their sights,
But I was kidding myself,
Yes, I was kidding myself.
So let me give it to you straight:
The bomb it don't discriminate.*

*You can dig yourself a hole,
Hide away in the dark,
But you're kidding yourself,
Yes, you're kidding yourself.
There's nothing really to debate
The bomb it don't discriminate*

*Politicians they won't take the risk!
Fear will stop them in their tracks!
Oh, we're kidding ourselves,
Yes, we're kidding ourselves,*

*Because, my friend, it's way too late
And the bomb it don't discriminate.*

It took me less than two lines to recognise it as one of Mach's songs. She had shown it to Jonny and me sometime during that summer along with her other anti-war songs. I remember liking it and trying to compose a tune for the lyrics but I don't think she rated it much.

What I held in my hands was a diary or notebook in her neat and rather refined handwriting. It was a jumble of stuff: some short daily entries, such as:

May 7

*Gig at Bungay. Raid by the fuzz but all cool. Back late with D ****

June 21

*Borrowed 2 ponies. On the beach at Benacre with B. Mind blowing gallops at the edge of the sea. ****

But there were also longer descriptions of events – the day at the folk festival, for example and a visit to the circus with the kids, that I had completely forgotten. There were songs and poems that she had written and sketches of animals and trees and children, including one of Micky. I'd no idea that she'd had such a talent for drawing.

The diary evoked such strong memories that I sat on an old piano stool and began to read page by page. I worked out that all her boyfriends were referred to by a single initial. B for Barney, D for Dante etc. And the coy *** recorded each time she had sex.

I made other more surprising discoveries too...

July 18

*In the woods *** with Jonny (cool but a mistake).*

August 3

Nice chat with Robert about my war songs. He really digs them. He's such a good friend.

Robert is me. Forty years on my heart still skipped a beat when I read that. Though I found only two other references to me in the entire diary.

The entries awakened all sorts of memories of Mach: her bright, generous view of people and events, notwithstanding the frequent references to nuclear Armageddon. For me it brought back that changeable, showery spring and summer with its brief heatwaves and even the lingering taste of beans, oats and brown rice. But towards the end of the year when Mach met Kennedy O'Malley, the mood shifted from sunny and carefree to something much more threatening and dark. Mach herself seemed slowly to fade out of the picture in his brooding presence.

October 4

*K is a genius. The exhibition is far out. He takes stuff to the max but he's so avant garde that no-one gets it. He said – Art is the most enrapturing orgy within man's reach. I get that. *** ***

October 5

*Covehithe with K. He collected some ace stuff from the beach – he called them 'objets trouvés'. There was an old pipe with limpets all over. He named it 'Leviathan'. No-one around - *** on the beach. And *** in the sea. I nearly drowned when he pushed me under. He said it was delirium.*

October 6

*Another warm sunny day. A walk with K. He can be so rad. Funny, hardcore hip but freaky too. I talked about disarmament. He said – I'm glad the world's in trouble. ****

October 8

K drunk last night. He shouted at me. And hit me. Punched me in the guts and slapped my face. I was so shocked. Today he's silent depressed. Won't talk about it. I'm frightened.

October 10

K painting non-stop for two days. He's hardly slept. When I suggested we should eat he said things like – let reason teeter; art intoxicates me and I want to be plunged into burning dementia!

October 11

*Fab painting, all green and yellow and orange with snakelike shapes and little scaly creatures. K said he wanted to paint my body naked for an exhibit. I said I'd think about it. *** rough – bruises and bites on my neck.*

October 12

Roll-neck jumper to cover neck for student gig in Norwich. K wouldn't come. On stage with groovy folk rock band Stackridge. Sweated a lot. Jonny said my voice was a bit flat. Got back 2am. K comatose.

October 13

*Got my period, but K doesn't care ****

October 14

Small gig at the Long Bar. K no show. Smoked a joint. Didn't want to sing. Left it to Janie. Think I'll quit the

*band. Back at midnight. ****

October 15

*K drawing with fab coloured pens. He says, drawing can carve out unimaginable suffering in the curve of a line. He's right; there's terrible darkness in his work for all its colour. *** bruises on my neck again.*

After October 15 the *** symbol didn't appear again. It was as if sex had ceased to be a pleasure and had become a torment, something to fear.

October 16

Picked mushrooms with Alicia and Janie. Janie asked why I was wearing a scarf. I felt like crying.

October 18

Bruises on my arms and cut lip. K said he was sorry for hitting me. He says he was drunk, which is true. But he didn't say he won't get drunk again.

October 19

I let him draw on my back and bum because it made him happy. He took photos while I danced naked.

October 21

I asked him what was wrong with normal when we do it. He said, for me insanity is super sanity. Normal is psychotic.

October 22

Scared. I thought of talking to Jonny or Robert. But afraid they won't understand. After all, I love K

October 24

K says the farm is a drag and the guys are freaking him out. He says it's time to split

October 25

Feel like an outcast on the farm. It was so wonderful when we shared everything. But there's the flip side: the nightmare when things get ugly and freaky and there's nowhere else to go. K says we should leave.

October 26

'What are these invisible hands, soft yet coarse, that grip my spirit in my hours of solitude and loneliness Into my heart they pour wine mixed with the bitterness of pleasure and the sweetness of pain.' Kahlil Gibran.
I love K, but I fear him too.

October 27

I like to put the things I love into extreme danger, he said to me. He wasn't joking.

October 29

Don't know how much more I can take. The pain is bad, but he's got into my head too.

October 30

A dream: a shelf of ice at the end of a glacier. Blue, green, translucent. Slipping from the mass; reflected in the sunlight. Beautiful. Yet I know it is death.

I was breathless with the horror of the last pages of Mach's diary. October 30 was the last entry. It was the night of October 31 that she and O'Malley disappeared; I've always remembered that. It was All Hallows' Eve, Halloween as we now call it. Jonny must have found the diary in the room and kept it for her. He probably never read it.

I thumbed through those last pages again, trying to edit the worst imaginings from my mind. And then I tried to recall my own fragmentary impressions of those distant October days.

I was lost in reverie when the caretaker came into the room and told me she was closing up for the day. It was nearly six o'clock.

Over recent weeks I have made countless enquiries. I even hired a private detective to research some of the records. I discovered that Kennedy O'Malley died in 2001 of a drug overdose. His last address on the death certificate was Streatham in south London. Mach's father, Roy Machin, died in 1998, apparently of liver failure. I didn't succeed in tracking down her mother but I discovered that Mach was an only child. I found no other relations.

Of Mach herself there is no trace. No death certificate, no missing person's report, no record of her whatsoever since October 31, 1972. I wrote out my findings and took them to the police together with the diary. I was given a polite hearing and told there would be a follow-up interview once they had completed their enquiries. I don't expect to hear from them again.



STRANGE TRACTOR



Nothing in Nature is random...
a thing appears random only through
the incompleteness of our knowledge.
Baruch Spinoza

‘Tell me ‘bout that tractor again.’

‘Tractor?’

‘Yes. That one what you was talking ‘bout.’

I scratched my head. I had become increasingly used to Ma’s puzzles ever since she had been cut off in her own bizarre world. Her dementia had brought growing confusion, frustration, memory loss but even now there were occasional bouts of lucidity, albeit distorted by her severely damaged thought processes. I knew very well that this tractor came from somewhere. But I needed more clues to make the connection.

‘Dad had an old tractor, didn’t he?’ I said.

‘We hed a Massey Ferguson,” she said, almost indignantly.

I chuckled to myself. When the old memories came back they seemed to lift her out of the stuck present for a moment. The Massey Ferguson? Yes.

‘I remember,’ I said. ‘The little red one. It used to be just the job for the farm. Dad loved his old tractor; he could plough the big field in a day.’”

She smiled weakly.

“What happened to it when you left the old place?”

The familiar blank look spread over her eyes as if she had either not heard the question or lost interest.

They’d sold the farm outside Woodbridge, long after it had become obvious that neither Wilf nor I was going to take it on, and moved to a suburban bungalow, rather nondescript

but with a nice view from the garden along the Deben. Dad died two years later, probably from exhaustion or boredom or a bit of both. He'd worked the fields from dawn to dusk until he was 75. Potatoes, onions, barley and pigs mainly, in some sort of rotation that I could never fathom. He seemed to have a sixth sense about what to plant and when. Ma did the hams at Christmas. They never made a lot of money but somehow they managed to stomp up enough to get us both through university. Wilf went on to make several fortunes with his hedge funds (Dad never tired of asking if they were box or privet.) He now lives in a big house in New York State with his wife, Yvette. Their three kids have grown up and moved on and I struggle to keep up with what they are all doing these days.

That left me and Ma. I got used to the Friday night drive down the A12 from London where I was living when Dad died. And when she was finally persuaded to move into a care home, I found her a pretty nice place, set in a big garden, just five miles from where I now live in Eye. Wilf pays the bills.

'It was almost part of the family, that old tractor,' I said, pursuing the theme doggedly in spite of the lack of encouragement. 'Nothing like those modern ones with their satellite programmes and sealed cabins. Wilf and I had a name for it, didn't we? What was it?'

No reply.

'Fergie. That's right. Fergie the Tractor, after the Duchess of York. Dad didn't take to the name, him being a royalist.'

A faint faraway smile. No clue as to whether she had taken it in or not.

A distant memory surfaced. Dad listening to the wireless.

A reporter describing the scenes in London for the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Wilf, 15 or 16 at the time, was making silly sneering jokes about royalty. When he called Prince Charles, 'King Prawn', there was a blazing row. Both of them shouting, fists clenched, Dad pushing Wilf in the chest, a slap across the face. "That what your education do for you? Turn you into a bloody Trotskyite?" Ma trying her best to smooth things over as she always did. She hated conflict.

Wilf was three years older than me, said to be the brainy one. I was 'more practical'. But in those days that's how it was: Wilf did an English degree, I went for biochemistry and the scientists were always marked down as the anoraks. One day, around the same time, Dad and I took Fergie's engine apart. Engines were simple things back then and that's what people used to do. We unbolted and unscrewed all the parts and laid them out in line on a big old sheet after giving each a loving clean. Then put them back together again, replacing the worn bits and the oil and the old gaskets. It took us two days and I loved it. We both did. Dad always said it was what launched me into my career, though I'm not sure that anyone else would make the link between tractor engines and the mathematics of robotics which has been my research field for most of my life.

'Now that ere's how a tracker oughta sound,' said Dad as we drove it round the yard, me steering and him perched precariously on the mudguard alongside me, ears tuned to the smooth running of the engine.

Years later Stephen took a photograph of me driving the tractor, lit by bright evening sunlight against a glowering black sky. It hung in our downstairs lavatory in Belsize Park until we redecorated that last time, six months before Stephen died. I wondered what had become of it. Did we throw it out? I was about to ask Ma if she remembered the picture but she'd nodded off.

Stephen was a good photographer. A leading theatre set designer, he had an eye for capturing the moment, for intensifying the drama. We lived together for 17 years and for whatever delicate and absurd reasons we never came out to Dad and Ma. I suspected they knew. But Dad always called Stephen 'the flat mate' and said how lucky I was to have a right good painter and decorator around the house, because they were like gold dust these days.

Matters were not made easier by the fact that Stephen was black, or half-caste, as he always insisted on framing it himself. His father was Nigerian, a doctor – Stephen told anyone who would listen that he was descended from the Igbo aristocracy – and his mother, Janetta, a successful children's book illustrator, originally from Kent. When I first brought Stephen home to the farm there were very few black faces to be seen in the county. At the start it put us both on edge but eventually we got used to the stares in the street and the sudden hush when we walked through a pub door.

Dad made Stephen laugh. The old man tried his best but he couldn't get his head round the multicultural sensitivities of the times. 'Your coloured friend', he'd say. And when I corrected him and said, 'Not coloured, Dad, it's black', he didn't like it, 'Pah, I ain't goin' to call him black, am I? That sound right racist to me.' And Stephen would be smiling away as we tied ourselves up in knots.

Ma and Dad both took a great interest in Stephen's shows in the West End and round the country. Dad was always one of the first to congratulate him on good reviews or awards, which I tactfully flagged up or sent him as cuttings. In all the years, as I remember, he and Ma came up to London for just two shows. I don't think they enjoyed either of them very much, but it was the city that made them edgy. They weren't a bit happy with the traffic and the crowds. Dad called it, 'a damn sight too frenetic for the likes of us country folk'. But

they talked endlessly about the shows to their friends afterwards.

For Stephen's sake and because he was often busy with work, I made roughly half the weekend trips to Suffolk on my own. To his amusement, he was always allocated Wilf's old bedroom next door to mine. He and Ma hit it off from the word go. He loved a good pudding; she was never happier than when she was making crumbles and tarts. And Stephen had a knack with compliments. He always said the right thing.

There was one occasion when Dad announced that he was going to insure the tractor because there had been a spate of thefts from nearby farms. I could see from the twinkle in Stephen's eyes that he was thinking the same as me: no self-respecting thief was going to bother with a 1973, 135, three-cylinder, diesel tractor, even assuming he could get it started. But what Stephen said was: 'Good idea, Jim. That old machine is a vintage treasure, and it must be worth a bit with all the love and care you've put into it.'

Dad never met Stephen's parents. All the stupid social nonsense in the eighties to do with 'coming out' and the stigma of HIV/AIDS meant that our relationship never really developed along normal lines. Stephen and I loved being surrounded by friends, but we didn't become a proper family with close family attachments. Ma was always asking Stephen about his mother and father and I got the same treatment from Janetta. We had neither the confidence nor the will to bring them together, perhaps because we felt they came from different worlds. But we should have.

When Stephen died of lung cancer Dad had been gone for several years and Stephen's father had succumbed to a heart attack the previous October. After the funeral, which was a small family affair, Janetta and I were persuaded to

hold an informal memorial service for Stephen to include friends and more distant relations, especially on the Nigerian side. Although Ma had already been diagnosed with vascular dementia, she insisted not only on coming to the service but on giving a short tribute to Stephen. I was so taken aback I don't think I even tried to discourage her, while Janetta was delighted.

The result was a pitch-perfect tribute to Stephen in broad Suffolk that had tears rolling down the faces of everyone in the room – tears of joy, laughter and grief.

The best of it was when she said: *Of course, I gotta tell you, the boys didn't hev no idea that Jim and me knowed all along that they was gay. What did they take us for? And we didn't let on that we knowed. I mean, what did that matter? They was happy together and that's all what counts. And Stephen, he was like another son to us.*

I wiped away a tear as I remembered the day. And then I saw Ma was awake and watching me and I coughed as I wiped my cheek again. And coughed again.

'You heven't started up that smoking again, hev you?'

'No, Ma. I haven't smoked for twenty years.'

'All that cigarette smoke rising in still air and swirling about. So complicated!'

What was this, I wondered? But then something clicked. I reached for my iPad.

In recent weeks I had taken to reading aloud to her extracts of the lectures I had been preparing for the new term. As first I wondered whether I was being disrespectful, but she sat there calmly as the words drifted over her. It gave me a

chance to rehearse my material, listen to myself and at the same time to break the long silences of afternoons in the care home.

I looked back through the drafts and found the section I was looking for. There it was:

Think, for example, of the smoke rising in still air from a cigarette. Oscillations appear at a certain height in the smoke column and they are so complicated as to apparently defy understanding.

Ma had been listening more than I thought.

My lecture was headed, 'Deterministic Systems with a Touch of Fantasy', lifted from the introduction to a remarkable piece by the Belgian-French mathematical physicist, David Ruelle, who founded a new theory of turbulence in the 1980s. We now commonly call it chaos theory.

My quote from Ruelle's original text was a longish one. I remembered reading it to Ma a couple of weeks ago. I had since delivered the lecture to a group of first year undergraduates with at best mixed results. Chaos theory wasn't exactly central to my core research area, although it had had a profound impact on robotics in helping us to build predictive models. My fear was that I was either talking down to my audience or going over their heads. By the end of the lecture I felt I'd managed to achieve both. Like chaos theory itself, lecturing is a trial-and-error type of refinement in interacting with your changing environment. What delights one day rots on the vine the next.

I decided to read the piece again to Ma to gauge her reaction:

Systems with an irregular, non-periodic, "chaotic time"

evolution are frequently encountered in physics chemistry and biology. Think, for example, of the smoke rising in still air from a cigarette. Oscillations appear at a certain height in the smoke column and they are so complicated as to apparently defy understanding. Although the time evolution obeys strict deterministic laws, the system seems to behave according to its own free will. Physicists, chemists, biologists, and also mathematicians have tried to understand this situation. We shall see how they have been helped by the concept of strange attractor, and by the use of modern computers.

As I said the words strange attractor she gave me a beaming smile of recognition. That was it! Ma's tractor. A strange tractor indeed. It arrived through the so-called damaged processes of Ma's brain with all its own strange attraction. Strange attractors explain chaotic systems. When a system – the weather for instance – has some kind of long-term pattern, but one which is not a simple periodic oscillation or orbit, we say that it has a strange attractor.

I recalled another paragraph from the same paper by Ruelle. He and a colleague, Floris Takens, are attributed with coining the phrase 'strange attractor', but neither of them could remember who came up with it first...

I asked Floris if he had created this remarkably successful expression. Here is his answer: "Did you ever ask God whether he created this damned universe?.... I don't remember anything... I often create without remembering it." The creation of strange attractors thus seems to be surrounded by clouds and thunder. Anyway the name is beautiful, and well suited to these astonishing objects, of which we understand so little.

I felt sure Ruelle would have liked 'strange tractors' too.

But that isn't quite the end of the story. Just over a year on Ma died. Peacefully enough in the end, though the sense of loss was stretched out as the mother I knew became some memory-less being with no connection to my real mother apart from her physical appearance. And yet curiously I still loved this creature and still read to her, even though I was pretty sure she didn't understand or hear a thing I said.

At her funeral a small, bent old fellow in his eighties came over to me. He was vaguely familiar and when he announced himself as Barnaby Jackson, I recognised the man who had owned the farm next door to my parents. As a child I'd always thought him a rum old bird. He'd lived his entire life near Woodbridge and never travelled out of the county nor even half-way across it. He used to call Dad a 'furrerner', because Dad's father came from Laxfield. As a result Barnaby had retained the purest of East Suffolk accents.

'He were a roight good old boy, your father,' said Barnaby. 'Call a spade a spade, he would. Your mother and all. She were a kind woman. Don't make 'em like that no more.'

'I'm so glad you remember them fondly.'

'Well I ain't goin' to give you a lot of guff. I tell you straight, chap, there's nothing they wouldn't do for me.'

'Thank you. I hope...'

'Fer example I growed a tidy lot of taters every year. And one time, after a drought and the blight, I lost the blooming lot. And that winter we were hooly cold and your father he come round with a trailer full of firewood. Said it were going spare. Well I knowed that was a load of squat but I sayed thankee all the same.'

'I'm sure you helped them out too when you could.'

'Yer roight there, chap. He jinked his ankle one autumn and the missus, your mother, was out all weathers a feeding them pigs. So I shewed up of an evening when I could arter work and give her a hand loike.'

'That was kind.'

'Anyhows what I come over to tell you was that I still got that old tractor.'

'Tractor?'

'The little red job. Your old buh give it me when he selled up. I tried to pay him loik but he 'ont take no notice of what I say. Anyhow I knew it were his pride and joy and I telled him I'd look after it proper. And that's what I done.'

'You've still got the Massey Ferguson?'

'Not only got it, chap. She won the 'best in class' at the Suffolk Tractor Run this year. I'll take you for a droive on it when you say.'

I haven't taken up his offer yet. But I will.

