

Extract from Undercurrents

Fergal thought of the mud on the cycle wheel and wondered whether it could have come from near the reservoir. That seemed to interest everybody he met. During the afternoon, a farmer arrived with his tractor and trailer to collect the rubbish and stated, 'You'll have been down to it,' then interrogated Fergal on day, time, and visible details. Like Mrs Helliwell and Desmond Singleton, he did not seem particularly bothered that the water was retreating, more about what it was leaving behind.

They're all bunged up with country superstitions, he reasoned to himself. Mrs Helliwell had said: I don't like the idea of anything not decently shrouded.

These words, mingled with more personal memories, lurked at the edge of dreams and made his night restless. At last, to banish them, he forced his eyes open as he had taught himself in the last weeks. He had discovered that sleep often returned unharassingly after a wakeful pause. The trick was to prevent his mind touching painful or difficult subjects. So he threw back the sheet, recited a list of formulae and then hummed his favourite track. Halting, he became aware of the quiet, but it was not the one he had made. It was the silence of listening. He could feel it as precisely as he could see his jeans on the chair, his bed lit by the last paring of moon. Then as no more sounds came from him, the silence withdrew and Fergal thought he could distinguish murmurs that alternated in tone, made by two speakers. They rose from the room below.

For a moment he thought: Mrs Helliwell needed attention; but there had been no call to his mother. Uncertain whether he ought to investigate, he waited, heard the latch on the door click and along the passage a few muted, slow steps.

He hesitated no longer, slid off his bed, looked round for a weapon, found nothing more fearsome than his camera, and held it against a leg. Throughout the house the curtains were not drawn and, guided by moonlight, he crept from his bedroom and down the stairs. He had no plan of what to do when he came upon the intruder; he assumed that he would find him in the parlour, a neat dapper figure rifling the drawers for loot. He had not expected that it would be empty and untouched. Nor in the passage was he prepared for Gyp lying drowsy and peaceful outside Mrs Helliwell's room. And when he stood on the steps that led into the dairy, he was surprised to see, propped against the wall, not a rifle but a long stick; its handle was of antler, fashioned from a tine.

He walked back through the kitchen. Across the passage, a slit of light showed under Mrs Helliwell's door. He had to open it, but he feared what he might see. In spite of its absence elsewhere, it was blood that his imagination gave him as he knocked. Hearing her answer, he felt his body relax.

'So you're wandering,' she greeted him.

'I heard voices. Noises.'

'You were making a few noises yourself. Reciting something or other.'

'I woke up and I was trying to get back to sleep.'

'We all have our ways, but you won't manage it standing there.'

He couldn't believe they were having this conversation after someone had walked into the house, talked with her, sneaked into the dairy. Why the dairy? Looking for something? he wondered.

'I thought there was a burglar.'

Mrs Helliwell's lips twitched. 'And what were you going to do? Take a photograph?'

He looked down at the camera and felt ridiculous. 'I hadn't anything else.'

'You've got a stick.'

'I found it in the dairy.'

'Then I'd be glad if you'd take it back. That's where junk's kept in this house.'

But it had not been there when he'd searched for tools and he had seen that she recognised it.

Exasperated, he thought: She's playing games with me. So he told her, 'I'll keep it upstairs, just in case.'

'You'll do no such thing.' Her voice had risen. 'You put it back exactly where it was. Do you hear me?'

His alarm of the last five minutes was changed to anger and his stare told her that if he chose he could drop the stick and walk out. 'I heard, and another time a whole cartload of tramps can come into the house if they like and knife us all in our beds. It's not my responsibility.'

Immediately he was ashamed of his rudeness, embarrassed by the wild ludicrous words, but she nodded as if she did not consider his outburst unreasonable. 'That's how it is,' she answered.

Trying to recover and suggest sense and maturity, he told her, 'I'll put the stick back, then, but I'd better lock the door before I go up.'

'I'd rather you didn't, Fergal.' Her tone was low now, almost pleading. 'You can think I'm exaggerating, like you, but if ever the day comes when that door is barred against any creature, I'll be put in my box.'

It was not until he was lying in bed again and going over their talk that he realised the final remark was Mrs Helliwell's concession that someone had visited her, and even then it had been sidelong, oblique.

Author's comments

Some years ago, when there was a long drought, a reservoir not far from where I live began

to dry up. As the water receded, the lower courses of some buildings became visible, also the spans of two bridges and a heap of masonry that had once been a church. They were the remains of a village. Long before the reservoir was built people had left West End, seeking work, and many of its houses had stood empty. When work on the reservoir began, their crumbling walls were broken up and the trees in the gardens were sawn down. Later its church was demolished. Yet on the bed of the drying reservoir, no longer covered by water, paths trodden for centuries were still visible. I found this abandoned, ghostly place very disturbing, especially at dusk.

It became the setting for **Undercurrents**. But the book is a novel not a history and so among the many inventions is the reason for the villagers' leaving--not the shortage of work but the construction of the reservoir.

This book was long-listed for the Guardian award.

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