REFLECTIONS IN A POOL

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I AM OLD ENOUGH to remember the older members of the previous generation and the much older members of the generation before that — dwindling towards their close — and, like large slow-moving fairies in white beards or white caps, the survivors of a generation before that, who chiefly existed in quotations, or in palely inscribed ink on brittle paper, or on gravestones.

Turning the binoculars of the living on to the far remembered dead, I discover that although my maternal and paternal forbears derived from stocks which were similar in beliefs, customs, and low income levels, their very differing characteristics persisted through the three generations that I knew — or nearly knew. In our quite changed and mobile world of today, these characteristics are no longer characteristic. My maternal forbears were urban, my paternal forbears were rural. They lived in parts of England then remote from one another. Now they are all over the place and in all kinds of occupations. My Mother's forbears were strict Dissenters; my Father's were Dissenters but un-strict. They were both better than gold, far better than money, and when I speedily became an orphan, both families held out their hands, ready to give loving care to a child. I was taken into my Mother's family and was cared for by them. That is a great proof of goodness — to take a child and care for it.

What has begun to interest me in the backward look is that, in the three older generations of my maternal family which I can remember, the capacity for being shocked was highly developed and regarded. It may have been a quite reasonable preservative and a reaction against certain bygone dangers which I do not know. There was not, of course, as much to be shocked at as there is today but, taking the conventional world as it then was, the capacity for experiencing shock, and the discussions involved, were considerable, and cherished. The objects of shock were confined to the very small conformities and circumference of the life of those generations, and included the incorrect uses of spoons, the right occasions for boots, the silence or importunity of children, caps or no caps, beards or non-beards, delay of christenings, small religious discrepancies. Shock did not need to extend as far as adultery, of which there was relatively little in the middle classes of those times. As far as I can see, there was nothing to be shocked at within the lives of those generations. Shockedness had become a kind of domestic duty or fetish and perhaps had its value, but did not amuse. Those generations were kind, stern, sometimes merry, but had little humour; their workmanship was sound. They were incapable of deceit or cruelty. Come to think of it, they shared the characteristics of Jane Austen's Sir Thomas Bertram, but unlike him, had neither great income nor estate.

My Father's family, and pre-families, on the other hand, seemed unable to be shocked. The spoons and boots did not matter, nor the delay of christenings, not even the fact that my Father and his brothers were taught in school by an unprincipled young Frenchman whose name was Paul Verlaine. When, long after the death of my Father, I remembered the name and read about the goings-on and poetry of Paul Verlaine, I found this difficult to believe, but hoped it was true. I went to see my half-uncle Herbert and said, "Uncle Herbert, can it be true that Paul Verlaine was your schoolmaster and Father's too?" and to my surprise Uncle Herbert said, "Yes, he was." So I said, "Oh Uncle Herbert, tell me some of the things that Verlaine said and did!" and Uncle Herbert said, "I'm sorry my dear, but I only remember that he roared at a very snivelling boy 'Sir! Sweep your nose!' and that's all I remember of the words of the poet Verlaine."

I told Kildare Dobbs about that and he gave me a little book in which was a drawing by Max Beerbohm of Paul Verlaine in a top-hat escorting a crocodile of little schoolboys also in top-hats. It looks incongruous. They all appear vindictive, including Paul Verlaine. Verlaine must have moved up into a higher bracket of schools, because in my Father's village the boys did not wear top-hats. This was before the Rimbaud days and those later harridan Eugénie days in Paris, and perhaps before most of the poetry which must, however, have been brewing.

My Father's family and pre-families seemed to have had swift perceptions and senses of humours that made life amusing whether rural or urban, but not commercially productive. In the few years in which I remember my Father, life was luminous and merry and beloved, although I was sometimes whipped on my hands with the back of a hairbrush. I always started to bellow while the hairbrush was still in the air and before it touched me — gently. I became difficult when, in my reading lessons I (aged 5) could not understand the meaning of the word "the". I asked "*What* is a 'the'?" My Father tried to explain but could not tell me. "But what *is* a 'the'? What does it do?" He could not say.

It may or may not be because my Father's county, Lincolnshire, had a mild and milky name or because it is a county of fells and a few fens but chiefly flat pastoral country, that boys were adventurous and wished to leave it and did leave it. Vikings and refugee French had arrived there and have left interesting linguistic remains, but the first departer that I know of is Captain John Smith whom we associate with Pocahontas and continental wars. There were of course the escapers to the New World who gathered at the little Lincolnshire town of Boston and carried the name away with them, and I have seen in village churches the memorials of Arctic explorers. My Father's eldest brother Tom went to Africa, full of gaiety, and was at last thought to be dead, for no more was heard of him. The next brother went to Australia, and then my Father after a year or two at Trinity College, Dublin, went off to Africa too. Of the half-sisters, one went to Russia, one went to South Africa (in failed near-money-less search for her half-brother Tom, I do believe), returned to England and became a journalist and Garvin's right-hand man on the *Observer*. The third sister who was dreamily and intensely musical went to Germany and became the last pupil of Clara Schumann. She translated Schumann's letters and, later, Pushkin's poem *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*, published in an elegant little yellow book with a commentary by Raïssa Lomonossova. She returned to England prepared for a brilliant musical career. She never had it, as she soon married a feckless clever character on the staff of *The Times*, and between them they translated Spengler's *Decline of The West*. He left her and took up with someone else who took to drink. To this sad family my half-aunt, who was an agnostic, gave angelic care. She was charming; her tastes were musical and intellectual, not domestic. She had a sweet fatigued voice, like silk or a lute. Her middle name was Waller as her step-side of the family was descended from Edmund Waller the erratic poet who wrote "Go, lovely rose! Tell her that wastes her time and me." I used to feel deprived that it was only my Father's step-side who were descended from Waller, as it struck me that otherwise I could claim an addiction to writing from him. But no. I have long recovered from that desire, and it does not matter; anyway he was not a reliable character.

UNCLE HERBERT told me a story of a meeting that my Father had in Africa which I have always pictured vividly in my mind. It was in a bright-coloured country and there were Zulus there, and some Kaffirs. A very tall Zulu gave my very tall Father a big Stick of good fortune. But it brought no luck to my Father nor — later — to me. Soon after he married, his young wife died; then he died; then the stick vanished and practically all I had of my Father's was his little ten volumes of Shakespeare which have brought me more happiness than the stick could have brought to anybody. Missionaries in Africa have only treasure in Heaven to leave to their children.

In this bright-coloured part of Africa whose name I do not know, my Father lived in a rough sort of little bungalow. He had a Kaffir boy and he had a little horse. One day he was riding along an interminable dusty road into the hills to another village when he saw plodding towards him, raising a small cloud of dust, a man who — as he approached — appeared to have been white once and was now very dirty and wore shabby and ragged clothes. My Father was thinking of something else, yet, as he passed the plodding man and gave him a cursory glance and the man looked up at him, he saw something familiar in that sombre face. The man did not stop, but my Father stopped. He turned his horse and looked after the plodding man with such strange and conflicting memories — the family at home, the present scene, the gay departure of the adventurous Tom, the excitement of letters, the gradual decline, few letters, fewer, no letters, no word of Tom, and at last the parents' buried sorrow. Was this Tom?

My Father, very much moved by all this, rode back to the man who now had stopped, turned, and stood heavily without motion. My Father reined in his horse, looked into the man's face, exclaimed "Tom?" and dismounted. Tom said nothing and it was impossible to know what his feelings were. Humiliation of discovery in this condition? What has your life been? thought my Father as he took Tom's arm and they walked slowly together. My Father was unable to say what he wanted to say, but because he was still young and very boyish he spoke quickly of home, and of his luck in meeting Tom — and look! there is my bungalow!

When they reached the bungalow my Father tethered the horse and took his brother inside. My Father was excited. What the past of this man had been he did not know, nor the future. He and his young Kaffir boy quickly made a simple meal and the men sat down. Tom wolfed his food and hardly spoke. He told nothing. He is suffering, thought my Father, he is thinking of our days and of some great change and of disappointments. Something makes him suffer very much and he does not want to tell me anything. He is not glad that we have met.

When Tom threw down his knife and fork and pushed back from the table, my Father said, "Would you like to go to bed now, Tom, or shall we go outside and talk?"

"Bed sounds all right to me," said the man.

My Father took him into the other little room where there was a bed and a chair and a box, a bowl and a jug of water. He went to the box and took out his other nightshirt for Tom.

He turned towards the bed. The man had pulled down the bedclothes. He said "Well, goodnight young Robert," and got into the bed, heavy boots and all, dust and all, dirt and all, pulled up the sheet and turned away on the pillow with his eyes shut. Just like sleep. Just like exclusion.

My Father stood and looked down at the stranger in the bed. But all he could think was — He must have suffered. He has confusion and regrets. Everything is lost. He is no longer Tom. He is a stranger.

When my Father awoke from the mat on which he had slept, Tom had gone.

I think, vaguely, that my Father found him again some time later, but I do not know the rest of the story except that after my Father had returned to England with me, Uncle Tom wrote letters, sometimes, and then he died, alone, of enteric fever which spread through Africa, and that was the end of the boy who had left home, so gay.

When I mention the acquired addiction to shock ("I was indeed shocked, Elijah!") of the earlier generations of my maternal family, I also remember that my Father's two half-sisters, whom I loved so much for their unshockability and funniness and cleverness and musicalness, lived and worked in London. They combined being fastidious with not being susceptible to shock. They wanted me to become an actress. They would help. During my holidays from the boarding school to which I had been sent from Canada, I was distributed around to both sides of my family. But I saw my intellectual and amusing half-aunts less and less because my maternal Aunt-in-Chief, in whose kindly care I really was, had a great fear that if I stayed with my emancipated paternal half-aunts I would really go on the stage, and the thought was so terrible. Lost! Forever lost! Years later, when I was a married Canadian, my husband came to know and love my half-aunts as I did; but it was then too late to go on the stage. I had never wanted to, anyway.