

The World's End

Dorset, Late Summer, 1846

The mid-morning sun has beaten the world into hiding; the fields stand motionless in the ripening heat and only the crickets raise a sound; filling the air with their cree-crick-cree-crick; making it seem all the hotter.

Bill and the chestnut mare are in the shade of the stable. He has a hand palm-flat on her shoulder as he brushes her quarters with a reassuring rhythm, the hiss of the brush marking long, drawn-out beats. Drops of sweat fall from his brow, splashing darker colours onto the cobbles, and when he draws breath, the scents of horse and straw sting his nostrils.

The mare flicks her tail in agitation. He keeps to his rhythm. Then her near hind-leg comes up and smacks the cobblestones. He hardly blinks.

"Yeah, a'right. I know."

She's having none of it. She stamps a second time. The clatter echoes sharply from the farmyard walls. It seems to cast her anger like a shadow on the hot stillness around them.

He stands back and straightens, and looks her in the eye.

"C'mon Penny. It's naught. Ee'll be gone tomorrow."

He moves closer to her and strokes her neck. She nods a little. 'S'alright' he tells her. 'S'alright, now.' Soon she is calmed, while the crickets still call.

He runs a hand over her muzzle, picks up the leather harness that needs mending and ambles to the stable door. His eyes are way off on the horizon as he mumbles his agreement with the mare.

"You're right, though. Should'n be a-feared to see us own brother."

He reaches over the door for the bolt, slaps it open and steps out into the sun. And there he stops. There is a figure at the far end of the track, just coming though the gate.

He shades his eyes and watches the man striding towards him.

"'Ere 'e is then."

As his brother approaches, Bill has time to appreciate the changes that time has grown. It is a surprise to see such an old man. Cornelius' face is tired and lined and his eyes are squinting and small. He has nothing of Bill's weight or strength—his arms are thin and wiry. Bill remembered him bigger.

Without removing his hat, Bill nods slightly.

"Corny."

His brother stops and grins at the reception, shaking his head but not commenting directly.

"You knew I was coming then."

Bill nods.

"I hears you're out by Stur."

"Rooms at the World's End Inn."

"Oh aye? They's having a good old get-together is they?"

The smile fades from Cornelius's face.

"They've not seen each other for a long time. They're brothers, Bill."

But Bill just hardens his jaw. He stares at Cornelius.

"Dare say," he concedes.

A bead of sweat forms on Cornelius's brow, breaks from the pore and slides down his cheek. His tongue laps it from the corner of his mouth. His eyes tighten.

"I was asked to bring word that your master, Squire Guthrie, requires his horse and trap."

Bill nods again, managing to show his faint disapproval with just the weight in his eyelids.

"Say which? Bay? Chest'nt?"

"Black Stallion."

He snorts at this.

"What's that then? Women out there?"

"My master was entertaining Miss Emily Bankes, who has lately been joined by her sister."

"'Lately bin joined?' Sort o' talk's that?"

Cornelius doesn't answer, sticking instead to the stiff formality of his task.

Resigned, Bill shakes his head and turns towards the carriage house.

"Ha. 'Lately bin joined!' Come on. The' can help me hook 'em up."

Cornelius follows him and is directed by his grunts and nodding commands.

They put a saddle in the trap for Bill's return, harness the chestnut mare to take the trap out to the Inn and tie the stallion behind.

All the while they work at it, Bill watches his brother with sizing eyes, noticing the scar on his neck and the forefinger missing from his right hand. He can't deny his brother's honest efforts but when he has to lift the canvas cover back on its shelf,

Cornelius hasn't the strength alone and Bill all but takes it from his hands. He looks as if that alone proved many, many points. Cornelius won't meet his gaze.

With everything ready, they climb aboard the trap.

“Walk on then, Penny,” Bill directs and the chestnut mare tugs them forwards, before settling into an energy-preserving amble. It is hot. The horses must be spared for their masters and delivered untaxed.

Cornelius is watching the chestnut mare, while peering out from under his hat as if he had nothing to answer. Bill can think of plenty of accusations and he glances sideways at his passenger as each new one occurs to him. They reach Julian's Bridge and are crossing the river before either has spoken.

At the top of the arch they meet an old man with a handcart and two dogs by his side. Bill draws Penny to a halt.

“Art.”

“Bill.”

“How's she doin?”

“Ar, she's a tough ol' bird, Bill, she's a-coming right.”

Bill nods with satisfaction and the old man whistles his dogs away from the horse.

“Much on?” Bill asks. Art dips his head back the way he came.

“Drayton’s ‘erd. Cassn’t find else. Gertie’ll harvest soon mind, so he’ll see us through.”

“Well, you send word if there’s ought the’ needs, now.”

“That’s right kind of you Bill. God keep ‘ee.”

Bill just clicks his tongue to get Penny moving again and they resume their steady rhythm. Cornelius asks after the conversation.

“Who was ill? His daughter?”

But Bill won’t answer. His sideways glance is full of contempt.

“Much as thee’d care,” he mutters.

Cornelius chews his lip for a little distance, sweating, as they both are. Then Bill starts shaking his head.

“Your Ma... Cried for a week she did. Then another week when she hears you’ve taken to soldiering.”

Cornelius keeps his gaze contritely focused on his boots.

“You could ha’ just told her. You could ha’ just a-said goodbye.”

He stares at his unanswering sibling.

“Could’n you?” he demands.

Cornelius looks up.

“William, we had no time. Major Guthrie was told he could join the army and leave for India or stay and hang for murder. We left that night. I had no choice.”

“So that’s the first week. And the next fifteen years when you sent no word, nor wrote nor nothing? You should ha’ seen your Ma, Corny. You broke her heart, you. You, her favourite. Went to her grave weepin’ over you.”

Cornelius sits quietly penitent as the road-side daisies drift by.

“Didn’ hear nothing ‘til old Healey come home one leg short of a wicket. Poor soul. An’ that were five year. You could ha’ sent word, but no. An’ I’ll tell you the wherefore. You’ve a cow’s heart, that’s the wherefore.”

“I had no choice.”

“Cow-heart.”

“If they’d have known where I was they’d have followed. Guthrie and I swore secrecy when he asked if I’d go with him. I swore, Bill. How could I have broken my word?”

“Broke your mother’s heart instead.”

“I’d no choice.”

Bill has no answer for this. Instead he broods over the reins and watches the road. They ride out past the water meadows by Cowgrove and onto the Mill Lane. They nod at the few other people they pass, but the silence between them seems to grow. Eventually Bill is chewing his lips, regretting his outburst, uncertain how to retract his angry words.

“India was it then?” he grumbles. Cornelius nods. “What’s that like then?”

Cornelius smiles as he glances up the road to review their pace.

“You’ve not been outside Wimborne, have you Bill? Not past the World’s End, I shouldn’t think.”

“Nope. No reason to.”

Cornelius cannot suppress his grin.

“If I told you what India was like, you wouldn’t believe me.”

Bill has no answer to this. Cornelius chuckles.

“Ain’t you ever wanted to, Bill? You’ve never even seen the sea.”

Bill shrugs, head sideways, like a tortoise wriggling to return to its shell.

“No reason to,” he repeats.

"But wouldn't you like to? Just to see a little more of the world beyond the Stour?"

"Why?"

"Why to see things... to grow... for betterment, for self-improvement!"

At this, Bill raises his eyebrows.

"Oh ar? Improvement is it?"

"Yes," Cornelius insists, "Improvement."

"That an improvement?" he checks, nodding towards Cornelius's missing finger, "Or that?" he asks, looking at the scar in his neck.

"No..." Cornelius concedes.

"Good. There's no need to lose parts, then? To improve the' self?"

"Lor' me Bill. That was just the army. No, I'm talking about progress. D'you understand? Like the railways. Tell me you've at least seen the railway?"

"Railway? Progress?" Bill shakes his head. "Look, see that field there? Week or so, it'll be harvest. Then'll plough him an' lay seed. Then'll grow again an' ripen an' harvest again. It don't need no progress."

Cornelius is grinning and trying to interrupt, but Bill will have none of it.

"I seen your progress. Art Hanham an' all his gang spent two summers in no work for them steam thrashers. They's no food an Barkham's paying less for his

harvest, but can't sell grain for tuppence and who the blue-blazes do you think's improved by all tha'?"

Cornelius's mouth hangs open as he looks around the landscape for his argument.

"That's politics, not progress."

Bill grunts, and for the time being that is the end of it. They sit, rumbling down the road without a word, before Cornelius picks up the point.

"That was him we saw earlier was it? Art? Are they all working now?"

"Some on 'em. There's them as burnt the threshing machines, they's in Australie. There's Ted Crick and Jerry wassisname—Thatcher—they's both hanged. Chapman's Common got took over by the Vicar French an' his board. But ar, they's working now. Banke's banned them machines. That's the wherefore. God knows there's enough others that isn't."

"Jerry Thatcher, hanged?"

"Ar. Bloody fool."

"You don't think they should have burned the machines?"

"Don't think they should a' been a-caught. Machines? I dunno, don't make sense to me..."

At which point they suddenly lurch forwards because Penny has stopped still in the road. Bill fumbles, rushing to resume his seat, coughing self-consciously, as though he was embarrassed by the antics of the horse. He clears his throat before clicking his tongue.

“Get on now, Penny.”

The horse moves off, but Bill is still rolling his shoulders to re-position his shirt. Cornelius smiles as he looks from horse to driver. He watches them for some time, travelling in slow, steady silence. Bill unwraps some buttered bread and two apples and they eat as they drive. Eventually Cornelius gestures at the Chestnut Mare with his half-eaten apple.

"How does she know where to go then?" he enquires.

"What? Penny? Does as I tells her."

"But you've not so much as twitched those reins since we left the stables."

Bill shrugs, unable to answer.

"She know your thoughts?"

Bill stares at his brother, squinting for the sun, but scowling too.

"See, you make that sound like a wrong-un. That's what you do. Sommit I's never so much as thought on and you make it out as it's wrong. Sure enough,

Penny understands me, much as an old mare might, which is better'n some folks, but it's just as it is. That's all. Just as it is. There's no need f' you to come an start a-making it right or wrong, no need at all."

"I haven't said a thing about it!"

"No, but there's plenty as said as needs no words. That's the truth."

The two men stare at each other. Bill's gaze jumps from his brothers' face to his tunic and back again. Cornelius' wide-eyed look of wounded innocence melts into earnest concern.

"Bill, I'm sorry. I meant nothing by it, really I didn't. You and I, we just live different lives now, that's all."

He licks his lips and searches the floor for something more to say.

"I've seen things, see. I've seen a lot of the world. It's exciting, Bill! That's the thing. I've always been excited by it. And you would be too, if you'd seen what I have."

"You reckon?"

"Of course! Look, I'll tell you what. What if we go up to the railway tunnel once we're done with the horses?"

Bill shifts on his seat and rolls his shoulders.

"Can't think as I needs to visit no railway."

"No, Bill. No need. But it's a thing to see, truly"

Bill looks up see the broad thatch of the World's End Inn curling into view. He shrugs and starts wrapping up the remains of their meal.

"If you like."

They prepare the horse and carriages for their two masters and Bill is surprised how familiar the Major is with his groom. Compared to Bill's own master, the Major is almost friendly. Once the courtyard has stopped echoing the clatter of hooves, he remarks on it.

"Part of the family then, eh?"

"He treats me very well," Cornelius agrees.

They both know the same cannot be said of the Squire, so his change of subject is welcome.

"Come on. I'll get a flask of cider from the landlord, we'll go and see the train pass by."

And so they do. Cornelius carries the stone flask and they walk until they reach the embankment where they sit to watch the tunnel mouth for the train.

"So what happened with Chapman's Common then?" Cornelius asks.

Bill smacks his lips savouring the cider.

"That's all beyond me," he mutters, "They fixed up some Board, the Vicar and that. But first no-one's allowed no trapping or shooting, and then no pasturing. Can't say as I understands it. Not common land no more like tha'."

"And the threshing machines?"

"Ar, well, that's all about the same time. Sprung up like daisies they did. Suddenly there's a whole crop of men, Crick, Thatcher, Johnson, they've no work in the harvest an' French has taken over the common so they can't even put a cow out to pasture, much less shoot a rabbit for the pot. No surprise they took to burning the things."

"And what happened?"

"Word comes out of Lacey. Old man Bankes just bans the lot of them. No machines on his land. Course there's plenty of others that uses them, but there's not many cares to cross him. Hard times, though. Hard times."

He takes another bolt of cider and hands the bottle it to his brother.

"What you do for Guthrie then? Tickled his teats wi' summat."

Cornelius peers over the cider bottle and into the past.

"He was set upon in the streets of Calcutta. I grabbed the cutlass that was swung at his neck. He kept his head, I lost my finger."

Bill nods, trying to imagine.

"That India, was it?"

Cornelius cannot help but grin.

"Yes, that was in India."

He looks up towards the tunnel as the shrill whistle of a train breaks in on their conversation.

Bill finds himself tensing. It is a ghostly sound to his ears—screaming and unearthly.

"Here it comes," Cornelius mutters, but nothing could have prepared Bill for what came next. The thing that came out of the tunnel exploded into the space before them. There was first a puff of smoke and then, like a terror-stricken horse bolting from its gate, a huge black cylinder screamed into the cutting, blowing out immense breaths of smoke, one on top of the other, roaring, thundering and burning at once.

Bill jumps two feet back up the slope in the instant it appears, scrabbling for grip.

"Oh The Devil!" he cries, "The Devil!"

The train's whistle blows again and Cornelius turns to see his brother's fear. For an instant he is amazed but then he bursts out with laughter.

Bill won't let go of the grass, as though his grip on the ground might save him.

"What?" he demands, eyes still wide, "What's so funny?"

He is glancing anxiously after the train and its carriages as they curl beyond a growth of young beech trees. Cornelius has tears of laughter glinting on his cheeks.

"I've a cow's heart!" he calls, "Just look at you!"

It takes a while for Bill to see the funny side. He defends himself at first, saying it just shocked him, that was all, then explaining that it came at such a pace as he had never seen, until he can finally laugh at his own surprise. As they walk back to the inn, they are chuckling together.

But the sun sinks low and the shadows stretch too long.

"If I'm lucky, Bill, I'll have some time tomorrow. I'd call in and see you if I can. I should like to see where Ma and Pa are resting."

Bill nods, keeping his eyes on his brother's golden-lit face. He tells him of the church yard and the flower-covered corner. They shake hands before they part.

By night-fall Bill and the Chestnut mare are back in the cool of the stables. There's barely enough light in there to pick out the walls, but he knows the place for everything and has time enough to feel his way. The horse is steaming, for the night's air has turned cool, and the vapour catches what little light the moon yields. Penny raises her near-hind leg and stamps on the floor.

"S'alright, now," Bill mutters, "s'alright."

And when everything is hung in its place, he shuffles to the stable door. His hand reaches for the bolt, he slaps it open and steps out into the night.

His eyes do not focus on the stars as he mumbles his agreement with the mare.

"You're right, though. Progress. I hope they knows what they's doin'."