

The boy on the river

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The Boy On The River

from the Journals of Denton Welch

14 December, Monday

Suddenly I remember that afternoon by the river near Henfield. It must have been in the summer of 1933 when I was in a sort of disgrace with my aunt and grandfather because I had left China to go to an art school and would not 'settle down'. My aunt had said, 'If you want to study art, why don't you do some work? You should be sketching every day; instead of that, you wander in the fields doing nothing at all from morning till night.'

I left the house and wandered again as she had described, only this time I wandered on my bicycle and got as far as the river. It is a forgotten place, because the road-bridge was washed away a hundred years ago and now there is only a footbridge and a track across the fields.

I threw my bicycle into the hedge and started off across the tufty grass. In the winter, I thought, this will all be flooded. Now it was hot and heavenly with the scented, dried-up grass and a loneliness almost piercing.

I sat down on the bank where I had sometimes seen small boys bathing. The river was wider and deeper there and one could dive from the bridge.

I sat there nursing my solitude yet longing for somebody to talk to. And as I longed, I saw approaching from the old farmhouse on the opposite bank, a brown figure—almost the colour of the landscape—that sort of worn, lichen, olive green-brown.

It crossed the bridge and walked along the bank in my direction. While he was still some way off I saw that his hair was of that pale 'washed' gold, because it suddenly glinted in the sun as if it were metal.

He came up to me coolly, with the loose, bent-kneed stride of someone used to walking over rough fields.

'Thinking of going in?' he said pleasantly and in an unexpectedly 'educated' voice.

I was so pleased at his sudden appearance and so curious that I looked him straight in the face and smiled. He smiled back.

I saw the gold hair, untidy and rough, gold eyebrows too, sunburnt chestnut skin and the vivid brick-dust cheeks and lips which framed the almond-white teeth. Not distinguished or handsome—the ears were thick, the nose was short and thick, the lips were thick, all the details unfinished, yet the skin, the teeth, the eyes, the hair had that wonderful, shorter-than-springtime, polished, shining look as of some liquid or varnish of life spread over the whole body. The shirt and the breeches were the colour of the mud and the cow-dung caked on them. By their dullness and drabness they stimulated one's imagination so that one could almost feel the tingling fire and coolness of the body they sheathed.

'Lusty' and 'rough' were the words that flooded through me as I

looked at him. In their right sense they fitted him perfectly. As you can see I was extremely impressed by him. He must have been a few years older than I was and my capacity for hero-worship was enormous at thime. It still is. He was all that I was not—stalwart, confident and settled into a 'manly' life.

The only thing I could not quite understand was the 'educated' voice. It struck a slightly jarring note, yet made communication much easier and more 'natural'. I started the eternal game of placing people and fitting them into their right pigeon-holes. He could not be ordinary 'gentry'. Nobody would wear quite such dirty clothes or such hob-nailed boots unless they were really working. Besides, he had come, as if from home, from that ancient farmhouse, which, by its untouched appearance where no single beam was exposed, proved that no 'improver' had been near it since the eighteenth century.

On the other hand he could not be an ordinary farm hand. I was just deciding that perhaps he was the farmer's ambitiously educated son, when he stopped all my dreary surmises by saying that he was down here learning farming—at least I think he said this, but I am not absolutely sure for at that moment he started undressing.

With the words, 'If there are any women round here they'll get an eyeful!' he started to pull his shirt over his head. I was shocked at the whiteness of the skin on his chest and upper arms when he stood up in only his trousers. They were junket-white, but matt, as if powdered with oatmeal. The long gloves of his burnt arms and hands and the bronze helmet of his face and neck joining this whiteness, did something curious to me. I could only gape and wonder as he stripped his wonderful body. He unlaced his boots and kicked them off, then peeled down his thick and sweat-sticky stockings. The breeches he pulled off roughly, and stood revealed with the gold hair glinting on his body as well as on his head.

As I say, I could only watch. This was not just an ordinary man taking off his clothes for a swim—and yet it was. It was this prosaic, mundane quality and the bubbing-up spring of some poetry which held me enthralled.

He flung back his hair with the gesture which is considered girlish when used by effeminate men. (When used by others it has, of course, a quite different effect.) Then he dived into the muddy water and came up spitting and laughing. 'Bloody filthy water,' he shouted, and spluttered, 'bloody filthy water, but it's lovely.'

He stood up near the bank, so that the water gartered his legs round the middle of his calves. The hairs on his body and legs dripped like sparkles of water. He looked like a truncated statue fixed to a base in the bowl of a fountain.

He whirled his arms round, dived, and swam about for some time; then he crawled up the bank and lay down beside me on the grass. As he lay with his face to the sky and his eyes shut I watched the rivulets coursing off his body. The main stream flowed down his chest, between the hard pectorals, over the mushroom-smooth belly, to be lost in curly

gold hair. I could just descry the quicksilver drops weaving a painful way through the golden bush.

He opened his eyes and saw me staring at him; he didn't seem to mind. He sat up and started to rub his arms and chest brutally with a dirty towel.

'I'm working down here at the moment. What do you do?' he asked, abruptly but without giving offence.

'I, I'm at an art school,' I got out with difficulty. The shame and fear of sinking in his estimation were very real.

'Oh—my sister's a very clever artist, too,' he said confidently. 'She's been studying for some time and has got a scholarship. She's going abroad.'

He continued talking about his sister and his family. I got the impression, perhaps wrongly, that he was a little in disgrace too. This thrilled me. I felt I had found a brother. When he talked of being drunk and barwling, I was tremendously impressed and horrified—to be so cool and casual about it all! Then I had the fear that the beer would decay his teeth or that they would be knocked out in the fights. This caused me the sort of pain one feels when some beautifully-made and intricate thing is threatened.

He asked me what I had been doing all my holidays and I told him that I had been for one walking tour down to Devonshire and would soon be going for another, as my aunt obviously did not want me at my grandfather's.

'I'd like to do that too,' he said decisively. 'I'd like to go abroad, walking and paying my way wherever I went. My parents wouldn't give me anything, you see,' he added in explanation.

'I wouldn't like to go alone though,' he mused.

Thoughts, hopes, fears were all seething together in my head. The idea was too exciting to be considered seriously. Here, I longed to step in and say that I would go with him whenever he wanted to go, but I was much too clear-sighted not to see the difficulties of money and also of temperament. I felt that I would fall short of his daring and careless sense of power. When I would be tired or timid, he would be vigorous and scornful, and when he would be drunken and brawling I would be frankly alarmed and irritated.

'I'd like to do that too,' I said. 'Fine if we could go together some time,' I added boldly.

If there had been the slightest reluctance I would have been ashamed, but he took me perfectly seriously, saying:

'I wonder if we could ever fix it up.'

We exchanged names. He pulled on his khaki shirt and caked breeches and lost some of his magic, thus becoming more comfortable.

I knew that I would never go with him. I felt cowardly for not making it happen in some way.

He held out his hand and I shook it, wondering as I felt the horn on his palm.

‘You can always get hold of me there,’ he said, pointing to the farmhouse; then he turned and walked back along the banks.

I watched him the whole way. The legs and the shoulders and the dirty towel swung in rhythm until he passed through the little gate into the garden.

At the last sight of him I felt unbearably angry and frustrated. I jumped up and ran over the tussocks. I jerked my bicycle out of the hedge and pedalled viciously, cursing God and everybody, pouring scorn and pity in a deluge all over myself.

Now stranger, whose name I have quite forgotten—where are you now? Even if you are not dead in battle, that ‘You’ is dead and nowhere, for at most it could only have lasted a year or two—that animal magic.

(Edited by Jocelyn Brooke, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1952.)

DR. EDITH SITWELL, in her foreword to Denton Welch’s first published work, remarked of him that he was ‘that very rare being, a born writer.’ Other critics, scarcely less eminent, have hailed him as the most gifted prose writer to emerge in this country since the war. His early death at the age of thirty-three, the delayed result of a spinal injury, received thirteen years previously, was an inestimable loss to English writing; he would never, perhaps, have been a ‘great’ writer in the sense that one uses the word of Tolstoy or of Proust; yet he did possess, there can be no doubt, the authentic spark of genius, and it is impossible to say what he might not have achieved had he lived.

At the same time, he was far more than merely promising; considering the briefness of his literary career, his achievement, even as it stands, is impressive. As Dr. Sitwell says, he was a born writer, and his first book, MAIDEN VOYAGE, already had a mature self-assurance which is astonishing in such an early work.

In the years which followed his accident, during which his health grew gradually worse, he continued to produce two further novels (one of which he left unfinished), and two volumes of shorter pieces, besides much hitherto unpublished material, including the JOURNALS which comprise the present volume.

Several of his fellow writers who have read them in manuscript consider that these journals contain some of the very best of Denton Welch’s writing. They are very personal and sometimes extremely frank, and are written with a freshness and spontaneity so characteristic of all that he wrote.

They deal largely with his day-to-day occupations, but include also a number of flashbacks to his earlier life; literary personalities whom he encountered are described with disarming candour and (on occasions) not without a grain of malice; but the chief impression which emerges from the book is of a dedicated artist struggling bravely against almost overwhelming odds, to complete the tasks which he had set himself.