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# SOLDIERS, WEEDING-WOMEN AND LINNETS

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

(Good Housekeeping, 1948)

*But what became of* . . . ? Cinderella's coachman, King Alfred's cakes, the little pig that didn't have roast meat? It is not only children who insist that no loose ends should be left hanging at the end of the story. The same tidy mind persists in the grown-up literary public. It was to comply with those *what became ofs* that the Elizabethan dramatists slaughtered so many minor characters before the fall of the curtain, that the Victorian novelists rang such peals of marriage bells in their last chapters, pairing off the curate and the governess, the valet and the lady's maid, the old aunt and the family lawyer, leaving not a celibate behind. 'There is, sure, another flood toward, and these couples are coming to the ark. Here comes a pair of very strange beasts.' The speaker is the melancholy Jacques, but for a moment one hears Shakespeare himself, poking fun at an artistic convention even while he complied with it.

Historians achieve the same satisfying tidiness by different means. Armies are annihilated, cities levelled with the ground, whole native populations vanish before the invading colonist in a sentence or two, flattened into a macadamised surface down which the muse of history proceeds as calmly as a steam-roller.

But the reader of memoirs, diaries, collected letters, must forswear the pleasures of a tidy mind, and prepare to be haunted by ghosts that cannot be laid, minor characters that appear but once, exist only in half a dozen lines – but for all that, exist. Sometimes they are of incalculable importance, like the Person from Porlock who interrupted Coleridge while Coleridge was writing *Khubla Khan*. 'At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour'. And so the thread of the poem was broken, and Coleridge 'found to his mortification that though he retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter.' Unfortunate Person from Porlock, poor speechless ghost whom every lover of poetry has abused for being so haplessly talkative for above an hour! He can say nothing in his defence. Perhaps he visited Coleridge with some philanthropic intention of telling him about a house to let, a copy of Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodexia* which could be bought cheap in a second-hand bookshop. Perhaps he brought strawberries or asparagus (for it was in summer that the ill-timed visit took place). No doubt Coleridge did quite half of the talking, perhaps the Person from Porlock's whole life went awry because of some engagement he missed through being delayed by that talkative Mr Coleridge. Perhaps, he ended his days in shame and remorse, having bought a copy of the *Collected Poetical and Dramatic Works*, having begun to read *Khubla Khan* with rapture, having turned the page, and found the poem unfinished, and followed by that accusing foot-note. It is quite possible. But it is impossible to know. The ghost can neither answer our questions or be laid.

The Person from Porlock is, so to speak, a public ghost, as one is a public statue or a public nuisance. But if you begin to attend to the ghosts of this kind, ghosts of no importance will waylay you, and haunt quite as efficiently as any ghosts of good standing. Only last week I added another to my repertory. He started up from the Journal of Miss Jane Hester Reilly, in which she recorded her journey from Dublin to London in the year 1791.

Miss Reilly was seventeen, a rather pert young lady, and somewhat of a Jacobin, to judge by her reactions. 'We were there for some time before the procession began, which was as grand as a parcel of ugly old Dukes, Lords, and Bishops could make it. The Duke of Gloucester came in the procession with his train held up by two attendants . . . I should have know him by his likeness to all the halfpence and guineas I ever saw to be one of royal family'. This was at Westminster Hall, where the trial of Warren Hastings was proceeding. *My* ghost rises up from the side of the Finchley Road, and is one of those common persons from whom the use of History constructs her smooth surfaces. 'About four miles from London we observed a soldier, he had sat down on a stone and appeared so ill that my mother stopped the carriage and called him over to give him some trifle; she asked him what regiment he belonged to, he said the 30th, that he had been discharged for illness, and that he had long lain in a hospital in London unable to begin this last journey to his own country to die with his friends, which he now scarcely hoped even to accomplish. Where was he going to? – to Liverpool. What was his country? – Ireland. What part? – the County Down. Oh!, whereabouts? – a town called Banbridge. He then described exactly the spot on which he was born, it was my father's estate and he gave him a blessing before he knew how welcome that blessing was to us. It was an odd and pleasant adventure to us and I hope a lucky one to the poor man who was enabled by it to pursue his journey more comfortably.'

At first sight it is a charming vignette: the ladies in their plumed hats leaning from the carriage, the soldier's face lighting up at this news from home, the three voices becoming more and more Irish as the conversation proceeds. It could be drawn by Morland and engraved by Bartelozzi, and called *Benevolence, or the Soldier's Fortune.* At first sight. But then the questions begin to scribble over the vignette. How much did they give him? How far did it take him? Did he achieve his last military ambition, the close of all his marches and counter-marches: to reach home and die there? The carriage bowls on towards London and Westminster Hall and the Duke of Gloucester who is so like a guinea – or a halfpenny. The soldier goes limping up the Finchley Road. And that is all we know of him, nor should we know that if Miss Jane Hester Reilly had not happened to keep a journal.

Some diarists have a sort of cedar-wood-chest quality, and sweeten what they preserve. The ghosts that wander in and out of Gilbert White's Journal have caught a particular serenity and charm from their dwelling-place. Goody Hammond is my favourite. Goody Hammond was his weeding-woman. She came in the spring, like a cuckoo or a brimstone butterfly. At the beginning of harvest she went away to work in the harvest fields and when the harvest was gathered she came back. She is not, of course, so interesting as a cuckoo or brimstone butterfly to Gilbert White the naturalist, and he is not quite sure of her exact nomenclature, for sometimes he calls her Goody Hampton. But there she is, grubbing about in the garden among the pinks and the Dames Violets and the Crown Imperials; and in the spring of 1793 'my weeding-woman swept-up on the grass-plot a bushel basket of blossoms from the white apple-tree; and yet that tree seems still covered with bloom,' And yet Goody Hammond seems still to be brooming away under gnarled apple trees that were apple-pips in that spring of 1793.

A cousinly contrast to Goody Hammond is Mrs Mule. 'There is something to be very softening in the presence of a woman – some strange influence even if one is not in love with them. I always feel in a better humour with myself and everything else, if there is a woman within ken. Even Mrs Mule, my fire-lighter – the most ancient and withered of her kind, and (except to myself) not the best-tempered . . . '

It is Byron who writes. Mrs Mule was a charwoman, of unbelievable ugliness, whose witch-like countenance lightened upon him in his Bennet Street lodgings. She was the mock and marvel of his friends; but when he moved to the Albany Mrs Mule moved with him. Even when he married, and lived in Piccadilly with a household of proper respectable servants, Mrs Mule was taken along, and marked her rise in the world by a new wig in which she looked even uglier than before. And when Byron quitted England in a storm of pride, rage, debt, frustration, and mystery, though he left his friends unfarewelled he found time to say goodbye to Mrs Mule. 'The poor old devil was so kind to me,' he said. He said it at a time when every woman in London society was hell-bent on being kind to Byron; but Mrs Mule's was the only kindness he acknowledged as such. If we could have Mrs Mule's account of Byron we might be nearer to understanding him. But she is a ghost. She flits before us with her broom and her duster; she stands in the deserted Piccadilly mansion listening to the last sound of those limping departing footsteps; she goes off shaking her hideous head, an old woman who doesn't hold with gossiping about employers. There's been a sight too much talking about his lordship already, if you ask *her*.

One can be haunted by apparitions even more shadowy and insignificant. From Swift's *Journal to Stella*, its pages embossed with statesmen and men of letters, rustling with the silk trains of duchesses and the silk cassocks of bishops, such an apparition peeps out.

'London. January 4. 1711. I went last night to put some coals on my fire after Patrick had gone to bed; and there I saw in a closet a poor linnet he has bought to bring over to Dingley: it cost him sixpence, and is as tame as a dormouse. I believe he does not know he is a bird; where you put him, there he stands, and seems to know neither hope nor fears: I suppose in a week he will die of the spleen.'

Swift shuts the cupboard door, and makes up his fire, and thinks that Patrick's linnet will be something to tell Stella. He is in the flush of his ambitions, in the thick of his schemings; he is that remarkable Dr Swift who is so witty and so learned and so savage and so mysteriously commanding. And the sixpenny linnet, bought by a foolish man-servant, has won its minute of immortality, even though it will die in a week, losing what knowledge it had may have had that it was a bird. Down it goes into the *Journal to Stella*: a trifle, trifles please women; a trifle and a portent. For thirty-four years later Swift too will die of the spleen, not knowing he is a man, shut up in the dark closet of his madness.