

THE STROLL BY THE LAKE

Five figures left the big house for the lakeside path to stretch their legs before dark. Will and Dot had just moved from Dove Cottage to the bigger Allan Bank to cope more easily with their extended family. Sam and Tom, whose literary base was London, had been sponging there for several weeks now. Robert, straight-laced but well-meaning, was the outsider. He lived at comfortable Greta Hall in Keswick where he was caring for Sam's estranged wife and neglected children. As they slithered over the hard-packed snow, the unseasonable fiery February sun was dipping towards the fell ridge and the crags glowed rosy-red.

It is a beauteous evening calm and free. /Earth hath not anything to show more fair, intoned Will.

His sister sharply intervened, *Brother, I would rather that thou didst leave thy sonnets at home than mix their lines so tastelessly.*

Stopped in mid-spout, Will stumped silently on and the others followed. They soon reached a small promontory and stood at its tip drinking in the beauty: the smooth sheet of pink-reflecting water, the stark stiff-fingered boughs, the mountains proud with snow and the dappled red sky. Utter peace. No birdsong, no breath of wind, not even a wavelet lapping the shore. An inquisitive mallard slowly drifting towards them was the only discernible movement. All they could hear was the silence. And then the magic was brutally and farcically dispelled by a rasp of escaping intestinal air.

Who, said Will, *hath desecrated this blessed calm so wantonly?*

Dot, known for her pure and direct response to nature and who had a fine regard for common things, replied, *'Twas the duck that farted, William dear.*

How canst thou possibly blame that innocent fowl? objected Will.

If thou wouldst follow thine own precepts, dear William, and consider the minutiae of nature, thou wouldst have observed the delicate bubbles adjacent to the creature's arse.

And there wert I, chuckled Tom, *blaming stout Sam here.*

Would that it wert, replied the suspect. *My daily quart of laudanum hath rendered that function impossible. I have not shittenfor a sennight.*

Thou drinkest so much? queried Tom. *'Tis enough to kill a regiment! I am a veritable non-starter compared with thee.*

Thou art young, my friend. Time and the drug will soon bring upon thee not only my constipation but all my other afflictions too.

Now thou dost mention it, continued Tom, *I do remember thy little joke that en route to Malta thou didst retire to thy cabin and, like a mathematician, tried to work it out with a pencil.*

No one would follow that bit of crudity. Even the maligned mallard had heard enough and departed. Quietness descended upon the party, only to be broken by the hapless Robert, who gently chided the pair for the indelicacy of their conversation. He ought to have known better than to criticise the eloquent but touchy Samuel.

The floodgates opened: And who art thou to pronounce upon my words? Thou dogged hack, thou scribbler of banalities. Thou speck of dust to my blazing sun. Truly them dost possess all those non-qualities that some day will gain thee the laureate. Thy recent piece, 'The Cataract at Lodore', is nought but an interminable list of boring rhymes 'dripping and skipping, / shaking and quaking, / guggling and struggling,' indeed! 'Tis only fit for the kindergarten.

But I wrote it for my four children who are of nursery age, *feebly remonstrated Robert.*

For a moment Sam was stopped in his tracks, but Tom, the mischief-maker, was unable to resist stirring the pot and soon had Sam's anger bubbling again: With reference to thine own verse, Samuel, I have always wondered why thou didst make thy Ancient Mariner a cricketer - 'he stoppeth one of three' - such incompetent wicket-keeping.

Humourless Sam was not impressed but now Will broke in. Tom, Tom, *he said,* Thou dost write thy share of rubbish. Thy 'Confessions of an Opium Eater' demonstrates how thy abominable habit hath reduced thee to raving.

Before Tom could respond, contentious Sam took up the cudgel on behalf of his recent critic. '// have thee know, Will, that my sublime 'Kubla Khan' was opium-induced. Had it not been for that person from For lock calling and disturbing me, I wouldst have finished it before my vision faded. As for thy infernal daffodils, I hear that thy original first line was: 'T wandered lonely as a cow.' It doth not surprise me. Thy work is so uneven Will. I've been toying recently with a few lines on the subject: 'Two voices are there: one is of the deep / and one is of an old half-witted sheep / And, William, both are thine.' I have not the appetite to finish it but no doubt some wit later in the century will do so. We can all play flippant word games with each other's works. Why, for instance, dost thou say that God tells lies about us when we are too young to defend ourselves?'

Ah, *smiled Tom,* that line from the Immortality Ode. 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy'.

Humour was being restored and the others joined in the fun. Dot recalled that Keats thought it nice to listen to music but nicer not to - 'Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter.'

Sam supposed that in his Elegy, Gray had in mind four dirty old men asleep in the churchyard when he wrote, 'Each in his narrow cell forever laid, / The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.'

And even stiff Robert capped the lot by suggesting that when Shakespeare penned, 'Tell me where is fancy bred?' *he was really asking the way to the cake shop.*

The spat was over. The breach was healed. The thunder and lightning of poetic temperament had suddenly erupted and just as suddenly subsided. In a few minutes the conversation had sped from scatological crudity through fierce invective to benign wit.

As the shadows lengthened and the cold began to grip, they were turning for home when Tom spotted far down the lake a large motionless bird on a rock.

A common heron, said Dot.

Short on country lore, Tom plumped for a cormorant.

'Tis a heron, said Will.

Perhaps 'tis Sam's dead albatross come back to haunt him, persisted Tom.

For God's sake, 'tis a bloody heron, said Sam.

But Tom would not shut up. *How about a shag, Miss Dorothy?*

The silence was palpable.

As if it knew it was under discussion, the bird rose clumsily into the air and winged its way towards the crags. It had gone to roost and the five friends too were homeward bound, already anticipating the cut and thrust of a literary evening before a roaring fire.

NOTES

- 1) The 'famous five' are William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855), Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Robert Southey (1774-1843)
- 2) The Wordsworths moved from Dove Cottage in 1808.
- 3) de Quincey and Coleridge both stayed at Allan Banks that year.
- 4) Southey became Poet Laureate in 1813 and Wordsworth succeeded him in 1843.
- 5) J K Stephen (1859-1892), Virginia Woolf's father, wrote this skit on Wordsworth:

Two voices are there: one is of the deep; It learns the storm cloud's thunderous melody. Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea, Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep; And one is of an old half-witted sheep Which bleats articulate monotony. And indicates that two and one are three, That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep: And, Wordsworth, both are thine.

- 6) Apologies for anachronisms and dodgy chronology. There are no historical grounds for the liberties taken. Alive, they would sue!

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