

## Triner's Bottom

I'm not going to underestimate you. If I say that I mistook my turning and found myself in a narrow downhill lane that became a tunnel, a hollow way overhung by trees, emerging at a sleepy hamlet that seemed marooned in time, you will know immediately that later I'm going to consult the Ordnance Survey map and find no such place or, at best, a ruined barn and the vestige of an unpassable track that might possibly be the spot. I'm going to return and find that I can't quite hit on the place again, that I just can't be sure which the mistaken turning was. While remembering that spring day so well, it will all seem somehow different on this later visit, the miles of field and lane and hedgerow so much more extensive, so much more the same that my recollection and orientation will be baffled.

All this you know: I take it for granted that you can anticipate such twists in the story. There's no need for me to be mysterious or laborious about it. Nor will you be surprised that the chatter of the locals stopped as I entered the quaint, low-beamed shop cum beerhouse (so it seemed), nor that several pairs of eyes followed me as if I were from another planet. As perhaps I was.

Behind the counter was a short, bright-eyed young lady who spoke in a mild version of the old country accent of those parts. She enquired if I'd lost my way and when I responded with a quizzical look (for one never likes to admit it) she explained that very few strangers were seen in Triner's Bottom. (Obviously, the name isn't on the map either.) I decided to lie. With strangers why should it matter? and why can't I be whoever I care to say I am, and have come there for whatever reason I care to say? So I said I was a special investigator with the General Registry Office come to look into certain census irregularities which, of course, I couldn't divulge. She looked at me with unastonished disbelief, and in a tone of voice as if humouring a ridiculous fantasy (which indeed she was) she suggested that I see her father about lodging in the spare room they had, as a gent like me would surely not kip under the hayloft (or some such phrase) and it was certain that such important business would keep me there overnight – she paused, and adopted a mock ominous tone – if not for three nights.

You see how quickly a simple untruth gets one embroiled in unanticipated complexities. I'd brought none of the necessities for an overnight stay, and yet I could think of nothing to say but to assent to the arrangement. I was taken through the back room – a large kitchen – to a back yard where the father was milking a cow. She did the talking, and after a cursory sideways glance at my trousers he informed her it would be a groat a night and she had better not let her granny catch her with me. She showed me a sparse little room immediately above the shop, informing me that the bed was the bed and that *her* room was the

one next door. She offered to fetch my things from my 'motor car', enunciating the latter words as if she'd never had cause to say them before. I confessed that I hadn't had the foresight to come prepared and she assured me that that would be all right, and if I had nothing to sleep in she would come and keep me warm. Her name was Peggy.

That evening as we walked by the river – a small but dignified stream really, with a regular traffic of twigs and leaves being carried down it – I told her all kinds of harmless lies about who I wasn't and what my life hadn't been like, and she slipped her hand into mine and seemed to suggest that her simple and eventless existence thus far had been spent awaiting my advent, though the eventlessness she elaborated upon was a warm and happy eventlessness, full of cousins and country dances and haymaking and fetching wood for the fire.

My hand was softer than hers, I noticed, but her cheek was softer than mine. Our lips matched exactly, and at exactly the same moment. She lay back on the grass and said that she could die now, I could kill her if I wanted to. Since my entire identity and purpose was a lie, and it seemed likely that on returning to the real world, so to speak, I would find that Triner's Bottom and its populace did not exist, then killing her *was* perhaps something that might be done without consequences. On the other hand, I had certainly neither evaded nor resisted the effect of her friendliness, and other charms, so for the moment I felt I liked her alive too much to avail myself of her kind offer, which is how I expressed it. And anyway, I remembered my lack of nightclothes and the consequent prospect of greater pleasure than killing.

She was not really disappointed that I desisted from killing her, and we sauntered back with arms linked and occasional pauses to kiss or to contemplate the reddish sunset reflecting in the stream. The beerhouse was lively as we returned, and on seeing what I supposed was their popular barmaid, a call went up for her to sing, which, judging from her reaction and the unanimous clamour for it, was something she did regularly and was not averse to doing. The whole house fell into a most respectful hush, and she sang a version of the pretty babes in the wood, the company joining in softly and reverently at the refrain. Indeed I found I was joining in myself: oh don't ye remember those babes in the wood. Her singing combined sweetness and earthiness in a perfect but I suppose quite natural way. It's a moving old song, and there was a moment's silence all across the universe after she finished – before the whole house roared with unbridled acclaim and gratitude. Only then and only for a second did she look in the least shy or abashed. I felt proud, and everyone ignored me as if I were a native.

It *was* rather chilly in my bed, but she *did* come and keep me warm. And sleep with me. Her body felt very warm, and plump and soft, and the bed rocked slightly but cradled us perfectly. We dreamed of being honest and having no secrets from each other, and staying together in the non-existent sleepy hamlet for ever and ever.

The morning was sunk in a soft white mist, and our own entangled wakefulness roused us more than the slight birdsong or the dim stirrings elsewhere in the house, or in neighbouring houses. I was astonished by my partner's beauty and smallness – in the sightless night she had been so large as to entirely envelope me in warmth and touch and love. In this hamlet in this hollow it is ever thus, I was told, the mist gathering in the night and taking all morning to disperse, and that is why no one stirs too early and breakfast is taken late and long, and if the talk across the table is good – or if eyes meet and fingers play with fingers and talk is uncalled-for – it not infrequently merges into lunch, and lunch into time for an afternoon stroll.

This time we walked a different way, through fields to a knoll of heath, a sort of spur of the steep and wooded valley sides that made this place so secluded. The side of the knoll was speckled with little purple flowers, I think it was speedwell. She lay on the flowery bank and said again that I could kill her now, if I liked. I didn't like, not then. We hadn't been talking much, I think I'd run out of lies. It didn't seem to matter. What mattered was the fresh-smelling grass and the flowers, the dashes of buttercup yellow here and there across the flat field we looked over, the flutterings and chirpings that came down from the sloping wood behind us. What mattered was the tender thrill of her kiss, the uncomplicatedness of her being there, her little bare toes tickling the grass.

I said casually, as if it had just flitted into my mind, you know everything I've told you about myself is lies. I don't care, she said, as if she didn't care. Then after a while she said, I haven't told you anything. On reflection she was more or less right: the place was Triner's Bottom, her name was Peggy, this bed was my bed. Our bed. Perhaps she'd told me all that mattered. The old lady who'd made breakfast and looked at us disapprovingly I'd *assumed* was her granny, she hadn't introduced us; the young man talking to her father while we sat gazing into one another's eyes after breakfast I'd assumed was a brother. I reflected on how little and how much I knew of her. I don't care, I echoed belatedly, and she laughed.

I think after some kissing I must have dozed on the sunny bank, for her shaking me and saying we must hurry back, for it was her evening to tend the bar, was the nearest to any kind of rush or time-discipline resembling normal life that I remember encountering there. I suppose she took her time from the sun, she certainly wore no watch. I began to apologise for detaining her, but she stopped me with something about how it was herself distracted with all the tying of flowers in my hair, and she ran ahead laughing. Purple veronica, yellow ranunculus, twisted among my hair.

The song she sang that evening – when the call went up, as evidently it did every evening, at some spontaneous yet inevitable moment of common inspiration – was that archaic folk song the streams of lovely Nancy, which I know only slightly, and which is one of those poetic things that seems incomprehensible while yet resonant of some profound lost meaning. Her singing held us spellbound. There is no question that after she stopped, time and the world and the whole falling spreading universe were transfixed and motionless for – well, if time has stopped you can't say for how long can you? – and then woke back into motion with a lump in everyone's throat and a crescendo of applause and cheering. An old man stood to applaud and kept saying over and over, that's our pretty Peggy, bless her.

The second night was like the first night. Even the dream was similar, though the grassy bank where truth or lies don't matter, where killing and kissing are equal, entered into it. We woke in our lovely entanglement slowly and quietly, and tenderly separated ourselves, and then watched each other rinse our bodies in cold water and dress them, a strange sense of the preciousness of what each tended for the other coming over us almost like a sorrow; and before going down to breakfast we came again into each other's arms inexplicably tearful, and held tightly for a long time.

On this day we took the track through the old farm, which first forded the stream – did I mention that she always went barefoot? she splashed happily through it while I tottered along the footbridge – and thence through the inactive farmyard. And so hand in hand to a beech copse half a mile beyond, where we sat under the tall trees looking out over our enchanted valley. And when she reminded me that I could kill her, if I were so inclined, I pushed her over and told her that what I was inclined to do with her was more along the lines of creating life than extinguishing it.

The song she sang that evening was all bells in paradise I heard them ring, an old carol surviving in only a few pure folksong repertoires, I was surprised she knew it. All paradise and all creation was stilled by her singing, and a moment of holiness followed that must have broken the heart of God.

And the third night was like the first night, enfolded in warmth and rapture. Awaking before her I lay in a tangle of limbs and warm skin and thought of returning to that hectic planet from which I'd tumbled a couple of days, or were they eons, ago. Moving an awkward limb wakened her, her eyes opened and made my decision for me. We disentangled lovingly as the mist began to rise; and as we were dressing I said I dreamt I stayed and we had babies and she threw her arms around me saying, so did I.

Over breakfast she became businesslike. So, these irregularities in the census, she said. I began to disclaim the lies and she reached across and placed her finger on my lips, frowning firmly; so we played the game. She went through the whole population of Triner's Bottom – which was not of course very many – and I made notes. I have them still. There were seven houses, one of them uninhabited, and nineteen inhabitants, mostly cousins in one degree or other; my list has little intrinsic value, except to illustrate how precisely she dictated their names and occupations and approximate ages. I had seen no children, but apparently there was one, her own nephew, a toddler belonging to an older brother and his wife, who lived at the other end of the beerhouse. It was, however, a predominantly elderly community, an impression I'd already formed from the section of it that spent its evenings in her taproom.

It was also, in this sense, a dying community, I remarked. Aware of my conviction that I'd strayed into a neverland that didn't – or once I'd left it wouldn't – really exist, she said that it must be so, and *that* not only because of mortality but because of the determination of younger folk to move away: her brother – her married brother – was looking for a chance to go to Australia, she said. So far as I can remember it was the first and only mention or recognition of any bit of the outside world of planet Earth that came from her lips, lips to which 'motor car' and 'telephone' (you'll have guessed there was none) were like foreign words. Do *you* want to move away? I asked, wondering if I'd mis-read her. Oh no, she replied without hesitation; I shall die here.

The dilapidated old farm across the ford was inhabited by 'Old Triner', and had been home of Triners beyond memory, she assured me. We were out on our walk now, and continuing our survey of the village. The stream and its ford must have formed the original focus for a settlement – it looked to me as if the huge barn might have been the original farmhouse; and perhaps the beerhouse, formerly a somewhat grander inn, was the next oldest. The other cottages, none more than yards distant, probably represented outgrowths over the centuries of the families inhabiting those two houses. We trespassed round the final cottage, the empty one, which stood by the stream, and she remarked that it had been a smithy. A forge, I shouldn't wonder, as its ramshackle outbuildings deliberately abutted and slightly diverted the stream, so I pictured a waterdriven hammer enlivening and slightly industrialising the scene in the hamlet's heyday, a century before or whenever.

She moved easily from the present inhabitants to their ancestors, and the history of the place, as if knowing the forefathers of the hamlet was second-nature to her. I was surprised by this newfound common ground, for I hadn't pictured her sharing my interest in history. But like the folk music, her interest and knowledge were of a different nature

from mine: she spoke of these things as if they were elements of her personal being and life, like her own reminiscences.

Come to think of it, they took the place of her own reminiscences, not a single one of which do I recollect hearing. When she'd spoken of her life – her brothers and feeding the hens and her granny's ineffectual strictness and keeping the fire supplied with wood – they were all descriptions of the routines of her present life, not anecdotes of things that had happened to her before. She had never been a child, and her brothers had never been young scallywags getting themselves or her into trouble, and her granny had never not been there disapproving of her free association with a stranger who'd come among them. No mother was ever mentioned. Since it was a game and nothing was necessarily true perhaps I should have asked and she could have invented something. In fact I had the impression that everything she said was true. Strange, because whenever I began to say something honest or confessional myself she would stop my lips, if not with a frown then with a finger. Whether I was about to say Listen, I want to be honest, my real name— or, The truth is I came here by acc—.

We actually had to clamber over some ruins to continue upstream beyond the forge. I'd guess there'd been a larger enterprise there at some time, perhaps a corn mill. She only knew that her ancestors included many generations of blacksmiths at the smithy. Upstream both stream and path were narrower and more overgrown than our first walk in the downstream direction, where the locals refer to it as the river. It also took us noticeably uphill. This walk was an adventure, we should have brought a scythe.

Eventually the path – if it ever was meant to be a path – petered out altogether at what must have been the head of the valley, the tiny beginnings of the stream bouncing towards us down a steeper slope through dark and pathless woodland. We clambered over some overgrown rocks to one side of this dead end, hoping to reach a point where the undergrowth would part and a view across our beautiful kingdom would open out, where we would find somewhere to lie down and gaze at it, as was our custom. Ferns and damp moss disguised rocks and hollows, and my adventuresome girlfriend who was leading the safari suddenly disappeared with a brief scream and the rustling sounds of disturbed vegetation.

A small quarry was bitten into the hillside, so old and its surfaces so crumbly that a very effective and at this season richly coloured disguise of greenery camouflaged it. It wasn't deep, but its side was uneven and unpredictable, and she hadn't fallen smoothly but bounced and rolled ignominiously over various uncomfortable protrusions. She lay face down and I quickly made my way to her, relieved to notice slight movements. I asked her the obvious ridiculous question, but instead of saying she was or wasn't all right she said: Kill me now. I laughed at first but her face looked agonised and she said it again. I

was about to roll her over, but then thought it best to take inventory. She could feel and move all her limbs, and move her head and neck, though a shoulder gave some pain. So I turned her over. She moaned. You're all right, you're little and bouncy, I said stupidly.

Certainly she'd bounced and rolled sufficiently to display variegated signs of heavy contact – green stains, a few tears in her dress, grazing and a little blood through a couple of the tears, and on her legs and arms, a smudge on one cheek. I was sure the wounds were all surface grazes, and nothing appeared to be broken. I made her head comfortable by packing grass and ferns under it, and I stroked her hair saying I must go and get help. She firmly forbade me. Just kill me, she said. Time out, I said. She asked what that meant; I said the game's suspended, and mentioned how it applied if someone sustains injury in a boxing match. Bad analogy I suppose; she said, then they continue.

I stroked grit off her arm, and licked my handkerchief and dabbed some of the grazes. I repeated that I must fetch help, if only someone to help carry her back. Undress me, she said, and then kill me. No one will find me here, not for ages, and you can cut back across those fields – I turned in the direction her eyes were looking, in sudden surprise that we had in fact found what we were seeking as we climbed away from the stream, a grassy place where we could lie down and enjoy a view of the valley – straight to your motor car and go back into your world, no one out there knowing we're here, no one here knowing who you are or where you came from.

Stop this nonsense I said, and lay beside her, putting my arm under her neck and resting my forehead near her ear. Killing me would be a *real*, unique experience you can treasure all your life. I want to treasure *you* all my life I said, and I meant it, though it almost began to sound selfish. And of course I'd dreamed about it too. I hadn't thought that she wanted anything different, her morbid strain of joking apart. Having wondered whether I ought to wrench her away from her shangri-la and take her into 'my' world, or whether I should myself stay forever in Triner's Bottom, I'd easily decided upon the latter; I wasn't expecting to feel tempted back given the compensations I'd found, here, in her. I said something along these lines.

She said nothing, but shortly she raised herself up and began to take off her clothes. Her shoulder hurt too much to reach the buttons at the back of her dress; I hesitated to help and she impatiently tore it and the petticoat below it, till it was down below her waist. She drew her knees up and leaned forward, but ached too much (or felt some other pain, I now suppose) to continue. Help me would you, she said. I gave her a disapproving look but did what she wanted, which was to kneel at her feet and pull dress and everything else over her bottom and knees and off. She took the mishmash of clothing from me and separated parts of it which she rolled into a bundle, sending me back to the stream to

soak it and then bathe her with it. Maybe what she was doing made good sense after all.

She had turned over when I got back, and I sponged the whole back of her body, cleaning a large gritty graze on her bottom, and as I rejigged the wet bundle she turned back, and lay flat with her arms and legs somewhat apart as I sponged the whole of her front. I threw the bundled rag aside but continued to caress her with my hand, and with my lips. Her flesh was dazzlingly white. She was beginning to seem large again, soft and cool and endless; I closed my eyes as my hand and mouth travelled the beautiful contours of her skin, and paused to kiss and moisten the several wounds and landmarks. At one point there was a sudden fierce spasm which I thought was pain, but her hands reassured me that it was pleasure.

Time passed. It began to get cold. Clouds had covered the sun, which was now approaching evening. Her body had become much cooler. I may have dozed, my head on one of her breasts and my hand on the other. This hand, this breast, felt somehow strange, something was missing that had been part of their union. A stillness had fallen. She was not breathing; her heart was not beating. It was not, I listened carefully. I raised myself slightly. She was white and completely still. Her face was serene, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open; no breath came from it, it was dry. I had refused to kill her, but she had died anyway.

I think I held her tightly and sobbed. I rocked her to and fro. I touched lately-beloved parts of her with disbelief, and I think I more than sobbed, I wept aloud for quite a while, kneeling beside her. I was furious with guilt for not fetching help – presumably she'd sustained an internal injury that I hadn't suspected. I was sobbing with my head pressed tightly into her bosom when it began to rain. I realised it was dark now, it was night. It rained heavily.

I did as she had suggested. I headed, rather stumblingly, across the several fields that lay between the quarry and where I'd left my car three days before, on a gravel verge just as the lane bends into the hamlet. My keys were in my pocket. I drove away.

o()o

The place I ended up in when I came searching, months later, was a large village which I reckoned, as far as I could orient myself, must be the nearest proper village to Triner's Bottom, though it was several miles from where I thought I'd taken the wrong turn. I walked around the churchyard, drawn to looking at graves, especially recent ones, but saw nothing familiar (what I was expecting I can't say). At the other end of the village, however, was a small, churchless cemetery, a Quaker burial ground, nestling unobtrusively behind some houses so that I nearly missed it. Several of the old gravestones bore the name of



Triner. One of them, a low, elegantly simple little stone, is locally famous for commemorating a murder. Margaret Triner, it says, 'murdered in the old quarry near Triners End in this Parish'. The date is April 15th, 1823. An unknown man is said to visit it occasionally, with a little bunch of wild flowers. Buttercups and speedwell.

o()o

© Tony Simcock 2006 onwards

2006/4