

Julian Thomas



Namesake and Other Stories

Published in 2011 by YouWriteOn.com

Copyright © Julian Thomas

First Edition

The author asserts the moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Typeset in Adobe Garamond



Also by Julian Thomas:

Zita

The Delicate Magic of Life

Walk With Me, Always

www.shortsnoter.com

Contents

Namesake	1
Aldo's Cot	46
A Goddess for the Day	56
The Telescope	65
Josephine	73
A Monarch's Wit	79
Gloriana	82
Fräulein L...	103
Almost Normal	121
The Stone Jar That Once Contained Honey	127
Bibi's Bicycle	134

The faculty for myth is innate in the human race. It seizes with avidity upon any accidents, surprising or mysterious, in the career of those who have at all distinguished themselves from their fellows, and invents a legend to which it then attaches a fanatical belief. It is the protest of romance against the commonplace of life.

*(W. S. Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence*)*

Namesake

I

The going out ... and the coming back
(An authentic story popularly regarded as false)

The vale is flat-bottomed and as such is hardly noticeable. To the community that lives there it is the most beautiful place in all the world. Flat it may seem, and wide it certainly is, but home-grown eyes can detect the gentle slopes to peripheral bulwarks that serve as boundaries between those within and those without. It is affectionately known as Cwm dagrau Mair, or Cowslip Valley.

The road to the north, and to prospects of greater beauty, runs through the centre of the vale from which tracks lead off like broken, random ribs. The whitewashed farmsteads that cling to the tracks were placed purposefully long ago. Some were built quite close to the road and others a good distant from it—devirginated dwellings dotted stonewhite between and around which lie their supporting fields for grazing sheep. Many of the fields are bordered with dry stone walls some of which are banked over with soil and where grow, wild and undisturbed, self-seeded flora—cowslips and primroses in the spring, harebells in the autumn.

The yellows and the blues.

Some of the families have roots extending back to when the road was used by drovers for the movement of livestock from upland farms further north. Then, over a century ago, cattle, sheep, pigs and geese ambled, tottered, plodded and waddled down the vale towards the slaughterhouses of England.

*

Now it is September and a traveller is driving up the road.

Midway there is a graceless cluster of buildings, grey and slated and sullen. They occupy both sides and have spread into the fields beyond to wither in the surrounding charm. Among the cluster there is a church and cemetery, a shop, an inn, a tiny school, a place for bed and breakfast, a garage ... There is a bridge under which water trickles, and a red telephone box stands blatantly like a foreign sentinel. To the traveller there appears no life in the cluster, though he needs life. He needs petrol and pulls into the garage forecourt.

He has a small boy strapped safely in the back seat of his car. The boy is not his.

The harebells are in bloom. He waits for service.

The petrol pump is old-fashioned. Petrol is pumped, manually, from an underground tank to a container housed in the head of the pump from where it is transferred by nozzle to the car. The container is made of glass and the traveller is fascinated by this antiquity and watches as the level of the petrol rises as each gallon is raised. He would have explained to the boy what was happening, but the journey has fatigued the child whose chin rests on his

chest and whose eyes are shut.

*

Charlie Jarvis, the proprietor of the garage, is closer to a bush mechanic than a skilled worker and is less technically advanced than he ought to be for one whose whole working life has been spent tinkering with the idiosyncrasies of the internal combustion engine. He carries an oily rag with which he wipes his hands from habit, his blue overalls are grease encrusted, and his hat, similar to those once worn on footplates by drivers of locomotives, is also covered in grease. To strangers he is a man of few words, none at all if he can get away with it. He is standing, patiently, by the traveller's car waiting to be paid for the petrol.

Behind him, and to the right, the door into his workshop is open. Within a radio broadcasts a different language and a car without pedigree stands with its bonnet up: an electric bulb dangles over the exposed engine from a hook on a beam. Nothing about the workshop would encourage thoughts of efficiency and assurance. Tools, and parts of cars long separated from their hosts, lie scattered across the floor. Piled in the corners are busted exhaust pipes and worn out tyres, and an old oil drum used for rubbish is so full that there is as much litter on the floor about its base as there is in it. Behind him, and to his left, are railings that bound the garage forecourt to a small piece of derelict land. Between the workshop and the railings is a house whose windows and door are so grimed with dirt that an observer might presume it to be unoccupied. It is the proprietor's home.

*

The traveller is searching for his wallet in the pockets of his jacket that is on the front seat and then, to his relief, finds it on the floor where it must have slipped. The wallet does not feel comfortable; he brushes a finger over its leather and examines it absent-mindedly. It's too flimsy, too light. Nevertheless, he opens it confidently believing it to be flush with notes, but it is not—it is empty.

'Christ. She's emptied my bloody wallet!' he explodes.

Charlie Jarvis, who has been peering down into the car, can see that this is so—that the wallet of his customer is indeed empty, and he adjusts the cap on his head and wipes his hands on the rag.

'Are you saying you have no money for the petrol?' he asks.

'I'm telling you my wife has emptied my bloody wallet ... so yes, I don't have money for the petrol,' the traveller replies irritably.

'Sometimes I do take a cheque, but only from people I know,' says Charlie Jarvis.

The traveller begins to look incisively for any spare cash. He goes though the pockets of his jacket again, and through all the pockets of his trousers. He fumbles beneath the front seats of the car and empties the glove compartment into the well. The garage proprietor watches without comment through the window, and believing the traveller to be worried about the money for the petrol he leans forward and suggests again that he does, sometimes, take a cheque. The traveller appears not to hear and continues to search, and although he believes neither in miracles nor the urgency of honouring a debt, turns around and gives the boy's leg a tug.

The boy wakes, looks wide-eyed, blinks, wipes his eyes with the back of his hand, remembers he is strapped into a car.

‘Are we there?’ he asks.

Ignoring this the traveller asks:

‘Tommy, did your Mam give you any money ... like for an ice-cream or something?’

‘No.’

‘No! For Christ’s sake, Tommy, she always gives you a few bob for a day’s outing.’

The traveller stretches back and feels in the boy’s pockets.

‘That’s women for you!’ he exclaims to Charlie Jarvis.

‘I’ll take a cheque ... then,’ offers Charlie Jarvis uncertainly.

‘I don’t have a cheque.’

Charlie Jarvis straightens up, adjusts his hat, wipes his hands on his rag.

‘Then how are you going to pay?’ he asks.

‘Is there a bank here?’

‘No.’

‘Well, where’s the nearest?’

‘At Tregynidr ... you came through it five miles back.’

‘Well, I’ll go there and get some money.’

‘I’ll need you to leave something ... a deposit, like.’

‘A deposit. Don’t worry ... I’ll be back.’

‘I would prefer a deposit, if you don’t mind. The spare tyre will do.’

‘Distrustful lot of buggers, you are,’ says the traveller with half-a-smile being content to leave something that will not inconvenience him. He gets out, goes to the back of the

car and opens the boot. The spare tyre is there. It is bald, illegal and of no value. Charlie Jarvis runs his hand over it.

‘I can’t take that! There’s no money in that. I’d have to pay to have it taken away.’

‘Then I’ll have to leave the boy,’ offers the traveller, jokingly.

*

Because Charlie Jarvis believes this offer to be more serious than it is, and that he believes the traveller would certainly return for the boy, he says:

‘Well, I suppose that will have to do then, under the circumstances. Mind you, I can’t be minding him, I’ve work to be getting on with.’

At first the traveller thinks Charlie Jarvis is entering good-naturedly into the joke, but when he begins to perceive that this is not so and that Charlie Jarvis is prepared to take the boy as a deposit he becomes disinclined to cast about for any reason for not leaving him. He unclips the boy’s seat belt and helps him from the car. The boy stands awkwardly because he has been sitting for quite a long time. He moves from one foot to the other. The top of his head does not reach the roof of the car. He is wearing a blue anorak, jeans and trainers. His short hair is fair and curly and unbrushed, and though his appearance is generally shabby-looking, that is his clothes are well-worn and have the hallmark of being passed-down both he and the clothes appear clean. Nevertheless, there is something about him that suggests the clothes are not his because they seem, in every respect, to be one or two sizes too big. The shoulders

of the anorak droop over the tops of his arms and only the fingers of his hands can be seen below the cuffs. His jeans have been rolled up at the legs and, though not visible, there is severe tucking with a belt around the waist. Whether it is drowsiness or uncertainty that gives the impression he is not at ease is hard to say, notwithstanding he appears to be a boy wishing he were some place else. And this appearance has not yet been subjected to being told he is to be left behind at the garage while the traveller goes in search of a convenient bank.

Tommy is one of a large family who live on the same estate as the traveller. Where Tommy comes in the order of birth within his family is not known save he is neither the oldest—who is in college, nor the youngest—who is in a perambulator. What is known, however, is that his family is large enough to require two council houses and that his mother has failed, as yet, to produce a daughter. It is the traveller's kindness that once in a while he relieves Tommy's mother of one of her little burdens for a day.

The traveller has no children, though he would much like some. His wife, too, would like some—or so he supposes, yet he thinks her heart is not in it, though there have been indications that this thought is misplaced. This day, for example, as he left the house his wife had called after him: You'd be better staying at home trying to make a baby of your own than going off borrowing other peoples'. Then she had slammed the door, and begun to count the money she had taken from his wallet.

*

Charlie Jarvis and the traveller discuss where the boy should wait. The proprietor says that he cannot remain in the workshop as it is against one of those daft laws they pass in England. The traveller says he cannot be left to roam free so near the road and though there's no daft law against that, it is a damned-sight more dangerous than being left in the workshop. They agree to compromise. The boy will be tied to the railings outside. The proprietor and the traveller go into the workshop and find an old tow rope. The rope is oily and muddy and smells as if it was last used in a farmyard. They come out, the traveller dangling the rope like a posse's leader, and approach the boy. Their anxiety jumps to him like a flea so that by the time they are close he is already cowering into his oversized anorak so that only his little white face can be seen. The traveller and Charlie Jarvis lead him to the railings.

The traveller says to the boy:

'Now don't you worry yourself, Tommy. I'm off to the bank to get some money and will be back before you know it. I'm tying you to the railings so you don't get run over. The garage man here will keep an eye on you. You just call out to him if there is anything you want.' Tommy had it in mind to cry, but crying never did much good at home. He allows the traveller and Charlie Jarvis to secure him to the railings.

'Could you find a box or something the boy can sit on?' the traveller asks.

Charlie Jarvis goes back into the workshop and comes out with a stool.

'How's that for comfort?' encourages the traveller.

NAMESAKE

The boy sits on it, but says nothing.

He is there, exposed, all blue anorak and white face like a little gnome.

*

The traveller drives off towards Tregynidr. The boy watches Charlie Jarvis disappear inside his workshop and listens to the fading sound of the motor's engine. The radio broadcast is audible to the boy, and over the different language he hears intermittent mechanical tapping and the sounds of metal on metal. Otherwise no life exists on the forecourt save once in a while Charlie Jarvis emerges to dispense petrol. Time passes. How much time? Empty time. Vehicles, scattered by indifference, motor by. Time has made their interruption inconsequential and the boy ceases to look at them. Eventually, however, anxiety concentrates his attention on the vehicles that approach from the south, and as each come into view he hopefully expects to see the return of the traveller. Then, becoming tired of disappointment he stands up and within the restrictions of his tether he fumbles beneath his anorak in order to piddle between the railings. He sits down again on the stool and listens, watches and waits ...

*

It has been a long and protracted business at the bank. The traveller has had to persuade the manager that he is who he says he is in order to be allowed to draw money, so it is with a feeling of success, and optimism, that he journeys back along the road from Tregynidr to the garage. It has to be said that when his business at the bank had been completed

he did not at once begin the return journey. First he searched for a baker to buy pastries, and then for an off-licence to buy a can of lager and a can of lemonade as it was his intention, having collected the boy, to drive only a little further before stopping for a picnic.

*

The first thing the traveller notices as the garage comes into view is the smudge of yellow by the railings where he had attached the boy. He thinks the boy must have changed his blue anorak, and realising this to be impossible thinks the boy must have taken off the anorak and is displaying a yellow shirt. As he gets closer he sees that not only has the anorak changed colour but so has the boy's face, and hair. Instead of a white face and short, fair, curly hair the face is dark and the hair long and black. For a second he believes his eyes are deceiving him, but when he pulls up on the forecourt he knows they are not. He lowers the window. Different language pulses from the radio in the workshop, and Charlie Jarvis continues to produce the sort of sounds a mechanic's spanner makes when tussling with an obstinate piece of metal. The aura of normality strikes the traveller as a contradiction to what he is experiencing. Tommy, a small white boy wearing a blue anorak has been replaced by a small dark girl wearing a yellow anorak. The traveller thinks Charlie Jarvis is playing a trick, though Charlie Jarvis seems unlike any of the pranksters the traveller has known. The traveller gets out of his car and examines the small girl. He bends down and stares into her brown eyes. He looks at the stool and the tow rope: they are the same.

The girl stares at him. She neither smiles nor is agitated and behaves as if nothing untoward has happened, that she is where she is meant to be. She is without expression.

‘Where’s Tommy?’ demands the traveller.

She blinks, and does not reply.

‘This is just the sort of sick joke I can do without,’ he shouts as he storms off to the workshop.

Charlie Jarvis has his head in the engine

‘Hey,’ yells the traveller above the noise of the radio, and gives Charlie Jarvis a sharp kick on the ankle.

Charlie Jarvis looks up, surprised.

‘So you’re back,’ he says.

He stretches up, slowly, and is at once overwhelmed when the traveller gets him by the throat and demands:

‘Where’s the boy?’

‘Where you left him ... last time I saw him,’ splutters Charlie Jarvis.

The two men stand before the small girl. For seconds they stare at each other, disbelief making them speechless. Neither are able to get a word out of the girl, and although Charlie Jarvis tries in his native tongue and the traveller in the more robust, threatening English there is no response, or recognition, to either language. The traveller seeing, for a moment, the funnier side, says:

‘Tommy’s mother will be pleased ... she always wanted a girl.’

*

The girl does not speak during the return journey. In one way this makes it easier for the traveller because there is only

his input to the problem. The girl, though silent, is watching, taking in the sights that pass her window. Observant, is how the traveller would describe her. Seemingly nameless and rootless, and seemingly neither fearful nor ill at ease to the traveller she is a most extraordinary kid. He pulls into a roadside picnic site to have the pastries and the drinks he bought in Tregynidr for Tommy and himself. He leads the girl to a table and spreads out the meagre fare. He points to the public lavatories. The girl understands and wanders off. The traveller watches her go, does not take his eyes off her until she disappears through the entrance: then he wonders what he should do if she does not come out, and would not be surprised if Tommy emerges in her place. The girl comes back and sits down, opposite him. There is a trace of a smile across her face which the traveller believes is a thank you for his thoughtfulness for her needs.

They eat the pastries and drink their drinks.

The traveller ponders:

‘Whatever am I going to say to Tommy’s mother?’

‘Of course, she will want to go straight to the police.’

‘I should have gone in Tregynidr, or rung them up from the telephone box. Funny how Charlie Jarvis remembered the Asian family when I threatened him. Served them petrol, he had said, they had money to pay, he had added pointedly as though that was the important thing, but had not seen them drive off.’

‘Boys are what Asians want, surely. Girls a bit expensive to get rid of, so he’d heard. Cheap enough the way they did it.’

‘Would I mind if I lost a son and gained a daughter?’

Perhaps not, if the mistake was genuine.'

'Pity she's not white ... then Tommy's mother might not be so cross.'

He looks at the girl, her big eyes set in a coloured, expressionless face.

*

When the traveller arrives back at Tommy's house he parks the car leaving the girl strapped in the back seat. He indicates that he will not be long, and goes around the car checking that all the doors are locked. The eyes of the girl never leave him. He walks up the path to the front door looking over his shoulder to see that she is not trying to undo the seat belt. To lose one child in a day is bad enough, but to lose two. He knocks on the front door. There is a rushing of children's feet on the other side and the door is flung open.

And there is Tommy's mother with her brood; well, almost all her brood.

'Did you have a nice time?' she asks. The children are all around her legs and stare up at him.

The traveller wishes they were not there, and is reminded that they hunt in a pack, as one unit, higgledy-piggledy like a mythological monster with many heads.

He pauses. Tommy's mother is looking for Tommy.

'I suppose the boy's asleep in the car. Usually is after a long journey,' she says peering through the open door to see if she can see the car. 'Not to worry the boys will carry him in.'

The tribe are quick on the uptake, and nimble. They try

to squeeze past the traveller.

'Just one thing ... I want to talk to your mother,' he says holding them back and shutting the front door. He knows that as soon as his back is turned they will dash off to the car.

Tommy's mother shows him into a room that he finds unexpectedly tidy.

'Hasn't Tommy behaved himself? Usually he is such a good boy,' she says. The traveller knows it will be only seconds before the signal whoops and cries of the children indicate they have discovered that their brother, Tommy, is missing. In fact, the traveller has hardly had time to say a word before they are back in house shrieking excitedly. They burst into the room and all the little heads jabber the same thing:

'Tommy's not in the car ... it's a little girl!'

*

When disbelief has sunk in, and before Tommy mother's can rush to the car to dispel the possibility that it is just a prank, the traveller says:

'Go and fetch her then.'

He throws the key of the car into the ferment of wriggling boys. None catch it and it falls to the floor. They dive down, snatching, grabbing and squabbling as if the key is a crust tossed to hungry animals. Then out they rush again yelling with delight, and whooping. For the moment they forget Tommy, his absence becoming less of a brake than the retrieval of the girl.

'So where is Tommy?' demands Tommy's mother as the

boys skid-addle from the room. She squares up to the traveller like an angry tavern brawler anxious for a fight.

‘I don’t know ... there has been a mix-up.’

‘A mix-up? Christ, you get mix-ups in maternity wards when all the little sods look the same, but Jesus Christ you always got one back of the same sex. So what you do ... a straight swap?’

‘It wasn’t like that ... not at all like that. I had to leave him at the garage when I went to get some money to pay for the petrol. When I came back he was gone, and the girl was there in his stead.’

‘You stupid, bloody idiot,’ bellows Tommy’s mother, and she swings a fist at his chest that off-balances him and sends him sprawling backwards onto the floor. The traveller is lying there, on his back, when the children burst in with the little girl.

Tommy’s mother takes one look at the girl and sinks into an armchair.

‘She’s bloody-well black!’ she exclaims.

The traveller raises himself.

‘Shall we go to the police?’ he ask without conviction.

‘I should bloody-well say so!’ barks Tommy’s mother. ‘And what’s her name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know, for Christ sake. Haven’t you even bothered to ask? And where does she come from?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Jesus!’

Tommy’s mother is shaking her head in disbelief.

‘Here, give her to me? Poor little thing.’

She takes the girl on her knee.

'Now, tell me your name, darling?' she asks. The girl looks at her in the same way as she has looked at the traveller. Wide-eyed, expressionless.

'So where do you come from then?' persists Tommy's mother.

The girl looks from her towards the traveller.

'She's been like that the whole journey ... haven't had a word out of her,' puts in the traveller. And gathering the fragments of a difficult day he suggests, untruthfully, that that was the reason he had not already gone to the police: that he had been waiting to find out the girl's name, or from where she came.

'She's dumb,' puts in one of the boys.

'Deaf and dumb,' adds another.

This suggestion did not at first sink in.

Then ...

'Why, of course!' exclaims Tommy's mother. 'That's it. Are you deaf?' Tommy's mother articulates into the girl's ear.

There is no response from the girl.

'She needs the doctor, not the police,' puts in the traveller. The police have never been a comfort to him, the giving of solace not being within their gift, in his opinion. So far he has escaped prison: a petty criminal being a suitable label for him. Light fingered—yes, dishonest with the dole—yes, but a man not known for much worse. Still, police stations are not places he would naturally go as he imagines he would not receive any benefit of the doubt.

The girl is eyeing the boys from the safety of Tommy's

mother's lap.

The boys are one minute silent and the next excited. They crowd around the girl, want to touch her, particularly the younger ones. She remains passive, like a doll, perched, little white socks on brown legs and tiny leather shoes. One breaks from the rest, rushes from the room and returns with a tin whistle. He wants a sound from her, any sound to make sure she is real, that she has something more than difference to offer. The girl knows what to do. She takes the whistle and blows into it. The boys are delighted; she sees that and blows again. She passes back the whistle, but the boy indicates she can keep it. She puts it coyly into the pocket of her yellow anorak.

'We must go to the police,' says Tommy's mother.

'If we do she will be taken into care,' puts in the eldest boy.

'So?'

'So you never let any of us be taken into care.'

'Don't be daft. We're family.'

'Couldn't she be, for the while ... until Tommy returns?'

The heads of the hydra nod amongst themselves, and the smaller ones with smaller legs fidget on smaller feet.

'You boys want her to stay?' asks Tommy's mother, incredulously.

'Yes,' they clamour.

'Then only until I get things sorted,' she says shrugging her shoulders. 'Then on your heads be it.'

The traveller is relieved. He gets up from the floor and says:

‘You’re a lovely family, you know that?’

And like a traveller from the Gods he departs leaving behind the legend.

*

The next morning Tommy’s mother gathers her brood of sons and settles them around the table in the kitchen, each in his own chair. Next to her, in Tommy’s, sits the girl. Tommy’s mother has tied a bow of yellow ribbon in her hair. The eldest son is there: he has excused himself from college. The youngest is in the high chair, and between and around these two sit the other seven. There is a general impression on the housing estate that each son has a different father. It is a rumour with justification for no man has settled for long under Tommy’s mother’s roof, and each registration of birth records father unknown. These facts are not maliciously put about, rather are they aired kindly and jocularly so that certain esteem has rubbed off on Tommy’s mother giving her local celebrity status.

Tommy’s mother does not believe in permanent relationships. Her view of life is kaleidoscopic; that is she loves change, loves to be a part of a drifting pattern and embraces novelty to offset the drum of procreation. She believes in discipline, pride in appearances, consensus. She manages tirelessly the family domestic arrangements and could allow her name to go forward for canonisation as Patron Saint of Utility because she has little time for ornamentation and all the time for practicality. She is clean, tough, aproned, honest, a tireless and forthright mother, a swigger of real ale, a zealot for healthy food and a strong opinion that races

should coexist side-by-side equally, but never crossbreed. To dilute the inherent characteristics of one race by mixing them with another is not a way forward, but a way back. That is her view, and each of her children is white. It is, therefore, an element of her present dilemma that if the coloured girl becomes part of her family, in whatever guise, it will cause a stir within the neighbourhood. This chatter would not discourage her: more seriously she considers future difficulties if she let into her flock of male white a touch of female black.

Tommy's mother smiles at each of her children. On a secure clip in the kitchen cupboard are their birth certificates. She has joked: I collect them as others collect Ming porcelain, the only difference being that my collection is more valuable.

Well, now she is about to discuss with her collection Tommy's demise, and the girl's.

'We can go to the police or wait until Tommy finds his way home ... from wherever he is.'

'He's only five, Mum,' puts in one boy.

'But he can talk, and he knows where we live,' puts in another.

'And what about school? He's meant to start on Tuesday,' puts in yet another.

'I think I will be able to sort that out. I can stall the school for a while,' says Tommy's mother.

'They might have taken him abroad, to India or somewhere,' suggests one boy looking at the girl.

'Wherever, who can say just now? But Tommy loved his home, loved all of you and will be missing you terribly so he

is sure to come back.'

'But that might not be for years,' puts in the boy again.

'Maybe, but he will return, like I hope you would under the same circumstances.'

The eldest son asks:

'Mum, am I right you seem to be content to let matters take their course ... to do nothing at present?'

'Oh, I'm not sure. About Tommy, yes. I just feel he will be back. However, this girl worries me just as much. She is like an orphan, a deaf and dumb orphan who would, if we go to the police, be taken into care when she might be much happier with us. While I feel the terrible loss for our Tommy, I also want to do what is best for the girl. Whereas there is hope for him, there is none for her ... so yes, maybe I'm content to wait awhile ... see how things turn out, wait for Tommy to return and see if the girl settles.'

There is a general agreement to this.

Tommy's mother gets the clip of birth certificates.

She detaches Tommy's.

Studies it.

Lays it flat before her.

Says to her eldest:

'Where it says sex will you find someone to change it from male to female?'

'Just like that!' exclaims the boy.

'Just like that,' replies Tommy's mother. 'And another thing, I suggest we call her Tommy ... for the while, at any rate.'

She slides Tommy's birth certificate over the kitchen table towards her eldest son. The sliding is like an irrevers-

ible decision whose rightfulness is by no means certain. She gives the girl a hug.

‘Are we all agreed, then? This is Tommy, and we shall all do the very best for her.’

The sons express their approval, and the baby in the high chair produces a wide smile.

The girl realises she is the focus of attention. She has been watching every movement, watching the syllables tumble from mouths. She is wide-eyed as always, and seemingly trustful of the tribe in whose hands her fate lies.

Tommy’s mother is well aware that she is just one little girl amongst a bunch of boys and could become the fault-line that shatters family tranquillity. She gives her another hug as much to reassure herself as to give comfort to the girl.

‘Let’s all go shopping,’ says Tommy’s mother, suddenly. ‘Then we can be seen together with our new one ... and listen as the tongues begin to wag.’

There is enthusiasm for this, as much for the wagging tongues as for the tribal migration and the joyous commotion it always causes.

‘I see you’ve got another one now,’ says a lady in the supermarket queue.

‘That’s right, for the time being,’ replies Tommy’s mother.

‘Bit shy is she? ... well I’m not surprised with all your boys.’ The lady chuckles. ‘I’m sure I don’t know about you ... two was quite enough for me, and glad to be rid of them, I was.’

‘I adore children, it’s my weakness,’ says Tommy’s mother testily.

Tommy twists her neck and gazes up at the lady.
'Pretty little one you got there ... a real gift I should say,'
says the lady.
'What makes you say that?' asks Tommy's mother.
'Plain to me. Give her wings and she'd be a little angel.'

*

Tommy's mother has a zest for dandelions, a belief in icons and a love for a rag doll. Of the first she has a rear garden devoted to them, of the second she has three which she keeps in the broom cupboard under the stairs and of the third only the one with whom she sleeps.

*

The dandelions are vigorous self-seeders so it is fortunate that Tommy's mother's neighbour on one side is not a keen gardener. She is her own neighbour on the other side because she has two homes to house her large family. Though these are semi-detached the council has refused to take down the dividing fence which remains as a demarcation between the part devoted to the dandelions, and the part given over for her children to play in.

The dandelions are not regulated into rows, and are very much in charge of themselves. Once Tommy's mother erected netting to catch the tufted seeds before they could drift away on the wind, but wind is neither constant in strength nor direction and she gave up trying. The netting lies collapsed and is only prevented from being blown away itself by the dandelions that have grown up through it and anchored it to the ground. For some of the

summer the garden is a carpet of yellow.

Tommy's mother has three purposes for the dandelions—she shreds the leaves to use in salads, she extracts the latex to use as face cream and she grinds the roots to use as coffee substitute.

Tommy will become familiar with the weed, and benefit from its properties.

*

The broom cupboard is without electric light and smells of dust mites and polish. On a shelf below the electric meter is a torch, some white candles, matches, fuse wires of various calibre and the three icons. Each icon is covered by a fresh, orange duster.

Under the first duster is a low-relief sculpture from Welsh slate of Saint Hilarion holding an hourglass. It comes out of the broom cupboard each October on Tommy's mother's birthday, which is also the Saint's feast day. She had been given the sculpture as a Christening present by a great aunt who had herself been given it by a chimney sweep as part of his suit for her hand in marriage, which sadly failed because the war took him for a soldier and did not return him.

Under the second duster is a piece of Mexican mineral formed from natural crystals of sulphur and mounted on a wooden base. The crystals are paler than the yellow of the duster, but sparkle in the sunshine—which is why Tommy's mother sometimes takes it from the broom cupboard on sunny days and puts it on the window-sill in her front room. The father of her eldest gave it to her: more exactly, he left it when he moved out. She found it on the kitchen table with

the note. A present, the note read, to the one who declines permanency. He knew she loved yellow and loved sparkle. He was the best, a wonderful man, imaginative, generous, thoughtful—yet she had let him slip away without a murmur. After he had gone she thought she might have been carrying his second child and it had greatly saddened her when she realised she was not. She thought of him quite often, when the sun shone, and wondered whether he had been the best because he had been the first. Then she would weigh up his qualities against the others and know that he was. The crystals of sulphur reminds her of prime time and the passage of love, of hot summers, and of discoveries.

Under the third duster is a pair of ballet shoes. They were hers when she believed she could pirouette to stardom, when her body had been lithe and little, before her physique grew unacceptably large. The ballet shoes represent the hope she had as a young girl with stars in her eyes.

It is before these icons that Tommy's mother romanticises whenever the tide runs against her. Saint Hilarion, the Crystals of Sulphur and the Ballet Shoes. Though they are lifeless Tommy's mother believes them to be full of spirit. When Tommy had become part of the family by inveteracy and had learned to speak she had asked Tommy's mother why it was she sometimes prayed in the broom cupboard, and wasn't that just the oddest thing. Tommy's mother had replied that indeed it was not the oddest thing. Everyone needed to worship something, and she worshipped Saint Hilarion because he represented Time, and she worshipped the Crystals of Sulphur because they represented the Earth, and she worshipped her Ballet Shoes because they represented Hope.

*

The rag doll is three feet tall and full of sawdust. When he is not in bed with Tommy's mother he sits in a chair and stares out of her bedroom window. For as long as any can remember he has been a part of their household, and about whom questions are discouraged. The rag doll has witnessed all the changing stations of paternity because he has been privy to the joys of men arriving, and often the bitterness that accompanies their departures. He has been present at each conception and at each birth, and has represented constancy in the kaleidoscopic lifestyle of his mistress.

The rag doll wears patchwork pantaloons, a white jacket and a black, shapeless felt hat. The ends of each of his arms are plugged with wood over which are stitched gloves without fingers. His face bubbles over with melancholy and his eyes are permanently on the point of tears.

His devotion has made him the most pitiful of cuckolds. Tommy does not find him attractive. Once she plucked him from his chair and kicked him under the bed. She is aware that in a household of boys there is need for a man, not a rag doll, and she believes him to be an usurper.

She learnt of his existence soon after she arrived, and before the pattern of her new life had become clear. She had gone quietly into Tommy's mother's bedroom for reassurance and a cuddle, but found that Tommy's mother was reassuring herself and cuddling the rag doll.

II

*The descent of the legend**(An inauthentic story popularly regarded as true)*

Ten years have passed since Tommy arrived. She is fifteen. She has been taught to lip-read and taught to speak, and though the words that come from her mouth are guttural the sounds are not unattractive. Her Asian-brown body is delicately formed. She has a straight back, slender arms and slender legs, and fingers that are long and artistic. Her eyes are big and inquisitive because they have been blessed by generations of cultural sublimity. She does not let her beauty influence her modesty, her eyes are cast down more often than not and there is about her an aura that encourages protection. What Tommy's mother had feared might happen has begun to manifest itself: her sons have started to show interests in her that are not brotherly. The clothes she prefers to wear make her look more like a doll than a young girl anxious to blossom, and her favourite dresses are made from bright materials, like silks and taffetas, and are full-skirted and tight-bodied.

Tommy's mother has long pressed her into dancing lessons, and though she has benefited in ways yet to be fully appreciated she has been unwilling to dedicate time to practise. Unable to hear the music has been a severe handicap compelling her to follow others and often making her at least one step behind. However, when she has mastered the routine she is a delightful little dancer. There is, too, a sign of restlessness which Tommy's mother puts down to growing-up though it is more to do with a burgeoning

perception of orphanhood. She is coloured and deaf in a white-hearing household, and although the atmosphere of tolerance is without fault and every effort is made to make her feel no different, she cannot rid herself of the feeling that she is. And there is the remembrance of the explanation she had been given when she had been told how she had become part of the family, why nothing had been done to trace her own family and how the simple falsification of a birth certificate was all that was necessary to change her life. Then she had realised that her birthright, whatever it was, had been stripped from her as had the religion of her lineage and its commitments. At school, whenever there was a requirement to separate by religion, she followed her brothers into the Christian camp. She knows about the worship of icons in the broom cupboard, but she has never worshipped. She is counted with the Christians, but has never been to Church. This troubles her.

*

So at fifteen she is beginning to seek, but what it is exactly is unclear. With the instincts of her body she imagines roots, and she clings to threads that might lead to self-discovery. For example, she would like to see the garage where she was abandoned, but there is no knowledge of it because the traveller of the Gods has disappeared from the estate. The brothers have become over-protective and are wary of any friendships she may develop outside the family. She wishes to be herself, whatever herself is, and the thoughtfulness of the family that was once a great comfort has become a stifling and disruptive influence on her natural growth. In her

silent world all the caring and loving lavished by her adoptive family is becoming irksome as the inner struggle to identify her roots develop. The boys peep at her from behind doors, ogle the tight bodices of her dresses, say things about her that she cannot hear. She has taken to drying her smalls in the privacy of her bedroom when once she dried them over the bath in the bathroom. In front of the boys she tries to be younger than her years, wearing her doll-like dresses and slowing progress to womanhood.

Tommy's mother watches, is aware, will pounce if ever one of her sons lays a finger on her. Tommy is unaware of these discreet eyes.

Tommy's mother, in bed with her rag doll, listens at night for any sounds of movement in or out of Tommy's bedroom. A guardian angel, maybe, but Tommy no longer recognises her as such. Nor does she hear the soft and listening treads as she patrols the house. Rather she has come to understand that beneath all Tommy's mother's goodness a manipulator is concealed. This observation, though new, does not signify a change in Tommy's mother's attitude; simply it has become manifest to Tommy because years have whetted her senses. Her senses tell her, too, that she is being manipulated like the rag doll, and is often little more than an object for keeping alive the gossip on which celebrity status depends.

In terms of the fairground, a crowd-puller.

*

One night Tommy's mother brings the rag doll into her bedroom.

In the quiet and the dark it is not difficult for Tommy to pretend to be asleep: but she wonders why her bedclothes are being drawn back. Her first thought is that it is one the boys and is about to scream, but she smells the aroma of dandelion cream and knows it is not one of them. She feels breath on her face as Tommy's mother bends over her to tuck in the rag doll beside her.

The quiet and the dark are still there.

Tommy's mother departs.

Tommy waits.

The strip of landing light beneath her door goes out.

She kicks the rag doll out of her bed.

The rag doll smells of stale powder and dandelion cream. Both have been ingrained into the fabric of his being from years of dalliance in Tommy's mother's bedroom. This white, pathetic cuckold disgusts Tommy because he accepts abuse without a struggle, because he is manipulated, because he is given an appurtenance of life when life is what he does not have.

That Tommy's mother thinks that Tommy and her rag doll have something in common is an affront to the girl.

*

When Tommy wakes the next morning and sees the rag doll lying on the floor she leaps out of bed and kicks him around the room. So savage is her attack that a trickle of sawdust from his side seam marks his demise across her floor.

'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,' she screams at him. 'I hate you because you are pathetic and allow yourself to be abused. I hate you because you believe you are something

that you are definitely not, because you smell of old age, because you are an usurper, because you are ... because you are dirty and white.'

Tommy opens her bedroom door and kicks the rag doll onto the landing.

She looks at the trail of sawdust in her bedroom like a passer-by at blood after an accident, and avoids it as she dresses for school.

When she returns the sawdust has been swept up, her room is back to normal and not a word is spoken of the incident.

*

The first to see the young man is the rag doll from his point of vantage at the window in Tommy's mother's bedroom. The young man wears a turban and a green uniform with lots of braid that is the sort of attire worn by fairground folk. It is ridiculously out-of-place on the estate, though the young man appears to be not in the least self-conscious.

It is Tommy. He has come to recall the poverty of his roots and to recount to his old family how Providence has raised him. He has not come to stay, but as his new family are travelling he was not disposed to miss the opportunity.

'So you have returned!' exclaims his mother excitedly. 'I knew you would. Didn't I say that, boys, the day you were taken?' She is addressing her children who marvel at their brother's return, his fine clothes and their mother's wisdom.

'I have not come to stay, just to visit,' he says staring at the girl.

Tommy's mother is exuberant.

'But you will come again?' she asks.

Tommy does not reply. He is in surroundings not complimentary to his attire, and he is uncomfortable at the kitchen table. He fathoms the girl is like him in this respect because she, too, is attired extravagantly and appears to be uncomfortable. She is watching his lips and he is watching her eyes.

Tommy's mother is watching both of them.

Tommy is recounting a flicker of his life on the golden rim:

'... we were well received in the town where an elephant fight was laid on for us. On each side of a low wall the two animals stood face to face butting the other's head and lashing out with their trunks. Of course, the elephants are held captive by chains on their legs, but what power in the brutes—and what power in Man that he can tame them. And close by women clothed in traditional costumes did a stick dance, and others paraded with butter lamps balanced on their heads. There were women weaving wool into brightly coloured blankets and tailors embroidering fine muslin and bangle makers working in lacquer. There were wrestlers and fakir dancers and a camel that jumped like a horse. You see it was the time of a holiday fair ... and it was there that I met the merchant's wife.'

His brothers stare at him and wonder: Can this be truly our brother, this teller-of-tales, this popinjay?

Tommy gazes disdainfully around the kitchen.

'What merchant's wife?' asks his mother.

Knowing he has this family waiting at the tip of his

tongue Tommy elaborates while his eyes return to rest on the girl:

‘... the merchant’s wife wore layers of cotton skirts, and a veil. She had many ivory bangles on her wrists, many silver bangles on her ankles and her toes were ringed, like her fingers. Her feet were bare and flat; they made impressions in the sand that seemed to me to be too large for her stature. She led me to one side, and then into a temple where, through an opening in her veil, she eyed me with one eye. She confided to me: As you have been endowed with skin so fine and colour so rare you should find a good living in a fairground for yours is the purest skin I have ever seen. Then she eased up my turban with her little finger and said: Ah, I thought so, also you have the most beautiful hair. Why, to let people touch you could only be auspicious for them, and to do so they would pay you rupees that would multiply like a merchant’s rupees ... but without a merchant’s outlay. And your wife would have bangles of ivory and silver as I have. She would have rings on all her fingers and all her toes as I have. I know of just the wife for you, Illumination of Fairs on Holi-Days. So I asked her: What wife? And she replied: My daughter, Gita, that is who.’

*

The family listen, but cannot absorb. The girl lip-reads, and can. In the back garden beyond the kitchen window the dandelions are yellow in expectation; and in the vale of distant times the cowslips are yellow also.

‘Are you telling us you have married an Indian? You are too young. You are only fifteen. And in any case we do not

marry coloured folk!' exclaims Tommy's mother.

The brothers' eyes dart this way and that. To Tommy's mother, to Tommy and to the girl. They do not rest for long on any of them.

Without taking her eyes off Tommy, the girl says:

'I am coloured. Am I so bad?'

It is the first time she has spoken and the guttural surprises Tommy. He was expecting a clearer sound.

'She's deaf and damn near dumb,' says Tommy's mother. 'That's what we got left when they took you.'

'Then you did well,' says Tommy.

'Did well. Whatever do you mean?' snaps Tommy's mother.

'If Gita had been like this girl who is my namesake, then I should not have hesitated ...'

'... so are you or are you not married?' interrupts Tommy's mother.

'I was invited to the mansion of the merchant where I paid my respects. I said to the merchant and the merchant's wife: I am about to travel with my family and when I return I hope I shall be invited again, meaning ... then you shall know my answer as regards your daughter. And the merchant's wife said to me: Are you favourably impressed, Illumination of Fairs on Holi-Days, with our daughter, Gita, who has the wisdom of her father and the beauty of her mother? I answered: Yes, because then I was favourably impressed.'

'Then, but not now ... is that what you mean?' asks Tommy's mother.

'My namesake is the parasol that has shaded the

merchant's daughter.'

Tommy's mother looks at her sons, raises her eyebrows indicating that, to her, their just-returned brother is an enigma. Then she asks lightly, putting on an Indian accent:

'Tommy, you will stay then ... now that the merchant's daughter no longer shines?'

'No,' says Tommy.

'No! ... well, at least stay until tomorrow?' she snaps.

Tommy looks at the girl, says slowly to her so that she can easily read his lips:

'I shall call you Namesake. It is a name that shall bring honour.'

To his mother he says:

'Until tomorrow, then.'

'Let's all go shopping,' says Tommy's mother, suddenly. 'Then we can be seen together with our new one ... and listen as the tongues begin to wag.'

*

That evening, amidst the bustle of reunion and the fluttering of hope, Namesake is persuaded to dance. It is not her idea: nor is the special costume that she wears. She senses the return of Tommy, though it is a long-gone dream come true, has not matched its expectation and that moderation is under strain. Moreover, the way Tommy looks at her, which is not the way his brothers look at her, signifies his understanding—and the whiff of collusion between them. Of the switch, he seems to be saying to her with his eyes: I had the better deal, but from now on we can decide.

NAMESAKE

Later, when the dancing was over, Tommy would pass a note to her.

I can find the place where we first met.

And she would pass a note to him.

Then let us begin our journey there.

*

Because music cannot be part of the dance Tommy's mother has a stick so that Namesake can watch the stick and dance as a musician watches a conductor's baton and plays.

She is dressed in a full-skirted red dress with long sleeves and ruffs at the wrists, striped pantaloons that reach below and white socks that stretch above her knees, a green tight-bodice, white gloves and a sailor's hat. On her feet are the ballet shoes that are the icons of Hope that live in the broom cupboard. Her face has been powdered white and her cheeks tinted pink.

No part of her brown skin is visible so she appears as white as Tommy and the rag doll and Tommy's mother and all Tommy's mother's other sons.

The room has been rearranged with chairs in a semi-circle on which Tommy's brothers sit. Tommy's mother, Tommy and the rag doll sit to one side.

Namesake is standing quite still in the semi-circle. Her hands are raised above her head, one foot is in front of the other and she is poised to dance a ballet sequence in time with the movement of the stick that Tommy's mother holds aloft.

However, rebellion is stirring in her mind.

It is stirring because she feels Tommy is her saviour.

And because Tommy has been where she should have been, has seen what she should have seen, has learnt what she should have learnt she believes he can lead her to where she belongs.

She is watching the stick, but flooding into her being are Indian classical dance movements drawn from the daughter-nation of her ancestral past.

She may be dressed like a Western puppet and be expected to behave like a Western puppet, but as the delicate and elegant dance forms of her own culture fold one upon another into her mind these ephemeral dispositions are being squeezed out and replaced by an inborn capacity to behave otherwise.

In the silence of her world a metamorphosis is taking place.

She closes her eyes.

She no longer needs to see the stick.

She is elsewhere, in a beautiful pink city that is alive with the sound of bells: and it is to this sound she begins to dance.

She changes her stance. Now her legs are apart, her knees are bent and turned outwards at the hips. Her feet are flat on the ground, her body upright, her arms extended and crooked upwards at the elbows, the tips of her fingers point like darts. For a minute all of her is motionless, and all is quiet, expectant. Her eyes remain closed.

Then, very slowly, her wrists begin to twist and her feet begin to stamp.

She moves her head from side-to-side, tilts her body—just a little.

She has her own music ...

... and its beat is conveyed by the stamping of her feet.

At first, dressed as she is, she behaves like a puppet or a fairground performer, comical, out of place, manipulated: and amongst the brothers there is a tendency to laugh as though she were clowning, but the stamping of her feet becomes too precise and well-timed, and withers any suggestions of comedy.

Her body movements are graceful, either shifting from side to side or turning on the axis of her spine as her arms and hands and fingers perform intricate movements. Her hands, in particular, seem to move separately from the rest of her and give the impression of communication—of saying something, identifying something, promising something. The position of her fingers, though her eyes are closed, search out and focus on Tommy's mother, on the rag doll, on Tommy—pronouncing different meanings that leap like static electricity from her finger tips to their eyes.

She springs from one foot to the other, stamping out the beat on the balls and heels of her feet. She encompasses with her arms the line of brothers sitting in their semicircle. The gesture is dismissive. They learn her performance is not primarily for them, not directed at them: that as spectators they are exclusive while their mother, the rag doll and Tommy are inclusive.

But Namesake is telling all of them, save one, as she dances that they have stripped her of her spirit and blunted her origins, and while she will admonish the brothers she will not admonish Tommy's mother and the rag doll—Tommy's mother with her selfish pursuits and the rag doll

NAMESAKE

who forays into her bed.

Before these two Namesake portrays a new-found hatred. Her feet are stamping with rage, her fingers point, her body twists, her facial expressions are tortured, ugly expressions that Tommy's mother has never seen before in the girl to whom she has given a home and comfort, and whom she believes she has saved.

Tommy's mother begins to sob.

Namesake opens her eyes, slows her feet to a standstill, and lowers her arms.

She stands still, and looks down at Tommy's mother's bent head.

Then, without warning, she snatches the rag doll off his chair, rips him open and scatters his sawdust over the carpet of the room that the traveller had once upon a time found unexpectedly tidy.

The following day Tommy and Namesake slip away unseen dressed in their fairground costumes.

III

The ascent of the legend

(As told by the bard, Charlie Jarvis of Cwm dagrau Mair)

Charlie Jarvis, bard, raconteur and garage proprietor, has been invited to be the principal guest at the Mid Wales Ladies Local History Society's annual dinner at Aberyst-

wyth. He considers it a great honour to be invited, and a greater honour to be invited to speak. He makes no claims to be an historian; only has he, on occasions, accepted with modesty the brush of local fame his poems have brought him. While basking in a contentment that is the lot of a bush mechanic with responsibilities that extend along only a few miles of country road he has dreamt that his words might escape this stretch of macadam and find their way into the wider world beyond Cowslip Valley.

He has put on his Sunday best, eaten a fine meal of Welsh lamb and drunk just the right amount of Mrs Megan Price Beguildy's elderflower wine bottled especially, and proudly, for the occasion from the elders that are rampant along her bottom hedge. He is being introduced from the Chair, he is politely smiling at the nice things being said about him and his poetry. Shortly he will recount a story unlikely to have been heard by his listeners.

*

'Ladies, I thank the Chair for the kind words of introduction and for inviting me here this evening. I have to say it is a privilege to be asked to address you because I am not an historian in the sense that I delve into what has passed and only am I known, locally, as a bit of poet. Nevertheless, I believe I can make an addition to the making of history ... which of course we all do every day of our lives whether we want to or not, by recounting a story in which I have played an observer's part. So tonight I shall not be offering any poetry, only a poet's view of a very strange occurrence.'

Charlie Jarvis pauses. He is looking at his wine glass and

wondering if he dare take a little more, but he is of an opinion that Mrs Megan Price Beguildy has laced her elderflower wine with more brandy than she ought. Notwithstanding, he raises the glass, sips a little, looks around, smiles:

‘Lovely drink, best I have ever tasted.’

Mrs Megan Price Beguildy reddens, whispers to her neighbour:

‘There’s a lovely man, now. And they say he never married.’

Charlie Jarvis replaces the glass on the table in front of him, and begins.

*

‘Fifteen years ago, in September, a traveller called at my garage for petrol. He had no money to pay for it, and nothing to leave by way of a deposit, save a small boy in a blue anorak. This boy was not the traveller’s son, only was the traveller doing the boy’s mother a good turn by giving him a day out because she had nine other children, all boys, mind you ... and that many would be a bit of a handful, wouldn’t it?’

Many of the Mid Wales ladies nod their heads in agreement.

‘So the traveller left the boy at my garage while he went to the bank in Tregynidr to draw some money. To stop the boy wandering on to the road we tied him to the railings on the forecourt.’

Many of the Mid Wales ladies know kinder ways to stop boys wandering.

‘I continued to repair a motor inside the garage, but

when the traveller returned he found that the boy was no longer there, and tied to the railings in his place was a coloured girl wearing a yellow anorak.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies suck their breathes at the very thought.

'The traveller, not wishing to call the police at that stage, took the girl and drove back in the direction of England from whence he had come earlier in the day. I had expected a visit from the police, but none came and eventually I gave the matter no further thought believing the incident to have sorted itself. How surprised I was when one day, five years ago, two teenagers arrived like spiders' gossamer on my forecourt. At first I was startled more by their attire than how they had arrived, but arrived they had dressed in fairground costumes. The boy wore a turban and a green uniform with lots of braid and the girl full-skirted red dress with a green tight-bodice, striped pantaloons and a sailor's hat.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies sigh in amazement.

'When I went over to them they were examining the railings, chattering and pointing. We met here, the boy said to me excitedly, this is our beginning ... and from here we go on. The boy thought for a moment, then added: It might have been you who helped tie me to the railings. And the girl said, gutturally: It might have been you who helped untie me from the railings. Then, of course, I understood and remembered.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies find this hard to believe.

'The boy told me how he had been English, had been taken to India and educated in all things Indian and how the girl had been Indian, had been taken to England and

educated in all things English. He told me that the girl had been born deaf and dumb, and because of this she was considered a useless prize to her family. When I asked how they had been reunited the boy said: By the stuff of legends. Stuff of legends? I queried. However, when they had gone I thought about it, and began to believe ... being a bit of a poet. Moreover, the manner of their departure was as unexpected as their arrival. A car drove in for petrol, distracted my attention ... and then there was no sign of them. I looked up and down the road, but they had vanished.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies wonder how this could happen.

'Later I heard others had seen them on the road further north where, as you know, the land rises to prospects of greater beauty. Later still I was told a cluster of farm buildings had been painted pink and that a domed temple had been constructed there from sandstone ... that the place was referred to as the Pink City. But when I asked where it was none knew for certain, as though much of what was said was in the imagination. When I enquired further an informant told me the Pink City was occupied by an Indian sect whose only woman wove wool into brightly coloured blankets and whose only man embroidered fine muslin. Again, none had witnessed this work and only was my informant recounting what he had heard.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies feel unable to separate fact from fiction.

'Last summer I had occasion to go to Llandudno and was idly looking down onto the beach from the terraced promenade when I noticed a booth and a gathering of chil-

dren sitting in a semi-circle in front of it watching a puppet show. They were shrieking with delight and urging the puppets to all kinds of little wickedness. It had not been my intention to go down onto the beach, but something compelled me for I was attracted, as a magnet attracts, to the puppets dancing on their tiny stage.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies remember when they enjoyed puppet shows.

'I had timed it rather well because the show was reaching its climax. There were three puppets ... one wore a turban and a green uniform with lots of braid, another a full-skirted red dress with a green tight-bodice, striped pantaloons and a sailor's hat, and the third was a rag doll dressed like a clown.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies see the connection.

'I stood behind the children, and watched. It seemed that the rag doll loved the girl in the red dress, but she did not love him because she loved the boy in the green uniform. Apparently, disregarding the girl's feelings, the rag doll continued to make advances towards her and she, in desperation, ran him through with a knitting needle. Well, it must have been known that the rag doll was full of sawdust because at once the puppeteers removed the rag doll and replaced it with a similar, but empty one. Handfuls of sawdust were showered onto the exuberant children before tiny curtains, like shrouds, were dropped over the tiny stage. The children, reluctant to leave in case something further might happen, were encouraged to move away.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies mutter 'ah', sadly.

'I expected the puppeteers to dismantle the booth so I

waited for them believing them to be the children who had been switched at my garage. I stood, a solitary figure on the sand, waiting and staring at the booth.'

And as I waited and stared not a sound came from within it.

And as I waited and stared the in-coming tide came further up the beach.

And as I waited and stared the holiday-makers seemed to withdraw so that only I and the booth remained.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies are spellbound.

'The tide soon lapped the fabric of the booth, began to spread itself beneath and around, to spread itself where the children had been sitting, to reach the toes of my shoes. I stepped back one pace, and the tide followed. The fabric of the booth began to soak up the seawater and by then, I thought, the puppeteers would surely be standing up to their calves in water. I called out: Puppeteers, please come out otherwise you will have to swim. There was no reply, and as the water rose I retreated. And the water rose further and I retreated further until I was standing on the terraced promenade's lowest level. By then the booth was half-submerged and I expected it to rise off the sand and float. But the tide just ran on in and as I was forced to step further up the terraces less and less of the booth was visible ... until nothing of it remained above the water.'

Many of the Mid Wales ladies are waiting for an explanation.

'I turned to express anxiety to those closest to me on the promenade, but the holiday makers were either unobservant or disinterested because it was as if none had witnessed what

I had witnessed. Indeed, when I tried to explain what had happened I was stared upon with disbelief?

*

Charlie Jarvis, bard, raconteur and garage proprietor is about to sit down when one of the ladies asks:

‘Oh, Mr Jarvis, please tell us ... is it really true?’

Charlie Jarvis has spent many hours pondering over the question. He replies slowly, carefully choosing his words.

‘It is the stuff from which legends are made and on which history feeds. It is the genesis of folklore without which the human spirit has no permanence.’

Mrs Megan Price Beguildy says loudly to her neighbour:

‘I don’t mind if it’s true or not, now there’s a lovely man.’

Charlie Jarvis hears this and raising aloft his glass of elderflower wine asks her:

‘Please tell me ... how much brandy did you put in your delightful wine?’

‘Now then, Mr Jarvis, you would never believe me if I told you.’