

"Don't Look Now"

"Don't look now but that man has a hook for a hand."

I had overheard this whispered comment many times. My response to the poorly disguised, over-the-shoulder glances depended on my mood and the situation. Sometimes I would just cover the item of curiosity with a glove and look the other way.

I was also known to give the onlookers a friendly wave.

This is my story.

I was enjoying the view from the cottage, looking down to the stream running through the wooded valley on its way to the bay. Billy pricked his ears. "Quiet boy" I hushed him, "Don't bark now". It was probably deer foraging in the undergrowth. Then, as the day's first beams of sunlight broke through the trees, I saw her. She was striding along the track leading up to the old manor house, followed by a furtive dog which was sniffing everywhere. She walked confidently, despite the track being out of bounds on a private estate. I thought about challenging her, making her turn back with a flea in her ear. After all, it was my job. Being the gamekeeper I should really put the fear of God into any intruders. Usually, I would have done so, assisted by Billy barking as ferociously as is possible for a black labrador. Waving the hook where my left hand should be was usually enough to get them running.

This time something made me hold back. Intuition, premonition, perhaps. She was different. I'd seen her before as she walked the coastpath up to the headland. She was young, in her late teens or early twenties and displayed an attractive arrogance, a maverick quality. I liked that. She had an air about her, a desire to explore and discover the secrets of these parts. When the track turned left and started uphill, we followed her. She was close to the old house now. It had become derelict since the owners moved out and was hidden by overgrown gardens, adding mystery to its precarious, sad and neglected state.

She seemed to know the house was there and when she pushed between two rhododendron bushes it appeared in front of her, just thirty yards away.

She looked mesmerised, like a rabbit in the headlights, taking in the details of the house, appreciating its symmetry despite the ivy shroud spreading over the front walls. She walked forwards and reached out, placing her hands against the stonework. It was then that her dog stumbled upon Billy in our vantage point among the bushes. This time I couldn't stop Billy barking and the dog ran off with its tail between its legs. She followed, back down the track to the coast path.

I saw her again, a few days later. She was rowing a small dinghy along the river. I remember being impressed by her ability pulling on the oars against the ebbing tide and the east wind. There was talk about her in the Ship Inn. I earwigged the conversation as I sat drinking my beer. It was mostly in her favour. Her family were from London, although she had a foreign-sounding name. Theatrical people, arty-types, living in a holiday home on the other side of the river. She'd been asking questions about boat-building, claimed to be researching local history for a book she was writing. Educated in Paris. Ooh La La. This made me think about my younger days. I suppose, in a way, I had also been educated in France, well Belgium really. The lessons I learned were how to survive hell on earth in muddy, stinking trenches with the smell of rotting flesh wafting across from no-mans land, so rank it made me sick. I learned how to appreciate the simple things; the dawn of a new day, the birds singing, breathing, sleeping.

Anyway, one day I was loading a shell into a field gun and it exploded in my hands. In a split second my life changed forever. The bullet that hit the shell was my ticket home. I was patched up in a military hospital and the doctors told me, 'You'll be fine, nothing hurts for long.'

After the war I was offered a job as gamekeeper on the estate. I learned how to hold a gun with my hook and fire it with my thumb and first finger, the only digits remaining on my right hand. My job was mainly to raise pheasants for the shoot as this was a regular source of income for the estate. I was given the use of the cottage and I kept myself to myself.

My dogs were my only companions. I liked it that way. Billy was my favourite. His affection was always unconditional. He understood me, accepted me for what I was and he and I were a team. We had no great desires other than to enjoy the passing of the seasons in this beautiful place we called the happy valley. I knew a butcher in town who would give me good money for venison, no questions asked. Usually, at the week-end I would walk into town and enjoy a beer in a pub, but mostly I stayed away from people. It was better that way.

One evening in The Ship, I noticed a magazine left on a table. Her photo was on the front cover. No doubt about it, although she was dressed all posh, not in her usual trousers and sailor-top. The barman told me one of her stories had been published in the magazine.

A few weeks later, there was a knock on the door. I'd been expecting her. I opened it and she stood there, smiling. "Are you Reg May? You don't know me, but ... " I interrupted. "It's okay, I know who you are and why you're here, come inside." Billy wagged his tail. She stroked his head and gave him a treat.

She had written to the estate owner asking for permission to walk in the grounds. This had been granted, with the understanding that she call on me and introduce herself. We had tea and a chat and I said that Billy and I would look out for her. As she left I waved my hook and shouted after her, "You be careful now, there's some crazy people out there!"

I had a good life in the valley with my dogs. As a young man I believed I could make a difference by going to war. How wrong I was. However, I do think I may have made a difference to some people. How? Well, if I'd been a jobsworth and made sure she'd never set foot in the estate and not seen the old house, then maybe, just maybe, that book would never have been written. You know, the one with the opening line about dreaming of returning. That book earned her a small fortune which she used to renovate the old house, having already persuaded the owner to agree to a long-term rental.

It took a new roof, windows and doors as well as installation of mains water, electricity and heating before she could move in. Quite an achievement, especially during the second war, but she was determined to make the old house her home.

She'd married an army major, who I remember from Belgium. The Battle of Cambrai, but that's another story. They had three children and the old house was their home for twenty years until the major died.

A few years later she moved out and the lordly ones were able to take up residence in their family home again, restored beyond its former glory and all because a gamekeeper with a hook for hand had taken a shine to a young lady from London!

All good things come to an end and I moved out of the cottage to live in a flat in town. I'm now in a care home where I am well looked after. I enjoy the views out over the river. When I left the cottage, two eccentric elderly ladies moved in there. One of them was blind. I only met them once but they gave me the creeps! Don't look now, but I wouldn't be surprised if they became characters in one of her stories

And what happened to Billy? Well, when he died I was going to bury him under the apple tree down in the valley. However, she said she had a better idea. On the hill behind the cottage is a granite obelisk. We dug a hole just behind and buried him underneath. Such a large headstone, but one Billy deserved.

And as for me, the old man, I only have one real regret. Nothing to do with the war. It's that I never learned to read or write.

Reg May.

(transcribed by S. Miles, from recordings of conversations made at River View Retirement Home, in 1975)