

The Girl in the Blue Muslin Dress

Most Reverend Sir:-

It is with a heavy heart and no little trepidation that I have embarked upon this present correspondence. The matter which I must now lay before you is one which has exercised me greatly in recent weeks but I feel I must, in all conscience, relate to you the matter which passed between myself and the late rector of Falstone, the Reverend Milburn.

As your Grace will recall the rector was a man of most austere temperament who had been incumbent for nigh on three score years. He assumed holy orders, as I understand, upon his coming down from Oxford, this would be back in 'twenties, having previously fought as a cornet of light dragoons against Buonaparte. His some what radical views had tended to bar his advancement within the church tho' he was successful in winning members of his flock from the pernicious clutches of those Scotch Presbyterians who have otherwise cast their net so firmly over Upper North Tynedale.

The living, as you will also be aware, has never been an easy one; the church itself lay in ruins until the middle part of that decade and it was John Milburn himself who prevailed upon the Duke to fund its restoration. Indeed the parish only really came into existence as an independent living in 1811, having been, prior to that time, a chapelry of the mother church at Simonburn, wherein I presently have the honour to serve.

Thus it was that, some weeks ago, toward the latter part of October, I received a note from the carter bound for Chollerford, in the vicar's own hand entreating me to call upon him at his dwelling. He apologised for the rather peremptory tone of the summons by stating that he was prevented by illness from travelling himself and there were matters of an urgent nature which he sought to impart to me. Now, I had been aware for some time from various reports that the old man's health was failing – he had to be well advanced in years and the harsh upland climate is scarcely congenial.

I must, at this point, affirm that my acquaintance with the Reverend Milburn was somewhat limited, we had met only in the course of deanery business. His living, though not distant in miles, is both remote and of considerable extent. The parish embracing as it does a broad sweep of bleak moorland that stretches northward to the waste of Peel Fell and the Border Line. Quite frankly I had not found him at all easy in his manner, detached and somewhat contemptuous, I felt, indeed I sometimes wondered why he did not join the ranks of dissenters, so akin to them in his views did he appear.

Notwithstanding that we are now joined to civilisation by the inestimable boon of a new railway the journey to Falstone is still less speedy than one might hope. Though scarce a score or so of miles the progress of the locomotive is by no means rapid and frequently interrupted by a series of seemingly interminable halts at every passing hamlet. Having sat off after luncheon it was heading towards dusk when I alighted at Falstone. There being no trap or other conveyance available I was obliged to make my way on foot to the rectory which lies on rising ground, some little way outside the village. The weather was blustery with a fine curtain of rain, the road no more than a rutted track clogged with a mess of fallen leaves.

The rectory, when at length I approached, bore unmistakable signs of disrepair, paint had flaked from the casements and the garden was much overgrown. The building itself is ancient, constructed around the core of what is, as I believe, termed a 'vicar's pele,' a remnant of the grim days of the reivers. In the fading light the massive, rough hewn stones, almost cyclopean in their weight, seemed sprung from the very earth itself.

My summons was, at some length, answered by Mrs. Dodds, the house keeper, a respectable person of mature years who had been in service for as long as any could remember. The interior served only to confirm the bleak appearance, austere rooms, furnished in the most Spartan manner and a maze of passages which led us into the parlour, a chamber no more cheerful than those already traversed but at least able to offer the consolation of thin fire burning in the grate .

The Reverend John Milburn sat in a plain chair pulled toward the meagre blaze, the light reflected in the dark shadows of his face which, when he rose to greet me, I perceived to be markedly more drawn since I had last beheld him. “My dear Featherstonehaugh,” he began, “I am most deeply obliged to you venturing so far into our remote uplands at my behest.” His voice was as I recalled it, clear and firm, devoid of affection and with that hard ‘A’ which so indicates a born northerner. I responded with the usual felicitations and enquiries as to his health.

“I do, I must confess, feel the pull of mortality, thus I was inhibited from making the journey to see you. As you may recall I suffered a slight stroke some months ago and though I feel fully recovered in mind, I am somewhat less robust than hitherto.” Again I made a bland reply, assuming he wished to discuss matters relating to the living, which was clearly becoming too much. However, in this I was mistaken.

“I wish,” he continued, “that you should hear my confession”. With this he smiled, perceiving my immediate discomfort for this was the very last thing I had anticipated. “I regret having to lay this burden upon you but there is a matter which has perplexed me these fifty years and more and I should not wish to be called to account with such a weight yet laid upon my soul,”

In the circumstances how could I refuse? Bolstered by a glass of spirits, ‘innocent’ whisky being, as my host informed me, prepared by several of his more wayward parishioners from an illicit still upon the moor, he proceeded. The account which follows is as near in his own words as I am able to recall, I have neither added nor expunged.

“In the year 1825,” (he began), “I was a simple country curate, true I had been to Oxford and, prior to that, had seen service in the cavalry. The parish, as I am sure you will recall Featherstonehaugh, was much neglected and invaded by the Scotch, the Kirk having attracted a far greater flock than we poor Anglicans. I was, in those days, full of the fire of my ministry and believed I could evangelise both the dissenting and the apostate.”

“One of the leading families in the vale were the Ridleys of Lee Hall, an ancient grayne, with a long and sanguinary history, steeped in the blood of the border wars. One of their ancestors once did away with one of yours if you recall the tale. The head of the family was Sir Simon Ridley, a dissolute fellow, frequently in his cups and ready enough with his fists. The knight had two children, a youth, Richard, as degenerate as he and a daughter named Emily upon whom he doted. Ridley came to church for no better reason than to maintain the favour of the Duke who had funded and endowed the restoration himself and he doubtless hoped to make a good match for his favoured child.”

“It is strange how the memory of those days seems far clearer then the events of yesterday but I suppose that to be a function of age. I believe that I fell in love with Emily Ridley at the very first instant I beheld her, something of a romantic cliché of course but nonetheless true. She sat with her family in the box pew that was theirs and as she raised her face toward mine a shaft of light fell thro’ the lancet window and, as it seemed, surrounded her sweet face with a halo of gold.”

“ From that moment I was lost – so great was the intensity of my sudden passion that all note of my sermon fled clear from my mind and I stumbled through the office as though dazed. Afterward, alone in the empty church, I could think of nought else but she. I will confess that I was not, by this time, entirely a stranger to affairs of the heart, but never had I felt that clean, straight shaft of love so deeply embedded.

I brooded upon how I might improve upon her acquaintance but the way seemed barred. I was without substantial means and therefore unlikely to be an acceptable suitor. I could so easily imagine the pleasure her loutish brother would take in witnessing my humiliation should I seek to act the ardent suitor.”

“As it was, providence, or so it seemed, intervened for not two days later I received a visit from the young lady herself, accompanied by an elderly maidservant. You may imagine the extent of my delirium at having the object of my desire sipping tea in this very parlour. She was dressed for walking out, in the fashion of those days, in a muslin

dress of the palest blue which set of the colour of her eyes and golden curls to absolute perfection.

The reason for her visit, as she imparted, was a perfectly proper one. She was engaged upon a quest to discover the history of certain of her ancestors and understand the romantic balladry that had grown up around the dark days of the border wars and the notorious reivers – amongst whom her own family had been prominent.”

“I stammered some acknowledgement and was able to confirm my willingness to assist, my heart hammering against my ribs all the while, so deeply was I in thrall. Thus it was that Emily became a frequent visitor to this rectory when we talked very properly of past history and sad poems, there was one ballad called ‘The Lament of the Border Widow’ with which she was very much taken. The tragic eloquence of its sombre verses moved her very greatly. One day, toward the end of June, we repaired to the church to examine certain of the parish records, her maid she despatched upon an errand as clearly none would now perceive that any impropriety would occur.”

“This was the first time I had been altogether alone with her and was near overwhelmed, bending my endeavours toward dusty ledgers and my reeling senses away from the elixir of her presence. John, she said to me, quite clearly, hitherto we had maintained formalities, I must confess that my purposes in coming here are not quite as they seem. She went on, adding to my delirium, to aver she was unhappy in the company of her sibling and his roaring cronies from whom she might be expected to choose a partner and that she had come to feel a great fondness for me.”

“And thus our romance was born. I shall not trouble you with the details of its course nor of the passion that fired my veins, the love so all consuming that I would gladly have thrown all, ministry, living, prospects and reputation onto the flames. For months we existed in a kind of vacuum so wrapped up in ourselves and the intensity of our affections. I passed thro’ the daily round of parish business in a near unconscious state, dealing by rote while my mind ever hovered on the planning of our next tryst.

“The danger we were in was not to be underestimated. In such a place as this the very walls have eyes and ears, it required all our concentration, cunning honed by need to avoid suspicion. We were both of us sensible that such a state of affairs could not endure. At some point discovery must take place with fearful consequences. At length we resolved upon flight, a dishonourable choice, I do not deny but what was honour to me it was only she that mattered.”

“ You may, my dear fellow, consider in what a perfect state of anxiety I passed that final late summer’s day, valise packed, my horse ready and saddled with even my light dragon sabre to hand, unused for a decade. She was due to meet me at six, outside the church, the evening was fine and still with that clear golden light we see here at such time of year. I stood in the porch, taut with apprehension, till on the hour and as my heart pounded within my breast I perceived her walking toward me along the dusty track. Unable to contain my passion I rushed down the steps toward the lych gate.”

“She was wearing the blue muslin dress, her head held downward as she approached me and it was then that some deep terror of alarm sounded within me, some dread premonition for, as I made to call out to her she raised her head and looked me straight in the eye. My lover’s face was deathly pale and her expression was one of the utmost sorrow. As I beheld her thus a thin trickle of blood, bright scarlet against alabaster, ran from her brow, the trickle became a flood before my horrified gaze. I may have cried out, I certainly started towards her and in my distress, tripped and fell upon a loose paving. I may have lost consciousness – time had no meaning, recovering I sprang to my feet but the way was bare, no trace of her presence remained.”

“Overcome with dread I leapt upon my horse and dug in the spurs, racing along the lane toward Lee Hall, heedless of the risk. As I pounded the narrow track I perceived a group of horsemen coming at me, light glinted on bared steel. With a shriek that clearly unnerved the better part of my would be assailants I fell upon them, my blade, old skills suddenly remembered, alive in my grasp. Most scattered, one fell, cut from the saddle –

her brother as I later learnt, left lifeless in the dust. Abandoning my blowing mount by the door I stormed into the house, servants scattering at the sight of a wild eyed man with reeking blade.”

“ I rampaged through rooms calling her name, none came forth to challenge me. As I ascended the stairs, still roaring, I found myself confronted by the elderly companion and one glance at her stricken countenance told me all. It was then my manhood deserted me and fell to weeping upon the stairs it was she who comforted me like a sobbing child and from her I learnt of my lover’s fate. As I had feared we had been discovered, by what foul mischance I no longer recall. A fearful row with her father ensued, he being much in his cups. When she refused to surrender he struck her, not intending fatal damage but the force of the blow caused her head to strike upon a stone hearth and she expired forthwith. In his remorse the old man had blown his brains out though not before dispatching his son and a posse of rowdies to seek me out.”

“It was her wraith I saw upon the road, she had already been dead an hour or more and the sight of her in her blue muslin dress has haunted me ever since. All the days of my life I have prayed, God forgive me, for but another such sighting.”

Shortly after I took my leave of the Reverend Milburn, the nature of his confession had, I will readily admit, shaken me to the very core. For sometime thereafter I remained undecided till, some weeks later, in the midst of a November gale, the carter called again this time bringing a note from Mrs. Dodds. In this she advised that the Rector was dead. She had found him when she called in the morning stretched out in the very same room wherein we had talked. Heart failure was diagnosed as the cause of his demise. He was, as she related, perfectly composed, the only strange thing, which she was unable to explain was that, clutched in the dead man’s hand she found a scrap of material. As far as she was aware this had not come from any of the domestic furnishings being of muslin and moreover, in a particular pale shade of blue.