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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

An edited presentation of a previously unpublished short story by Sylvia Townsend Warner. A widower's feelings are stirred by an adder he discovers in his garden. The story is undated but the typewriter suggests a date in the mid- to late 1950s.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; snakes; *The Greek Anthology*; Byron; housekeeping; gardens.

He heard a faint dry rustle – so faint and so brief that he wondered if he had heard it at all, and stood motionless, waiting to hear it again. When he heard it again, he realised that at the first hearing he had stiffened in alarm – a minute electric shock of fear. Asking his mind what image had been aroused in it, he found that it was an image of a very fine tinsel gauze, a scarf trailed by an invisible wearer. At the third hearing, he realised that it was an inanimate sound, that it depended on a movement not its own: the light stir of wind moving intermittently through the garden was the invisible wearer of the scarf. His mind's eye now saw the scarf distinctly – a web of tinsel, loosely woven, semi-transparent, silvery. Listening more attentively, he realised with the next puff of wind that there were other sounds in the garden; the rustle of dried grasses which had stood out the winter, the creak of the thuya,[1] the swish of the pampas grass plumes: sounds so ordinary that he had not been aware of them, so ordinary that they could not have given him that small electric shock of fear, nor halted him to stand listening. Though it was spring, the air was cold. Standing had chilled him, and he walked on. As he did so, a tinsel glitter at the foot of an apple-tree caught his eye, as the faint crepitation had caught his ear. It was the sloughed skin of a snake, of an adder. All fear left him when he thought of the glittering beauty of the creature in its new nakedness.

It was probably somewhere about in the garden. A good place for it. Till the strawberries were ripe, village children would not be coming to ask if there was a job for them. It could live in peace, and eat fledglings.

Since Anna's death three years before, the garden had gone back considerably. He planted no more bulbs, sowed no annuals. He had always preferred shrubs. In fact, he had always disliked weeding. The nurserymen's catalogues which still came to the house increasingly recommended the use of heather for ground cover – a silly innovation, he and Anna had agreed. Heather was not meant to grow in an enclosure. An adder would like heather, delicately sliding through that forest of harsh stems. This adder would have to do without it. There was no lack of cover in the garden; three years' neglect had seen to that. He and the adder would lead separate private lives (he must remember to tell Jopling the postman, though) while the grass grew and the blossom fell on it, the apple-blossom and the mock-orange, while the dandelions renewed themselves as ghosts and the cow-parsley foamed above the curling glaucous waves of the Solomon's Seal. 'When I see it,' he said to himself, 'it will be in the strawberry bed.'

And it was in the strawberry bed he saw it, loosely coiled under the strawberry netting. Ah, that was the way to live: silent, eluding, unambitious and every inch recumbent!

After a while he saw his shadow nearing it, and went quietly away, and indoors to review a batch of cookery-books. Many years before, his novel about Vatel[2] had been the success of that distant year, and ever since then editors asked him to review cookery-books. He did not seriously need the money, but he did not scorn it. Scorn, ambition, self-esteem – his heart was too impoverished to support such luxuriant growths. He reviewed the cookery-books and their like because he had always done so, and it gave him something to do.

The adder gave him something to look forward to. It was more companionable than a rose; the mere fact that it might have shunned him and did not, made their encounters almost like meetings. If he had not known better than to fall into anthropomorphism, he might have said the adder made the first advances. It was the shade cast on the hot lawn by his deckchair it sought, not his company. Yet his company was not distasteful to it, for having settled itself it would stay there, undisturbed by the pages he turned, the click of his cigarette lighter, the creak of the chair as he changed his posture. It did not even resent being spoken to. At other times, it would go away of its own volition – a lovely

movement rippling across the lawn, increasing its speed as it increased the amplitude of its curve. Then the proud head dived into the long grass or the thicket of lupins and it was gone. In any case, the advances were not made exclusively to him. Jopling often reported meeting it, lying in wait for him, he said a little extravagantly. It was Jopling who said he should put out a saucerful of milk for it at nightfall. Most mornings the level of milk seemed much the same; sometimes moths had drowned in it; but the saucer, a blue one, became a habit.

When the strawberries were ripe he consulted Jopling about the village children. 'Leave that to me,' Jopling said. 'I'll pass it round there's a viper I see in your garden, and they won't come near the place, not if you put up a notice saying, Strawberries For All.'

'But if they know there's an adder, they may want to look for it. They learn natural history at school.'

'They may *learn*. But learning isn't everything. There's instinct.'

Yes, there was instinct, the electric tremor of fear he had felt when he heard that tinselled rustle. Looked back on, it seemed almost an indecency, at any rate, a crudity. If instinct were to work on either of them, it should work on the adder, whose lovely head with its composed expression was branded with V for venom. His ears were pricked for the hateful sound of childish voices; but no children came to the gate; and hearing them go yelling down the lane he relaxed into the tranquility the adder had never lost. By now, anthropomorphism or no, one could say they were on very good terms with each other – terms of discreet detachment. When all possibility of love is gone, that is what a sensible man should choose.

'An Englishman's heart is his castle,' he wrote on the end-paper of his Greek-English Lexicon. It had been his sentiment for three years but he had not expressed it so concisely till now. The Lexicon was at hand because he had been looking up *ophis*.[3] One cannot call an adder Puss, and he sometimes felt a need to address the creature with more civility than can be got into a Hullo or a Good Morning. An Englishman's heart is his castle, but the adder[4] had glided into it. He had admired it, esteemed it, been anxious on its behalf, put down milk for it; all this throughout a ripening summer had accumulated into a sort of first love – the attentive, incredulous love which vanishes with the first possession; after which comes triumph, terror, jealousy, bewilderment, tenderness, exasperation, repentance . . . but as he couldn't possess his adder, he could hope to love it serenely.

'Ophis,' he said gently, 'Ophis, sas agapo.'[5] He was picking gooseberries at the time and the adder was curled up near-by. 'Sas agapo,' he repeated with more confidence. The adder appeared to be listening. If an adder were to be pleased by any music of human speech, as hamadryads are wooed by the music of Indian snake charmers,[6] Greek would be the likeliest tongue to please it: in which case, he must manage something rather better than a dependance on the Lexicon and Byron.[7] The adder watched him carry the bowl of gooseberries towards the house, then poured itself into a deeper repose under the rhubarb.

The Greek Anthology was on the third shelf of the bookcase to the left of the bracket clock. He carried the first and the fourth volumes to the window-ledge. Strato or Meleager? Unfortunately, he did not know the adder's sex; perhaps it would be better to choose one of the dedicatory epigrams. Since his intention was to please the adder by the sound of Greek, the sense of that sound was entirely unimportant; he was merely consulting his own approbation, a whim of honour. Strato or Meleager, Herodotus or the Greek Testament, it would be all the same to the adder. He had better begin with something short. There was a person in the first volume who waved a green branch and was dusky: the adder was losing the geometrical brilliance of its markings, one might call it dusky; its movements through the unweeded borders wagged green fronds. Not Heliodora, not Rhodanthe, not Zenophylla . . . . Didyme!

Didyme by the branch she waved at me has carried me clean away, alas! and looking on her beauty I melt like wax before the fire. And if she is dusky, what is that to me?[8]

His neglected memory, like the neglected garden, was not what it was; but he should be able to memorise this. He turned down the page and stretched out on the chaise-longue, feeling pleasantly relaxed. The air flowing in through the open window had relaxed too. It had begun to rain. Released by the moisture in the atmosphere, the smells of leather bindings, of Anna's geraniums, of the camphorwood chest he kept his winter jerseys in, crept out and were at home in the room. No wind stirred the branches; an acquiescent dusk corroborated the low-lying web of cloud. He would fall asleep to the sound of rain.

He woke to the sound of rain. It was the gentle, dutiful kind of summer rain in which one should hear the cuckoo. But the cuckoos had flown. The volumes of the Greek Anthology had been drawn from a dusty lair. He spent the day cleaning bookshelves and rehearsing Didyme of the branch. Though he could still read a Greek text, it was a long time since he had spoken Greek aloud – so long indeed that it was as though

he heard another man speaking. At intervals he thought of the adder, shining like water and eating slugs.

Next morning Jopling also shone like water, for he came wearing his oilskin cape.

He brought nothing of the least interest; and this was soothing and enlarging. By the end of the day all the bookshelves had been cleaned, some of the leather bindings polished, the first stages of a cassoulet accomplished, and two dedicatory epigrams learned by heart.

But when would they be spoken? It was not raining so steadily, but it was still raining. When he went out to pick runner beans he realised that even if the rain were over before morning it would take several days for the lawn to become dry enough for the adder to choose to bask on it, several days of intensifying sunlight before it would want to lie in the shade of the deckchair. And in his mind it was so, and no otherwise that the Greek recitation must take place. He wandered about the garden, soaked to the knees, drenched by sudden spillings of rain from overhead branches, looking for the adder and looking in vain. He had gone back to the house, dispirited, when it occurred to him he had not looked in the toolshed. He went out again. There was Ophis, rustling in a dark corner behind the peaguards. He made another journey to the house, stopping to pick up the saucer on the way – washed it, filled it, returned to the toolshed.

'To thee, gentle Ophis, wordless consoler, I dedicate this sky-blue saucer filled with white milk. And do thou tutor me in prudent acceptance of my lot.'

It might have sounded quite well in Greek, he thought, as he set down the blue saucer.

As a measure of prudence, he changed his feet when he got in, and put on another pair of trousers. For all that, he woke with a fever; and the familiar pain at the base of his left lung. It was all perfectly customary and he knew what to do about it, because Anna had done it for him so often. He had only to keep himself in bed with an extra pillow at his back, take aspirin, drink a great deal of hot weak tea with lemon in it, and before he slept, eat a sandwich of raw garlic, chopped small and masked with pepper. During the night he would sweat, in the morning he would stink, wish to get up, and be kept in bed for a further day of this regimen. Anna would have thrown in her ameliorations – a pretty tray, a remnant tumbler from their first housekeeping. Thank God she had never known the desolation which assaulted him as he stood in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil.

In the morning he felt no inclination whatsoever to get up, nor on the morning after. Jopling came and went. The front door had been left unlocked for him.

On the third morning he woke and saw the sun streaming in and knew it would be a fine day – and that something not the sun had wakened him. Jopling knocked again. After a pause, he rang the bell. A letter to be signed for, some weary parcel of cookery-books.… Let them wait! Jopling rang once more. He got out of bed with a groan, went downstairs barefoot, huddling on a dressing-gown. Light and heat streamed in through the open doorway and silhouetted against it stood Jopling with something dangling heavily from his hand.

'The adder, Mr Parnell. I found it in the lane, battered to death. Done early this morning, I should say. The ants were at it already. But I hadn't the heart to leave it there, poor dumb creature!'

Getting no answer, he repeated, 'The adder, Mr Parnell. Your adder,' as if he were offering something on a tray.

Matthew Parnell looked at the muddied body, which was certainly an adder's, and at the head which wilted sideways from Jopling's grasp. It was not that it was unrecognisable. *But he did not recognise it*. The dead snake had companioned him, felt no fear of him, watched him as he picked gooseberries, appeared to listen to his tentative avowal – *Sas agapo* – the first, the only Greek sentence he had spoken to it. All through the summer it had lived its life alongside him, given his days an interest, beguiled his thoughts, persuaded him to re-admit a possibility of finding pleasure, of hoping to please, of feeling gratitude – all this. And he so inattentive, so ungrateful, that he had never studied that proud and lovely head, had no mental image of it, could not recognise it.

Out of his true shame, he sucked a little false comfort. The dead adder which Jopling felt so positive about might not be Ophis, after all. It is in the nature of Joplings to be positive, to rush headlong to a tragic doxology. Ophis might still be about in the garden. For a long while he stiffened with hope at a ripple of wind through grass, stood listening to the rustle of a dead leaf, the angry chatter of a bird. The swallows gathered and departed, Didyme of the branch rusted in his memory. He sank into his old desultory melancholy as if into a hibernaculum.[9]

Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive,
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Notes

1 Thuya: 'a genus of coniferous trees' (*OED*).
2 François Vatel (1631–71), *maître d'hôtel* of Nicolas Fouquet, famed mainly for the manner of his suicide. He was responsible for organising a banquet for 2,000 people in honour of Louis XIV; when the seafood failed to arrive in time he killed himself.
3 Ophis: the Greek word for 'serpent' (ὄφῐς).
4 The typescript has 'his' crossed through and 'the' added by hand.
5 Sas agapo: Greek for 'I love you'.
6 Hamadryad: *OED* has as its primary definition: 'a wood-nymph fabled to live and die with the tree which she inhabited', but also lists a second meaning current in the nineteenth century: 'a large, very venomous, hooded serpent of India (*Naja hamadryas*, or *Hamadryas* (*Ophiophagus*) *elaps*), allied to the cobra'.
7 Parnell has been quoting from the Greek refrain to Byron's 'Song' ('Maid of Athens, Ere We Part'), 'Ζώη μοῦ, σάς ἀγαπῶ' ('Zoë mou, sas agapo'), 'My life, I love you!' George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J. J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 280–1.
8 Epigram 210, attributed to Asclepiades, in *The Greek Anthology, with an English Translation by W. R. Paton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), vol. 1, Book V, p. 233: https://www-loebclassics-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/LCL086/1918/volume.xml (accessed 17 August 2024).Warner omits the similitude that concludes the epigram: 'So are the coals, but when we light them, they shine as bright as roses.'
9 Hibernaculum: 'the winter quarters or place of retirement of a hibernating animal' (*OED*).

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