

PHILIP AND ANNA
by Sylvia Townsend Warner
(from *The New Yorker*, 31st July 1971)

AFTER the first onslaught of Mrs Talbot's welcome, Philip said he would wait in the car: his wife was better at looking over houses than he. So Philip sat outside the house called Perivale and placarded 'To Let,' and Anna followed Mrs Talbot from room to room, resigning herself to the thought that the rent was within their means and reflecting that the house might probably be more tolerable when Mrs Talbot's furniture and Mrs Talbot were out of it.

After the house came the bewintered garden. 'A mass of colour,' said Mrs Talbot, indicating a bed containing rose-bushes, to which a few leaves still clung, rattling in the east wind. 'A positive mass of colour. All these wonderful new shades. And so hardy, so willing! When people talk to me about nuclear warfare and battery hens and landing on the moon, I say to them, "But one can't condemn every new development. Think of the new roses!" Going on through the autumn, too—I think one appreciates colour more in autumn. Week after week—a positive blaze—you should see them! But you will.'

Six months later, Anna was doing so.

Vendors expatiate. The spirit of the bazaar inflames them; they praise their wares as if all their future happiness hung on getting rid of them. But when the roses opened fire, Mrs Talbot proved to have been the soul of truth. Every day they bloomed more vehemently; their scarlets, crimsons, oranges, salmon pinks more brilliant, their parti-coloured

petals more emphatically slashed, their livid mauves more insistently pathological. Strumpets, thought Anna, nothing but strumpets. But that honest old word was too good for them. She rescinded it and sought for something more vernacular. For a clergyman's wife her repertory of current abuse was deplorably meagre. 'Tarts,' she said inadequately.

Perhaps it was a mercy that their scent did not correspond with their hues. They were all totally scentless.

The garden of Perivale had been described by Mrs Talbot as a sun trap. It was a small rectangular trap. It had high wooden palings round it, in perfect repair. It sloped uphill. The rose bed dominated its upper slope, the rest was lawn and rockworks. Unless one inserted oneself in the tool shed between the mowing machine and some unaccountable old rhubarb pots, it was impossible to be in the garden without a total submission to the roses.

It was fortunate that there was so much to do in the house. It was small, yet managed to be gaunt, for its late-Victorian proportions ran to height. Its stairs were steep, its kitchen echoing. Its woodwork was dominated by cusps and ogees. It had a pursuing resemblance to the parsonages which would never more be theirs. At intervals Philip would fear that she found it tiring to spend so much time on the step-ladder. When she assured him that she liked the house very much and was full of plans for improving it, he politely looked credulous and turned back to the satisfaction of having enough room for all the bookshelves he wanted. The bookshelves were post-Talbot; some had come on with the books, others Philip had put up himself. Surrounded with bookshelves, which even had gaps for more books to come and occupy, he sat at his writing table with his back to the window.

Defeatedly reiterating 'Tarts,' Anna wrenched herself from the objects of her abhorrence and walked slowly down the sun trap, studying her husband's back. It wore a coat of clerical grey, a coat which still had a great deal of wear left in it. His hair was a less definite shade of grey. When the time came to buy a new suit, the new suit might be drab but would probably be grey, too. Philip would never be a mass

of colour. Yet within the last twelvemonth she had seen him positively blazing, morally apparelled in purple and scarlet, a scarlet man. How long it had been brewing she would never know; but on the eve of All Saints' Day he told her he was going to see the Bishop. With the idiocy which distinguished her intercourse with him she inquired, 'Does he want to see you?' Surely it could not be a question of preferment? Philip was not the sort of parson who is preferred.

'As to that, my dear, I cannot say.' He gave a brief cackle of laughter and drove the spoon into the base of his boiled egg.

'Will you be home to lunch?'

'I expect so, I expect so. I see no reason why not. He has read my letter with regret. Five minutes should be quite long enough for him to repeat his sentiments but his dignity may demand fifteen.'

'What has upset him?'

'*Die Wahrheit*, Anna, *nur die Wahrheit*.'

'I see.'

'And what do you see, my dear?'

'Well—he's no Sarastro. Truth would upset him, I suppose.'

Something, something unforeseen and probably uncomfortable, was impending. So she played for time.

'It may upset you, too, I'm afraid. I told the man that if I am to remain a Christian—if, mark you, for it is conjectural—I must resign from the priesthood. For I cannot and will not go on paying lip service to what I don't believe in and don't approve of. More coffee, please.'

She filled his cup, but he did not drink it. It was his variety of playing for time.

He folded his table napkin and got up. 'You won't want the car, Anna?'

'No, no, no.'

'I could perfectly well bicycle. We may have to adapt our ideas to bicycles.'

Philip in love had been as surprising as this. She felt a kind of awed giggle rise up in her as she watched the car turn

the corner. Now, as in those days, she longed for him to reappear: dazzling, incalculable, incontrovertible. They would go out on bicycles, she thought, freewheel down hills, silent as moths.

She freewheeled through the morning, making the most of this sensation of airborne, astonished youth. For it would not last. The question of lunch rushed at her like a good watchdog, and a remembrance of socks, and of Bartle and Philemon, their sons, both married and settled and regretably taking after her in their inability to rouse surprise in any bosom. Someone would have to tell them; in all probability, it would be she. Two letters, both of them read with regret. Oh, what was Philip saying to the Bishop? And why was he so late? If he were killed on the road, swept off in his fiery chariot of unexpectedness, there would be a symmetry about it—and the Bishop would see the hand of God wielding a fire extinguisher. Damn the Bishop, keeping Philip for so long!

‘Oh, here you are! I was getting quite anxious. What did he—’

‘Do you know what he had the effrontery to suggest? All this time, he has been asking me to reconsider, to stay on till he can get another man to put in. Plasterer! Timeserver! Facesaver! He would be so infinitely obliged to me. Of course, he would never dream of standing between a man and his conscience, but he would be so infinitely obliged. And it would be so much less painful to the parish. Whoso offendeth one of these little ones, you know. And then a tee-hee.’

‘Fiddlesticks!’ she interjected. ‘It would be Christmas pudding to them.’

‘Exactly. I told him so, though less poetically. More tee-heeing. I also told him . . .’

‘Goodness!’ she said at the close of the recital.

‘And finally I told him we would be out in a week. Can we be out in a week?’



They were out in a week, and in lodgings for six weeks; and then they were in Perivale and Mrs Talbot was in Malta.

And there was Philip with his grey back to the window, writing a horror story about the Three Choirs Festival. He had written several horror stories; they were all ecclesiastical, all popular, and reviewers said, 'John Emu again breaks new ground.'

Or he might be engaged in being a godsend to Dripworth. A clergyman of the Church of England is trained to industry, efficiency, and adaptable usefulness. A clergyman of the Church of England who has lost his faith need never be reproached with an idle hour, provided he settles in the South of England and an expanding neighbourhood. Dripworth's philanthropic factotum had been stricken with a palsy a couple of months before Philip and Anna moved into Perivale, and even before the move Mrs Talbot had spread the news that Philip was exactly what Dripworth needed. Before there was a leaf on the roses, Philip was being an answer to every need. Established inhabitants—defending the charms of old Dripworth, the horsepond and the vast inn sign of the Devil and Tongs, which hung across Fore Street and made it impossible for two-decker buses to pass beneath—more recent inhabitants who wanted a swimming pool and playing fields impartially enlisted him as Appeals Secretary. He kept the accounts for the Beekeepers' Association, the Moral Welfare League, the Boating Club, the Skittles Club; he was secretary to the Cemetery Trust, the Noise Abatement Society, and the Dripworth and District Operatic Group. He was respected by all, and collected useful material for his next story, 'Pelican's Piety.' On Sundays he mowed the lawn and tended the roses—weeding their bed, trimming its edges, and spraying them against aphids and black spot as though they were parishioners.

Never had a man lost his faith with less nostalgia and inconvenience. But a man's faith, thought Anna, is compact. You have it, you have it not. Rather like a hat. But spiritual.

Her loss—her losses, rather—was like a ragbag. An understanding butcher; a potting shed; a drying yard; a window seat; and a Souvenir de Malmaison, a Zéphyrine Drouhin, and a nameless lemon-scented, white cluster rose rescued from a rubbish dump. And she felt considerable inconvenience, and a piercing nostalgia for their materiality.

There was also one nonmaterial loss: an illusion, a silly, quite recent illusion and not at all creditable to a woman of her age. A distant dazzling Philip, bicycling beside her, bicycling at dusk through smells of meadowsweet and hemp agrimony; a recent furious and glorious Philip, blazing with rectitude, his garments dyed with the blood of bishops, helping her pack books and chinaware. But this was in a different county and eight months ago. A month more would make it a baby. Four months more, and those roses would still be at it. She hurried herself into the house and into the echoing kitchen. There were the pork chops, still glacial from the butcher's freeze; demand as she might, the man would never take things out beforehand. Bound, therefore, to be tough. She got the mallet and began to thump.

*'Frappez, frappez, ma belle.
Frappez, frappez toujours . . .'*

Hearing the thumps and the harsh, true voice, Philip winced. He had never expected that Anna would take it so badly, this decline into the laity. She had shown no aptitude for the lot of a clergyman's wife, drifting out of her obligations, ostentatiously reading the Thirty-Nine Articles during his sermons. On the rare occasions when she came to Communion, he half expected to see her turn away her head from the proffered wafer, saying politely, 'No thank you.' The winter might settle her in; he had noticed that shortening days are reconciling. Meanwhile, he had got to enrage the Vicars Choral and get two rats into the double bass with some acknowledgment of probability. She was now frying onions. 'We know each other by our works,' he said to himself. 'Identification by grace is a thing of the past.'



The weather grew increasingly hot, the sun trap increasingly retentive. The rose bed had to be watered three times a week. Anna was again on the stepladder—alleging that it was cooler up there. She had decided to redecorate the bathroom, giving it a green ceiling. A green ceiling, the colour of an ivy leaf, would mitigate its Gothic height. The bathroom window looked out on some neighbouring conifers, a form of vegetation which makes no attempt to be arresting. If ever again she had a garden of her own (she repudiated all ownership of the sun trap) she would fill it with conifers. At intervals she had to descend the stepladder and move it farther along to get at a fresh area of ceiling. To get at the portion of ceiling above the bath it became necessary to plant the stepladder's forelegs in the bath itself—which caused a wobble. The wobble was so far below her and she so much engaged in holding the brush at the correct angle that she thought little of it. But the bath acted as a sounding board; the wobble was reverberated through the house and impressed itself upon the yearly financial statement of the Cemetery Trust. Philip went to see what was happening.

‘How well you are getting on, Anna. I do congratulate you. There's a little streak just to your left—’

She leaned sideways to deal with the little streak. The stepladder adjusted to this by shuffling in the opposite direction. ‘Take the paintpot!’ she screamed, and appeared to throw it at him. With dreadful slowness, the stepladder deposited Anna in the bath and fell on top of her. Philip, who had caught the paintpot, placed it carefully on the windowsill and raised the ladder. Anna scrambled out. Relieved to find that she was able to scramble, Philip asked why the hell she hadn't called him to hold the ladder, and why he was treated like a nonentity in his own house.

Anna stooped to pick up the bottle of turpentine, and said ‘Ow!’ in a tone of surprise. She shook herself experimentally, and said ‘Ow!’ again.

‘Bed for you,’ said Philip sombrely.

The doctor came. It was his first visit, and nothing could

disabuse him of the idea that Philip's surname was Merivale. Mrs Merivale had torn her left trapezoid, wrenched her knee, and possibly cracked a rib. Sedatives, painkillers, bed. 'Unique chance to look at the telly,' said he; and went away thinking they were a skinny pair, and their furniture very shabby. But good teeth.

Philip had no conscience about tins, so housekeeping was easy for him. Anna subsided from resignation into enjoyment—the indulgent enjoyment one dedicates to what one knows won't last. Philip, happy with trays and tins; herself, virtuously doing as she was bid, reposing on extra pillows and remembering to take a painkiller at regular intervals: what a pleasant couple they made! She thought of them as the Merivales, the happy harmless Merivales. Nice people, nothing in particular, but nice: soothing, sensible, idyllically dull; undemanding yet fulfilling; not passion's slaves. Sedated Merivales. Dated, too, alas! But while they stayed, a pair to be reposed on, believed in, even. Here came Philip with another tray. Lunch? Tea? She could not quite remember.

'I've brought you some roses.'

She opened her eyes on that positive blaze of colour.

'Where would you like them?'

'Oh Philip, how kind of you. Anywhere, really. Yes, that will do very well. They'll be out of the sun.' They glowed like the fires of Hell.

A petal fell, orange and vermilion. It was surprising that it should fall silently; one would expect it to fall with a clang. But it fell silently. She recognised that the satire, the mockery, the derision with which she had assailed the roses had masked a plain positive hatred. As human beings hate human beings, she had hated them.

'My dear Anna, why are you crying? Is it your rib?'

She shook her head.

'Is anything worrying you?'

'No.'

She went on crying. Philip stared decently out of the window. He was allergic to the smell of tears—which had

been inhibiting when it was his duty to comfort the afflicted. When he looked round, Anna was mopping her eyes.

'I'm sorry to have been an idiot. I think it's these pills of his. I shan't take any more.'

'It wasn't to do with the roses?'

'No, no, not the roses. Though it's sad, isn't it, when you come to think of it—the trouble people have taken to make them so bright and bedizened, and the roses lending themselves to it so obligingly—and only to be disliked. And for no fault of their own, poor things!'

'No doubt some people like them very much. You are being anthropomorphic. I shall get you some tea.'

What a near thing, she thought. For it had been on the tip of her tongue to resort to a lie, saying that she was grieving for the roses left behind at Stoke Easter. Which would have sounded like a reproach.

It was a sad end to the Merivales—though Philip brought up two cups and stayed on to read from *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Next day, the Merivales were officially dismissed. Dr Hopkins pronounced her fit to get up. But he would like an X-ray of that rib; he would make an appointment with the radiologist for Thursday afternoon, and arrange for a Hospital Service car to fetch and return her. 'If it isn't a Mrs Talbot, it will be just such another,' Anna said to Philip. Philip said probably; they abounded.

This variant was a Mrs Neilson, who praised Philip, saying he was such a live wire. Anna was feeling the apprehensions usual to those who go for an X-ray. On the drive back, she felt the additional apprehension that those who undertake Hospital Service expect—since they can't be tipped—to be offered tea. The offer was rejected. Mrs Neilson had to hurry on in order to pick up Miss Hankey, arthritic but quite invaluable, for a committee meeting. But perhaps another day?

'Yes, yes, it would be delightful,' said Anna, overdoing it, for she had a violent headache.

For a long time now she had stopped automatically outside Perivale's gate, and knew so well what she would find beyond it that she did not look about her. The left-hand

path led to the back door, and she habitually took it, since the right-hand path led into the sun trap. But today, as though propelled by Mrs Neelson's resemblance to Mrs Talbot, she took the right-hand path. And there was Philip, carrying a fork and a pair of garden gauntlets into the tool shed. Why a fork? Could there be a weed in this garden so unrestrained as to necessitate a fork? Her eye was caught by what seemed to be the aftermath of a very gaudy funeral. It was the roses. They had been dug up, they lay heaped and sprawling on the grass. She was staring in amazement at this scene of massacre, at the roots clawing the air, the broken limbs, the leaves already wilting, the flowers (*so hardy, so willing*) defiantly blooming on, when she heard the tool-shed door being closed. That fork—

‘Philip, Philip! Did you do this?’

‘You seem surprised, Anna. You even look taken aback. Yes, I did it. . . . I thought it better,’ he added after a pause.

‘You dug them up—just like that?’

‘I *forked* them up. I hope you are not going to regret them. You disliked them. You could only regret them from the vulgarest motives.’

It was exactly how she had been regretting them—with a sense of waste and guilty compunction.

She looked from the roses to Philip, from Philip to the roses.

‘You have a very violent character,’ she said humbly. He accepted the tribute with one of his brief cackles of laughter—mirthless, and more like the cry of some rare, ungainly seabird.