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I

The Old Devil and His Wife

Grandfather's skirts would flap in the wind along the churchyard path and I would hang on. He often found things to do in the vestry, excuses for getting out of the vicarage (kicking the swollen door, cursing) and so long as he took me he couldn't get up to much. I was a sort of hobble; he was my minder and I was his. He'd have liked to get further away, but petrol was rationed. The church was at least safe. My grandmother never went near it – except feet first in her coffin, but that was years later, when she was buried in the same grave with him. Rotting together for eternity, one flesh at the last after a lifetime's mutual loathing. In life, though, she never invaded his patch; once inside the churchyard gate he was on his own ground, in his element. He was good at funerals, being gaunt and lined, marked with mortality. He had a scar down his hollow cheek too, which Grandma had done with the carving knife one of the many times when he came home pissed and incapable.

That, though, was when they were still 'speaking', before my time. Now they mostly monologued and swore at each other's backs, and he (and I) would slam out of the house and go off between the graves, past the yew tree with a hollow where the cat had her litters and the various vaults that were supposed to account for the smell in the vicarage cellars in wet weather. On our right was the church; off to our left the graves

stretched away, bisected by a grander gravel path leading down from the church porch to a bit of green with a war memorial, then – across the road – the mere. The church was popular for weddings because of this impressive approach, but he wasn't at all keen on the marriage ceremony, naturally enough. Burials he relished, perhaps because he saw himself as buried alive.

One day we stopped to watch the gravedigger, who unearthed a skull – it was an old churchyard, on its second or third time around – and grandfather dusted off the soil and declaimed: 'Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well . . .' I thought he was making it up as he went along. When I grew up a bit and saw *Hamlet* and found him out, I wondered what had been going through his mind. I suppose the scene struck him as an image of his condition – exiled to a remote, illiterate rural parish, his talents wasted and so on. On the other hand his position afforded him a lot of opportunities for indulging secret, bitter jokes, hamming up the act and cherishing his ironies, so in a way he was enjoying himself. Back then, I thought that was what a vicar was, simply: someone bony and eloquent and smelly (tobacco, candle grease, sour claret), who talked into space. His disappointments were just part of the act for me, along with his dog-collar and cassock. I was like a baby goose imprinted by the first mother-figure it sees – he was my black marker.

It was certainly easy to spot him at a distance too. But this was a village where it seemed everybody was their vocation. They didn't just 'know their place', it was as though the place occupied them, so that they all knew what they were going to be from the beginning. People's names conspired to colour in this picture. The gravedigger was actually called Mr Downward. The blacksmith who lived by the mere was called Bywater. Even more decisively, the family who owned the

village were called Hanmer, and so was the village. The Hanmers had come over with the Conqueror, got as far as the Welsh border and stayed ever since in this little rounded isthmus of North Wales sticking out into England, the detached portion of Flintshire (Flintshire Maelor) as it was called then, surrounded by Shropshire, Cheshire and – on the Welsh side – Denbighshire. There was no town in the Maelor district, only villages and hamlets; Flintshire proper was some way off; and (then) industrial, which made it in practice a world away from these pastoral parishes, which had become resigned to being handed a Labour MP at every election. People in Hanmer well understood, in almost a prideful way, that we weren't part of all that. The kind of choice represented by voting didn't figure large on the local map and you only really counted places you could get to on foot or by bike.

The war had changed this to some extent, but not as much as it might have because farming was a reserved occupation and sons hadn't been called up unless there were a lot of them, or their families were smallholders with little land. So Hanmer in the 1940s in many ways resembled Hanmer in the 1920s, or even the late 1800s except that it was more depressed, less populous and more out of step – more and more islanded in time as the years had gone by. We didn't speak Welsh either, so that there was little national feeling, rather a sense of stubbornly being *where you were* and that was that. Also very un-Welsh was the fact that Hanmer had no chapel to rival Grandfather's church: the Hanmers would never lease land to Nonconformists and there was no tradition of Dissent, except in the form of not going to church at all. Many people did attend, though, partly because he was locally famous for his sermons, and because he was High Church and went in for dressing up and altar boys and frequent communions. Not

frequent enough to explain the amount of wine he got through, however. Eventually the Church stopped his supply and after that communicants got watered-down Sanatogen from Boots the chemist in Whitchurch, over the Shropshire border.

The delinquencies that had denied him preferment seemed to do him little harm with his parishioners. Perhaps the vicar was expected to be an expert in sin. At all events he was 'a character'. To my childish eyes people in Hanmer were divided between characters and the rest, the ones and the many. Higher up the social scale there was only one of you: one vicar, one solicitor, each farmer identified by the name of his farm and so *sui generis*. True, there were two doctors, but they were brothers and shared the practice. Then there was one policeman, one publican, one district nurse, one butcher, one baker . . . Smallholders and farm labourers were the many and often had large families too. They were irretrievably plural and supposed to be interchangeable (feckless all), nameable only as tribes. The virtues and vices of the singular people turned into characteristics. They were picturesque. They had no common denominator and you never judged them in relation to a norm. Coming to consciousness in Hanmer was oddly blissful at the beginning: the grown-ups all played their parts to the manner born. You knew where you were.

Which was a hole, according to Grandma. A dead-alive dump. A muck heap. She'd shake a trembling fist at the people going past the vicarage to church each Sunday, although they probably couldn't see her from behind the bars and dirty glass. She didn't upset my version of pastoral. She lived in a different dimension, she said as much herself. In her world there were streets with pavements, shop windows, trams, trains, teashops and cinemas. She never went out except to visit this paradise lost, by taxi to the station in Whitchurch, then by train to

Shrewsbury or Chester. This was *life*. Scented soap and chocolates would stand in for it the rest of the time – most of the time, in fact, since there was never any money. She'd evolved a way of living that resolutely defied her lot. He might play the vicar, she wouldn't be the vicar's wife. Their rooms were at opposite ends of the house and she spent much of the day in bed. She had asthma, and even the smell of him and his tobacco made her sick. She'd stay up late in the evening, alone, reading about scandals and murders in the *News of the World* by lamplight among the mice and silverfish in the kitchen (she'd hoard coal for the fire up in her room and sticks to relight it if necessary). She never answered the door, never saw anyone, did no housework. She cared only for her sister and her girlhood friends back in South Wales and – perhaps – for me, since I had blue eyes and blonde hair and was a girl, so just possibly belonged to *her* family line. She thought men and women belonged to different races and any getting together was worse than folly. The 'old devil', my grandfather, had talked her into marriage and the agony of bearing two children, and he should never be forgiven for it. She would quiver with rage whenever she remembered her fall. She was short (about four foot ten) and as fat and soft-fleshed as he was thin and leathery, so her theory of separate races looked quite plausible. The rhyme about Jack Sprat ('Jack Sprat would eat no fat, / His wife would eat no lean, / And so between the two of them / They licked the platter clean') struck me, when I learned it, as somehow about them. Looking back, I can see that she must have been a factor – along with the booze (and the womanising) – in keeping him back in the Church. She got her revenge, but at the cost of living in the muck heap herself.

Between the two of them my grandparents created an atmosphere in the vicarage so pungent and all-pervading that they

accounted for everything. In fact, it wasn't so. My mother, their daughter, was there; I only remember her, though, at the beginning, as a shy, slender wraith kneeling on the stairs with a brush and dustpan, or washing things in the scullery. They'd made her into a domestic drudge after her marriage – my father was away in the army and she had no separate life. It was she who answered the door and tried to keep up appearances, a battle long lost. She wore her fair hair in a victory roll and she was pretty but didn't like to smile. Her front teeth were false – crowned, a bit clumsily – because in her teens, running to intervene in one of their murderous rows, she'd fallen down the stairs and snapped off her own. During these years she probably didn't feel much like smiling anyway. She doesn't come into the picture properly yet, nor does my father. My only early memory of him is being picked up by a man in uniform and being sick down his back. He wasn't popular in the vicarage, although it must have been his army pay that eked out Grandfather's exiguous stipend.

The grandparents weren't grateful. They both felt so cheated by life, they had their histories of grievance so well worked out, that they were *owed* service, handouts, anything that was going. My mother and her brother they'd used as hostages in their wars and otherwise neglected, being too absorbed in each other, in their way, to spare much feeling. With me it was different: since they no longer really fought they had time on their hands and I got the best of them. Did they love me? The question is beside the point, somehow. Certainly they each spoiled me, mainly by giving me the false impression that I was entitled to attention nearly all the time. They played. *They* were like children, if you consider that one of the things about being a child is that you are a parasite of sorts and have to brazen it out self-righteously. I want. They were good at wanting and



I shared much more common ground with them than with my mother when I was three or four years old. Also, they measured up to the magical monsters in the story books. Grandma's idea of expressing affection to small children was to smack her lips and say, 'You're so sweet, I'm going to eat you all up!' It was not difficult to believe her, either, given her passion for sugar. Or at least I believed her enough to experience a pleasant thrill of fear. She liked to pinch, too, and she sometimes spat with hatred when she ran out of words.

Domestic life in the vicarage had a Gothic flavour at odds with the house, which was a modest eighteenth-century building of mellowed brick, with low ceilings, and attics and back stairs for help we didn't have. At the front it looked on to a small square traversed only by visitors and churchgoers. The barred



kitchen window faced this way, but in no friendly fashion, and the parlour on the other side of the front door was empty and unused, so that the house was turned in on itself, against its nature. A knock at the door produced a flurry of hiding-and-tidying (my grandmother must be given time to retreat, if she was up, and I'd have my face scrubbed with a washcloth) in case the visitor was someone who'd have to be invited in and shown to the sitting-room at the back which – although a bit damp and neglected – was always 'kept nice in case'.

If the caller was on strictly Church business, he'd be shown upstairs to Grandfather's study, lined with bookcases in which the books all had the authors' names and titles on their spines blacked out as a precaution against would-be borrowers who'd suddenly take a fancy to Dickens or Marie Corelli. His bedroom led off his study and was dark, under the yew tree's shadow, and smelled like him. Across the landing was my mother's room, where I slept too when I was small, and round a turn to the right my grandmother's, with coal and sticks piled under

the bed, redolent of Pond's face cream, powder, scent, smelling salts and her town clothes in mothballs, along with a litter of underwear and stockings.

On this floor, too, was a stately lavatory, wallpapered in a perching peacock design, all intertwined feathers and branches you could contemplate for hours – which I did, legs dangling from the high wooden seat. When the chain was pulled the water tanks on the attic floor gurgled and sang. In the other attics there were apples laid out on newspaper on the floors, gently mummifying. It just wasn't a spooky house, despite the suggestive cellars, and the fact that we relied on lamps and candles. All of Hanmer did that, in any case, except for farmers who had their own generators. In the kitchen the teapot sat on the hob all day and everyone ate at different times.

There was a word that belonged to the house: 'dilapidations'. It was one of the first long words I knew, for it was repeated like a mantra. The Church charged incumbents a kind of levy for propping up its crumbling real estate and those five syllables were the key. If only Grandfather could cut down on the dilapidations there'd be a new dawn of amenity and comfort, and possibly some change left over. Leaks, dry rot, broken panes and crazy hinges (of which we had plenty) were, looked at rightly, a potential source of income. Whether he ever succeeded I don't know. Since the word went on and on, he can't have got more than a small rebate and no one ever plugged the leaks. What's certain is that we were frequently penniless and there were always embarrassments about credit. Food rationing and clothes coupons must have been a godsend since they provided a cover for our indigence. As long as austerity lasted, the vicarage could maintain its shaky claims to gentility. There was virtue in shabbiness. Grandfather had his rusty cassock, Grandmother her mothballed wardrobe and my mother

had one or two pre-war outfits that just about served. Underwear was yellowed and full of holes, minus elastic. Indoors, our top layers were ragged too: matted jumpers, socks and stockings laddered and in wrinkles round the ankles, safety pins galore. Outside we could pass muster, even if my overcoat was at first too big (I would grow into it), then all at once too small, without ever for a moment being the right size.

In those years almost the whole country wore this ill-fitting uniform designed for non-combatants – serviceable colours, grating textures, tell-tale unfaded hems that had been let down, bulky tucks. Our true household craziness and indifference didn't express itself in clothes, but in more intimate kinds of squalor: for instance, nearly never washing the bits no one could see. This was almost a point of vicarage principle, a measure of our hostility to the world outside and separateness from it. Inside our clothes civilisation had lapsed. And this wasn't to do with money.

Grandma had the scented soap, but she didn't use it – she bought it for its smell, and kept it wrapped in tissue paper in drawers and trunks. Her line was that her skin was too sensitive for soap and water. We even had a bathroom, but somehow the only way to wash was to boil the kettle and fill a bowl, and do bits – very little bits and usually the same bits – at a time. The resulting tidemarks, in my case round my neck, wrists and legs, would be desperately scrubbed at from time to time. Hair was another problem, a tangle of troubles: brushing was usually felt to be enough of a trauma, without the business of tangling it up all over again with washing, so that my pigtails stayed plaited for days on end. Our secret grubbiness was yet another thing that set us apart. If other children were dirty, that meant they were common, their parents were foully neglectful and slummy, you could catch things from them. One of

Grandma's favourite terms of abuse, in fact, was 'dirty' – villagers were dirty, callers were dirty, I mustn't play with dirty children. So there were two different kinds of dirt, theirs and ours. It was a most metaphysical distinction, as befitted the vicarage.

As if to demonstrate the point, next door to us, also fronting on to the square, was a sixteenth-century tumbledown timber and brick cottage crammed with children I wasn't supposed to mix with – the Duckets, one of Hanmer's most shameless tribes. The wall that divided us from them provided me with a perch from which I could look down into their back garden. Our side had a lawn with borders and apple trees, and was neglected and overgrown and peaceful. Theirs was like a bomb-site, a muddy, cratered expanse with twisted pieces of old prams and



bike frames, and shards of crockery embedded among straggly weeds and currant bushes. The Duckets epitomised what my grandmother meant by 'dirty': they were openly poor (the father was a farm labourer), they bred like rabbits and they spilled out of their house wearing their ragged hand-me-downs for all to see.

The vicarage was a secret slum, but the Duckets' doors were always open, so you could see Mrs Ducket with her hair in curlers running about bare-legged in slippers, or – even more scandalously – sitting down with a cup of tea and a fag. They had no secrets. Their kitchen drain (on the opposite side to us) disgorged a slow stream of soapy slime and tea-leaves into the open gutter that ran along the main village street. The Duckets kept yappy dogs and skinny cats, and had kittens and ferrets in their pockets; they didn't go to church, although sometimes one or two of the children would be spruced up and sent to Sunday School. While I was forbidden the square, they were positively driven out of their house, back and front, in all weathers, clutching wedges of bread and damson jam. They reached over our wall and picked the apples, according to Grandma. And (the crowning horror) they had bugs in their hair.

The Duckets made me feel lonely. Even the bugs were more fascinating than frightening. Once or twice I managed to 'play' with Edna, the girl nearest to my own age, through the crack in our side gate. She squatted in the square, I squatted in the vicarage kitchen yard; I squeezed my dolls through the gap one by one for her to look at and she squeezed them back. But otherwise I'd climb the wall and sit astride, watching Duckets in the plural, whenever I was left to my own devices. Which wasn't often. Grandpa and I must have pottered about in church almost every day, and the echoing spaces, the stained glass and

the smell of Brasso, chrysanthemums, damp pew-oak and iron mould from the choir's surplices were heady compensations for isolation. He'd tell me stories and read me to sleep at night, when he'd often drop off first, stretched out on the couch, mouth open, snoring, his beaky profile lit up by the candle. In fact, he got so impatient with my favourite books (which both he and I knew by heart) that one momentous day, before I was four, he taught me to read in self-defence. This confirmed me as his creature.

I knew my name came out of one of the blacked-out books – Lorna from *Lorna Doone* – and that he'd chosen it. Now he'd given me a special key to his world. We were even closer allies afterwards, so that when he took me with him in the rattling Singer to Whitchurch, and into the bar of the Fox and Goose down Green End, it never occurred to me to tell on him. There were several expeditions like that. He was well known in drinking circles and was looked on as something of a speciality act, a cynical and colourful talker, always with his dog-collar to set him apart. I was the perfect alibi, since neither my mother nor my grandmother had any idea that there were pubs so low and lawless that they would turn a blind eye to children. Few were willing to, however; and there were other times when I found myself sitting outside on the steps of one of his favourite haunts, an unfriendly place with a revolving door called the Lord Hill, in the company of streetwise kids a lot more scary than the Duckets. Perhaps I did tell about that, or perhaps someone spotted me: at any rate, the pub outings came to an end.

Not the collusion, though. I'd kneel on the threadbare rug in his study while he worked on his sermon, or talked to the odd visitor, pulling out the books and puzzling over big words. Sometimes he'd show off my reading to strangers, but for the

most part I was meant (this was the point of it, after all) to be quiet. When he was in very good moods he would draw pictures for me, starting mysteriously from the vanishing point and drawing out the rest into perspective. I learned that trick too, never very well, but well enough to disconcert people. Our mutual 'minding' turned by untidy stages into a sort of education. Since he was a man of many wasted talents, not only with words and images but also music, I might have had a full set of pre-school 'accomplishments', except that I was tone-deaf. Despite that, I was made a member of the choir as soon as I could sit still long enough – under strict instructions to open and shut my mouth in silence, along with the words. I was quite useful, in fact: I could be shifted across from the girls' bench to the boys' (my pigtails bundled up into my cap) depending on where there were the most gaps. Watching Grandpa dress up in the vestry, processing behind him, listening to him intone the liturgy and preach, I basked in his reflected glory.

I took to lining up my toys in a corner of the garden I called 'the secondary school', where I lectured them and told them stories. More than once they got left out overnight and were brought in sodden in the morning, to be dried out in the oven of the kitchen range. My teddy, a utility bear with a flabby square stomach made out of flowered cotton, was scorched ever after. An omen there.

I was going to have to go to school soon and that meant the village school, which would make nonsense of the dirt distinction, and – as it turned out – leave scorch-marks on my spoiled soul too. There was some reluctance to send me there sooner than need be, but the temptation must have become irresistible. When Grandpa was out, or hung-over, or not in the mood, I would wander the house in an ecstasy of self-pity,

wailing 'What can I do-o-o?' over and over again, tears dripping down. This was my own precocious contribution to the economy of frustration and want, and nobody could stand it. If the day was fine, Grandma might take me out into the garden, where we'd exorcise my misery by attacking the brambles and nettles with sharp scissors, pretending they were Grandpa, or Duckets, or other people on her hit list ('Ugh! Nasty old thing! Wicked old devil!'). She got even more fun out of this than I did, but she often didn't feel energetic enough for such games. So at four and a bit I went to school, and the whole village gave a shake and rearranged itself. I got bugs in my hair and started to lead a double life: one of the many – Hanmer school had a hundred-odd pupils, aged four to fourteen, in 1947 – and yet the sole vicarage child. I put about the story that you could play in the churchyard if you played with me.