

A Tight Turn

She could feel her heart pounding. The milk was coming. She was losing a lot and the towel she had used had worked loose and was beginning to chafe. She stumbled along the muddy path in the blackness, ever downward, tearing her shawl on the intruding brambles. In the distance, glimpses of cottage lights broke into diamonds through the film of tears. She tried to keep up. Somewhere in front she could hear him breathing hard, muttering and cursing. There was the clicking of his riding boots on the stones. He must be quite close. She could pick up the tang of old tobacco and the sharp smell of sweat, defiant of his lavish use of costly perfumes. Loping ahead, he stooped to miss the overhanging branches, sure-footed from the years of rough shooting. Under his arm was the small lifeless bundle, trussed up in a length old grey cloth.

He stopped at the gushing river, just short of the old bridge. The noisy turbulence had flooded the banks, carrying down a litter of leaves and fallen branches from the late autumn storms. She emerged from the holloway and stood behind him, fearful, bowed and wretched. They waited in silence. Somewhere in the cold night air was the sickly sweet odour of cattle, and the distant calling of tawnies. She felt an intense longing, a complete helplessness, an emptiness, a yearning to hold and to love.

‘Let’s get on with it’ he said. ‘I haven’t got all night. It’s an early start tomorrow. I need to get to Hatherleigh by midday and it’s no great delight by trap. Business can’t wait.’ He hurled the bundle into the swirling blackness. To her this was a devastating wrongness. She felt a stabbing deep in the chest and found it difficult to breathe. He had destroyed part of her. This was her being, her purpose.

He peered down at her, inscrutable and remote. ‘So that’s that,’ he said. ‘Not a word to anybody, or there’ll be trouble’. He turned on his heel and loped back into the gloom, leaving only the lingering smell of stale tobacco. She crumpled against the low parapet of the bridge, empty and exhausted. She had laboured without help in a basement store room whilst he had paced backwards and forwards, drinking from a hip flask. The baby had come with an ocean of blood. He was a beautiful boy with cherub lips and a little button of a nose. Holding him was like the meaning of life, but as soon as he cried he had been snatched away and smothered under a towel. She had fought to get him back but it was too late.

The cold of the night started to penetrate. She shifted slowly up the hill and into the wood, feeling the way. There was a sheltered spot between the beeches where the coppiced hazel splayed over a scooped out hollow. That first time in the gun room he had been suave and charming. He had promised comfort, protection and advancement, but it was too risky a place to continue their secret intimacy. Instead, in the good weather, they would meet here in the wood, and even drink wine. Her shawl was in tatters and she had somehow lost her shoes. She curled into a corner, reliving the few blurred images of her baby. She must give him a name so that, by repeating it out loud, she might make him live again, even just for a moment. She went through the list. There were all the Old Testament names, and the boys who pulled her pigtailed at Sunday school. Then there was the boy she had walked out with until not so long ago, so gentle and thoughtful. Her father hadn't approved and had turned him away. He said that the boy had no prospects. What he really meant was that he didn't like the way he smelt of cattle, and how he drank tea from his saucer. But he was a bright boy, a farmer made of pure earth, and gifted with animals. She had loved him and lost him. And having trodden on her dreams, her father had walked out on the family and set up with a milliner somewhere up country.

She drifted in and out of awareness, the horrors of real life merging into desperate dreams of pursuit and loss. She would need to find proper shelter so, shivering and off balance, she made her way as best she could back to the meadows, the heavily dewed grass pulling under her bare feet. She was breathing hard and worn down by the constant trickle of blood. She must have been in the wood for some hours because the crescent moon was now riding high above the trees. She followed the stream which would take her towards the old mills and cottages. There might be some kindness down there. A psalm she'd learnt at school kept time with her footsteps. 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me into still waters; and I will dwell in His house for ever.' And as she limped on she glimpsed in the distance another vision of that poor little grey bundle. She lived again the moments when he was snatched from her, his perfect but lifeless body, and the anguish of losing him to the water. Yet as she stumbled on, the pain of recollection gradually merged into a reality of hope and renewal. There in the moon-jewelled river her precious child was caught up in reeds near the bank. Above the hiss and prattle of the restless stream she was sure she could hear him crying. She could smell his newborn beauty and feel the softness of his perfect skin. His arms had unravelled from the crude wrapping as if, fresh from sleep, he was asking to be picked up. His little face had a sublime radiance, haloed in the spangled water, just like the saints in the church mosaics. She leapt forward, a fearless tigress retrieving her lost cub. 'Jimmy, I am coming,' she gasped, 'I am here'. In the freezing water she bound him close to her, kissing his fingers and nuzzling his little forehead. All around her she saw

brilliant lights, blending into swirls of wondrous colours. So at last their souls were together again and free to fly.

It was just dawn. The old farmer and his two sons came in through the top gate, tapping their sticks against their boots and sucking the cold air through their teeth. Half way down they stopped and tried to make sense of things. Something was going on. By the river the cattle were restless and stamping in the mud. In the half light a white fan was rippling in the turbulent water just below the lean of a half fallen willow. Locally wise they already suspected and feared what it was.

James, the younger son, took in a deep breath. His hand covered his mouth, the greying horizon swayed in a swimming lake of tears, and his future turned into a featureless moorland. Still in his mid teens, he had loved this girl until forced out by her father. She had awakened within him a greater sense of self and had made him feel truly alive. He was trying to save money and he'd hoped that they would get together again. As the energy drained from his soul he slumped down in the pasture, numbed by despair.

The other two, already hardened by the punishments of life, continued slowly down to the river. 'What do you think, Dad?' said, the elder brother, rubbing the bark of the leaning willow as if to restore life. 'I'm so sorry, Danny,' said the old farmer. 'That's young Josie from up over.' He looked, beyond the wood to the skyline where the ravens and buzzards were already starting to rise. He was well acquainted with tragedy. There was their little boy who had died when he was three, just when he could talk and feed the chickens. Then his young wife had suddenly passed over when she had so much more living to do. Still, he viewed the world with gratitude. He belonged here and felt part of the landscape. He had brought up the two boys. Danny was a hard worker and good at fixing things. James was a sensitive soul but he could see where things were going and, one day, might even take over the farm. After all, it had been in the family for generations. But suddenly there was this. It would take a lot to come to terms with this. Overcome by a surge of reverence he looked towards the water. 'We need to get them out and make them decent' he said.

She was caught in the arcades of willow roots, a lovely place where you might hope to see otters. Her white gown, streaming out into the current, was what they had first seen from up the hill. Her face seemed to radiate a curious contentment. Her long golden hair, where young James used to

bury his face, curled like flames in the eddies, as if she were still alive. In her arms was the little child, its perfect arms across her chest and its little head tucked into her neck.

Seeing no other way, they both lowered themselves into the dragging water. In the searing cold they clung to the tree, inching their tragic neighbours on to the bank and covering them with their jackets. When they had drained their boots, the old farmer steeled himself to make a judgement. 'Look, Danny,' he said. 'We have to get this right.' He was a devout man who had once read the scriptures. In his mind he carried an image of Solomon, a serious man with a long beard. He's the one who had written a very risky song which you didn't talk about in church. But he worked like a pair of scales. Each hand held equal weights and this was called justice. Now they needed some of Solomon's natural justice. 'First,' he said 'I know it's a lot to ask but I wonder whether you could go on up over and break the news to Josie's mum. Say she needs to come down and make arrangements.' He nodded in the direction of his younger son, still a lost soul on the slope. 'Young James over there, he's taken it really bad. But you might take him with you, if you think he's up to it.'

He looked again at the ravens rising. 'Second,' he said, 'we need to be fair to Josie and that little baby.' Danny looked at him, wondering how this might be possible. He continued: 'Well you know, Josie was an innocent girl, a lovely person, and we hoped that one day she would find good in our James. But working at the Big House turned her head and made her restless for luxury. We can guess who the father was because he's done it to others. At least two of 'em had to move up country and start a new life. They were all but ruined. It's that Edmund what does all the shooting. We've often seen the two of them up in them woods.' He indicated the direction with his chin. 'They tried to hide that she had fallen, but people, they knew.'

Danny looked down at his two neighbours, awed by the beauty of youth, even in death. Life was short and difficult, and there was a force to fortune. Then there was poor James whose dreams were for ever shattered. There he was, still sitting in a heap half way up the hillside. This was a dreadful thing which needed to be confronted. 'So what can we do to make things right for her?' he asked. The old farmer drew breath through his teeth and looked quickly over his shoulder. 'Don't tell nobody nothing, but you know young Edmund had a nasty accident a few weeks ago. Turned over his gig on the way home and got a hard landing. In bed for a good fortnight.' Beginning to shiver, Danny was distracted by a vivid image of their warm kitchen range, dry clothes and a cooked breakfast, but he managed to concentrate on the line of thought. The old farmer looked over his shoulder again and lowered his voice. 'Well, young Edmund's off to some dealing today. Back late

tonight, they say. We could give him another hard landing. That would be fair. All we need is an axe, a couple of mattocks and your Rufus. If we go by the back footpath we won't get noticed.'

Edmund made good time on the return journey from Hatherleigh. The sharp air gave a chiselled edge to his thinking. He smiled as he recalled the ebb and flow of the negotiations. He had done well and, although there was mutual satisfaction, he was sure he had come off by far the better. Property was like that. And the company later in the afternoon was a sheer pleasure. By the time he got close to home it was densely black, and the tang of wood smoke hung in the cold air. He turned the horse between the stone pillars. There was a surge of impatience as the lights of the Big House flickered into view between the trees and bushes of the long sinuous drive. Already, he could feel the warmth of the log fire at his back, taste the whisky, and smell the promise of braised beef. The coach lamps served only to give greyness to the imminent road, but he knew every inch of the way. There were the gate and cattle grid down there to the left, and just beyond them those dreadful ruts on the one side. He should really get someone to fill them. Last time he hit them at an angle and got thrown into the bushes. It was a miracle he didn't break the axle, or his neck. He was lucky to get away with a bruised chest and a sprained wrist. He wasn't sure if he'd broken a rib. There was something tiresome about missing good shooting but he was back to it within the month.

He got past the ruts and put on speed. Then, out of the blackness a dog was barking and snapping behind them. The horse leapt forward, trying to escape the menace. The trap scraped the stone walls of the narrow bridge and careered on, rocking sideways as it rode up and down the tussocky verges. He clung to the seat with one hand and strained to control the horse with the other. The next bend was the tricky one. You could do it at speed as long as you took the outside line to avoid the adverse camber. He needed some quick thinking and he was pleased he had not pulled too much on the hip flask. Suddenly, a vague form loomed up, low and threatening, glinting and shimmering in the dim lights from the Big House. A large branch had evidently come down from the huge oak. It had broken the fence and the wide jagged end, curling upwards to the height of the horse's chest, was thrust well across the carriageway. It must have fallen during the day because he recalled a clear drive through when he had left early that morning. It was impossible to take the corner widely enough so, instinctively, he pulled hard into a tight turn. In the flickering light of the coach lamps the grey gravel vanished into huge black lakes of shadow. More ruts? He couldn't remember ruts here, even from this morning. But here they were: long, deep and treacherous. He pulled harder on

the reins and swore at the horse, but there was no slowing it from the fugue of terror. There was the sickening splintering of wood and he was flung in a high arc into the unforgiving arms of the oak.

Early the next morning they came over when they heard the distressed calling of the injured horse. And that's how they finally found him.