ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

NEWS FROM THE DUCHY

Arthur Quiller-Couch

News from the Duchy

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PIPES IN ARCADY.

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I hardly can bring myself to part with this story, it has been such a private joy to me. Moreover, that I have lain awake in the night to laugh over it is no guarantee of your being passably amused. Yourselves, I dare say, have known what it is to awake in irrepressible mirth from a dream which next morning proved to be flat and unconvincing. Well, this my pet story has some of the qualities of a dream; being absurd, for instance, and almost incredible, and even a trifle inhuman. After all, I had better change my mind, and tell you another—

But no; I will risk it, and you shall have it, just as it befel.

I had taken an afternoon's holiday to make a pilgrimage: my goal being a small parish church that lies remote from the railway, five good miles from the tiniest of country stations; my purpose to inspect—or say, rather, to contemplate—a Norman porch, for which it ought to be widely famous. (Here let me say that I have an unlearned passion for Norman architecture—to enjoy it merely, not to write about it.)

To carry me on my first stage I had taken a crawling local train that dodged its way somehow between the regular

expresses and the "excursions" that invade our Delectable Duchy from June to October. The season was high midsummer, the afternoon hot and drowsy with scents of mown hay; and between the rattle of the fast trains it seemed that we, native denizens of the Duchy, careless of observation or applause, were executing a *tour de force* in that fine indolence which has been charged as a fault against us. That we halted at every station goes without saying. Few sidings—however inconsiderable or, as it might seem, fortuitous—escaped the flattery of our prolonged sojourn. We ambled, we paused, almost we dallied with the butterflies lazily afloat over the meadow-sweet and cow-parsley beside the line; we exchanged gossip with station-masters, and received the congratulations of signalmen on the extraordinary spell of fine weather. It did not matter. Three market-women, a pedlar, and a local policeman made up with me the train's complement of passengers. I gathered that their business could wait; and as for mine—well, a Norman porch is by this time accustomed to waiting.

I will not deny that in the end I dozed at intervals in my empty smoking compartment; but wish to make it clear that I came on the Vision (as I will call it) with eyes open, and that it left me staring, wide-awake as Macbeth.

Let me describe the scene. To the left of the line as you travel westward there lies a long grassy meadow on a gentle acclivity, set with three or four umbrageous oaks and backed by a steep plantation of oak saplings. At the foot of the meadow, close alongside the line, runs a brook, which is met at the meadow's end by a second brook which crosses under the permanent way through a culvert. The united

waters continue the course of the first brook, beside the line, and maybe for half a mile farther; but, a few yards below their junction, are partly dammed by the masonry of a bridge over which a country lane crosses the railway; and this obstacle spreads them into a pool some fifteen or twenty feet wide, overgrown with the leaves of the arrow-head, and fringed with water-flags and the flowering rush.

Now I seldom pass this spot without sparing a glance for it; first because of the pool's still beauty, and secondly because many rabbits infest the meadow below the coppice, and among them for two or three years was a black fellow whom I took an idle delight in recognising. (He is gone now, and his place knows him no more; yet I continue to hope for sight of a black rabbit just there.) But this afternoon I looked out with special interest because, happening to pass down the line two days before, I had noted a gang of navvies at work on the culvert; and among them, as they stood aside to let the train pass, I had recognised my friend Joby Tucker, their ganger, and an excellent fellow to boot.

Therefore my eyes were alert as we approached the curve that opens the meadow into view, and—as I am a Christian man, living in the twentieth century—I saw this Vision: I beheld beneath the shade of the midmost oak eight men sitting stark naked, whereof one blew on a flute, one played a concertina, and the rest beat their palms together, marking the time; while before them, in couples on the sward, my gang of navvies rotated in a clumsy waltz watched by a ring of solemn ruminant kine!

I saw it. The whole scene, barring the concertina and the navvies' clothes, might have been transformed straight from

a Greek vase of the best period. Here, in this green corner of rural England on a workaday afternoon (a Wednesday, to be precise), in full sunlight, I saw this company of the early gods sitting, naked and unabashed, and piping, while twelve British navvies danced to their music. . . . I saw it; and a derisive whistle from the engine told me that driver and stoker saw it too. I was not dreaming, then. But what on earth could it mean? For fifteen seconds or so I stared at the Vision… and so the train joggled past it and rapt it from my eyes.

I can understand now the ancient stories of men who, having by hap surprised the goddesses bathing, never recovered from the shock but thereafter ran wild in the woods with their memories.

At the next station I alighted. It chanced to be the station for which I had taken my ticket; but anyhow I should have alighted there. The spell of the vision was upon me. The Norman porch might wait. It is (as I have said) used to waiting, and in fact it has waited. I have not yet made another holiday to visit it. Whether or no the market-women and the local policeman had beheld, I know not. I hope not, but now shall never know.…The engine-driver, leaning in converse with the station-master, and jerking a thumb backward, had certainly beheld. But I passed him with averted eyes, gave up my ticket, and struck straight across country for the spot.

I came to it, as my watch told me, at twenty minutes after five. The afternoon sunlight still lay broad on the meadow. The place was unchanged save for a lengthening of its oak-tree shadows. But the persons of my Vision—

naked gods and navvies—had vanished. Only the cattle stood, knee-deep in the pool, lazily swishing their tails in protest against the flies; and the cattle could tell me nothing.

Just a fortnight later, as I spent at St. Blazey junction the forty odd minutes of repentance ever thoughtfully provided by our railway company for those who, living in Troy, are foolish enough to travel, I spied at some distance below the station a gang of men engaged in unloading rubble to construct a new siding for the clay-traffic, and at their head my friend Mr. Joby Tucker. The railway company was consuming so much of my time that I felt no qualms in returning some part of the compliment, and strolled down the line to wish Mr. Tucker good day. "And, by the bye," I added, "you owe me an explanation. What on earth were you doing in Treba meadow two Wednesdays ago—you and your naked friends?"

Joby leaned on his measuring rod and grinned from ear to ear.

"You see'd us?" he asked, and, letting his eyes travel along the line, he chuckled to himself softly and at length. "Well, now, I'm glad o' that. 'Fact is, I've been savin' up to tell 'ee about it, but (thinks I) when I tells Mr. Q. he won't never believe."

"I certainly saw you," I answered; "but as for believing—"

"Iss, iss," he interrupted, with fresh chucklings; "a fair knock-out, wasn' it?…You see, they was blind—poor fellas!"

"Drunk?"

"No, sir—blind—'pity the pore blind'; three-parts blind, anyways, an' undergoin' treatment for it."

"Nice sort of treatment!"

"Eh? You don't understand. See'd us from the train, did 'ee? Which train?"

"The 1.35 ex Millbay."

"Wish I'd a-knowed you was watchin' us. I'd ha' waved my hat as you went by, or maybe blawed 'ee a kiss—that bein' properer to the occasion, come to think."

Joby paused, drew the back of a hand across his laughter-moistened eyes, and pulled himself together, steadying his voice for the story.

"I'll tell 'ee what happened, from the beginnin'. A gang of us had been sent down, two days before, to Treba meadow, to repair the culvert there. Soon as we started to work we found the whole masonry fairly rotten, and spent the first afternoon (that was Monday) underpinnin', while I traced out the extent o' the damage. The farther I went, the worse I found it; the main mischief bein' a leak about midway in the culvert, on the down side; whereby the water, perc'latin' through, was unpackin' the soil, not only behind the masonry of the culvert, but right away down for twenty yards and more behind the stone-facing where the line runs alongside the pool. All this we were forced to take down, shorein' as we went, till we cut back pretty close to the rails. The job, you see, had turned out more serious than reported; and havin' no one to consult, I kept the men at it. "By Wednesday noon we had cut back so far as we needed, shorein' very careful as we went, and the men workin' away cheerful, with the footboards of the expresses whizzin' by close over their heads, so's it felt like havin' your hair brushed by machinery. By the time we knocked off for

dinner I felt pretty easy in mind, knowin' we'd broke the back o' the job.

"Well, we touched pipe and started again. Bein' so close to the line I'd posted a fella with a flag—Bill Martin it was—to keep a look out for the down-trains; an' about three o'clock or a little after he whistled one comin'. I happened to be in the culvert at the time, but stepped out an' back across the brook, just to fling an eye along the embankment to see that all was clear. Clear it was, an' therefore it surprised me a bit, as the train hove in sight around the curve, to see that she had her brakes on, hard, and was slowin' down to stop. My first thought was that Bill Martin must have taken some scare an' showed her the red flag. But that was a mistake; besides she must have started the brakes before openin' sight on Bill."

"Then why on earth was she pulling up?" I asked. "It couldn't be signals."

"There ain't no signal within a mile of Treba meadow, up or down. She was stoppin' because—but just you let me tell it in my own way. Along she came, draggin' hard on her brakes an' whistlin'. I knew her for an excursion, and as she passed I sized it up for a big school-treat. There was five coaches, mostly packed with children, an' on one o' the coaches was a board—'Exeter to Penzance.' The four front coaches had corridors, the tail one just ord'nary compartments.

"Well, she dragged past us to dead-slow, an' came to a standstill with her tail coach about thirty yards beyond where I stood, and, as you might say, with its footboard right overhangin' the pool. You mayn't remember it, but the

line just there curves pretty sharp to the right, and when she pulled up, the tail coach pretty well hid the rest o' the train from us. Five or six men, hearin' the brakes, had followed me out of the culvert and stood by me, wonderin' why the stoppage was. The rest were dotted about along the slope of th' embankment. And then the curiousest thing happened—about the curiousest thing I seen in all my years on the line. A door of the tail coach opened and a man stepped out. He didn't jump out, you understand, nor fling hisself out; he just stepped out into air, and with that his arms and legs cast themselves anyways an' he went down sprawlin' into the pool. It's easy to say we ought t' have run then an' there an' rescued him; but for the moment it stuck us up starin' an',—Wait a bit! You han't heard the end.

"I hadn't fairly caught my breath, before another man stepped out! He put his foot down upon nothing, same as the first, overbalanced just the same, and shot after him base-over-top into the water.

"Close 'pon the second man's heels appeared a third.... Yes, sir, I know now what a woman feels like when she's goin' to have the scritches. I'd have asked someone to pinch me in the fleshy part o' the leg, to make sure I was alive an' awake, but the power o' speech was taken from us. We just stuck an' stared.

"What beat everything was the behaviour of the train, so to say. There it stood, like as if it'd pulled up alongside the pool for the very purpose to unload these unfort'nit' men; an' yet takin' no notice whatever. Not a sign o' the guard—not a head poked out anywheres in the line o' windows—only the sun shinin', an' the steam escapin', an' out o' the

rear compartment this procession droppin' out an' high-divin' one after another.

"Eight of 'em! Eight, as I am a truth-speakin' man—but there! you saw 'em with your own eyes. Eight! and the last of the eight scarce in the water afore the engine toots her whistle an' the train starts on again, round the curve an' out o' sight.

"She didn' leave us no time to doubt, neither, for there the poor fellas were, splashin' an' blowin', some of 'em bleatin' for help, an' gurglin', an' for aught we know drownin' in three-to-four feet o' water. So we pulled ourselves together an' ran to give 'em first aid.

"It didn' take us long to haul the whole lot out and ashore; and, as Providence would have it, not a bone broken in the party. One or two were sufferin' from sprains, and all of 'em from shock (but so were we, for that matter), and between 'em they must ha' swallowed a bra' few pints o' water, an' muddy water at that. I can't tell ezackly when or how we discovered they was all blind, or near-upon blind. It may ha' been from the unhandiness of their movements an' the way they clutched at us an' at one another as we pulled 'em ashore. Hows'ever, blind they were; an' I don't remember that it struck us as anyways singular, after what we'd been through a'ready. We fished out a concertina, too, an' a silver-mounted flute that was bobbin' among the weeds.

"The man the concertina belonged to—a tall fresh-complexioned young fella he was, an' very mild of manner—turned out to be a sort o' leader o' the party; an' he was the

first to talk any sense. 'Th-thank you,' he said. 'They told us Penzance was the next stop.'

"'Hey?' says I.

"'They told us,' he says again, plaintive-like, feelin' for his spectacles an' not finding 'em, 'that Penzance was the next stop.'

"'Bound for Penzance, was you?' I asks.

"'For the Land's End,' says he, his teeth chatterin'. I set it down the man had a stammer, but 'twas only the shock an' the chill of his duckin'.

"'Well,' says I, 'this ain't the Land's End, though I dessay it feels a bit like it. Then you wasn' *thrown* out?' I says.

"'Th-thrown out?' says he. 'N-no. They told us Penzance was the next stop.'

"'Then,' says I, 'if you got out accidental you've had a most providential escape, an' me an' my mates don't deserve less than to hear about it. There's bound to be inquiries after you when the guard finds your compartment empty an' the door open. May be the train'll put back; more likely they'll send a search-party; but anyways you're all wet through, an' the best thing for health is to off wi' your clothes an' dry 'em, this warm afternoon.'

"'I dessay,' says he, 'you'll have noticed that our eyesight is affected.'

"'All the better if you're anyways modest,' says I. 'You couldn' find a retirededer place than this—not if you searched: an' *we* don't mind.'

"Well, sir, the end was we stripped 'em naked as Adam, an' spread their clothes to dry 'pon the grass. While we tended on 'em the mild young man told us how it had

happened. It seems they'd come by excursion from Exeter. There's a blind home at Exeter, an' likewise a cathedral choir, an' Sunday school, an' a boys' brigade, with other sundries; an' this year the good people financin' half a dozen o' these shows had discovered that by clubbin' two sixpences together a shillin' could be made to go as far as eighteenpence; and how, doin' it on the co-op, instead of an afternoon treat for each, they could manage a two days' outin' for all—Exeter to Penzance an' the Land's End, sleepin' one night at Penzance, an' back to Exeter at some ungodly hour the next. It's no use your askin' me why a man three-parts blind should want to visit the Land's End. There's an attraction about that place, an' that's all you can say. Everybody knows as 'tisn' worth seein', an' yet everybody wants to see it. So why not a blind man?

"Well, this Happy Holiday Committee (as they called themselves) got the Company to fix them up with a special excursion; an' our blind friends—bein' sensitive, or maybe a touch above mixin' wi' the schoolchildren an' infants—had packed themselves into this rear compartment separate from the others. One of 'em had brought his concertina, an' another his flute, and what with these an' other ways of passin' the time they got along pretty comfortable till they came to Gwinear Road: an' there for some reason they were held up an' had to show their tickets. Anyways, the staff at Gwinear Road went along the train collectin' the halves o' their return tickets. 'What's the name o' this station?' asks my blind friend, very mild an' polite. 'Gwinear Road,' answers the porter;' Penzance next stop.' Somehow this gave him the notion that they were nearly arrived, an' so,

you see, when the train slowed down a few minutes later an' came to a stop, he took the porter at his word, an' stepped out. Simple, wasn't it? But in my experience the curiousest things in life are the simplest of all, once you come to inquire into 'em."

"What I don't understand," said I, "is how the train came to stop just there."

Mr. Tucker gazed at me rather in sorrow than in anger. "I thought," said he, "'twas agreed I should tell the story in my own way. Well, as I was saying, we got those poor fellas there, all as naked as Adam, an' we was helpin' them all we could—some of us wringin' out their underlinen an' spreading it to dry, others collectin' their hats, an' tryin' which fitted which, an' others even dredgin' the pool for their handbags an' spectacles an' other small articles, an' in the middle of it someone started to laugh. You'll scarce believe it, but up to that moment there hadn't been so much as a smile to hand round; an' to this day I don't know the man's name that started it—for all I can tell you, I did it myself. But this I do know, that it set off the whole gang like a motor-engine. There was a sort of 'click,' an' the next moment—

"Laugh? I never heard men laugh like it in my born days. Sort of recoil, I s'pose it must ha' been, after the shock. Laugh? There was men staggerin' drunk with it and there was men rollin' on the turf with it; an' there was men cryin' with it, holdin' on to a stitch in their sides an' beseechin' everyone also to hold hard. The blind men took a bit longer to get going; but by gosh, sir! once started they laughed to do your heart good. O Lord, O Lord! I wish you could ha' see

that mild-mannered spokesman. Somebody had fished out his spectacles for en, and that was all the clothing he stood in—that, an' a grin. He fairly beamed; an' the more he beamed the more we rocked, callin' on en to take pity an' stop it.

"Soon as I could catch a bit o' breath, 'Land's End next stop!' gasped I. 'O, but this *is* the Land's End! This is what the Land's End oughter been all the time, an' never was yet. O, for the Lord's sake,' says I, 'stop beamin', and pick up your concertina an' pitch us a tune!'

"Well, he did too. He played us 'Home, sweet home' first of all— 'mid pleasure an' palaces—an' the rest o' the young men sat around en an' started clappin' their hands to the tune; an' then some fool slipped an arm round my waist. I'm only thankful he didn't kiss me. Didn't think of it, perhaps; couldn't ha' been that he wasn't capable. It must ha' been just then your train came along. An' about twenty minutes later, when we was gettin' our friends back into their outfits, we heard the search-engine about half a mile below, whistlin' an' feelin' its way up very cautious towards us.

"They was sun-dried an' jolly as sandhoppers—all their eight of 'em—as we helped 'em on board an' wished 'em ta-ta! The search-party couldn' understand at all what had happened—in so short a time, too—to make us so cordial; an' somehow we didn' explain—neither we nor the blind men. I reckon the whole business had been so loonatic we felt it kind of holy. But the pore fellas kept wavin' back to us as they went out o' sight around the curve, an' maybe for a mile beyond. I never heard," Mr. Tucker wound up

meditatively, "if they ever reached the Land's End. I wonder?"

"But, excuse me once more," said I. "How came the train to stop as it did?"

"To be sure. I said just now that the curiousest things in life were, gen'rally speakin', the simplest. One o' the schoolchildren in the fore part of the train—a small nipper of nine—had put his head out o' the carriage window and got his cap blown away. That's all. Bein' a nipper of some resource, he wasted no time, but touched off the communicatin' button an' fetched the whole train to a standstill. George Simmons, the guard, told me all about it last week, when I happened across him an' asked the same question you've been askin'. George was huntin' through the corridors to find out what had gone wrong; that's how the blind men stepped out without his noticin'. He pretended to be pretty angry wi' the young tacker. 'Do 'ee know,' says George, 'it's a five pound fine if you stop a train without good reason?' 'But I *had* a good reason,' says the child. 'My mother gave 'levenpence for that cap, an' 'tis a bran' new one.'"

OUR LADY OF GWITHIAN.

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"Mary, mother, well thou be!
Mary, mother, think on me;

Sweete Lady, maiden clean,
Shield me from ill, shame, and teen;
Shield me, Lady, from villainy
And from all wicked company!"
Speculum Christiani.

Here is a little story I found one day among the legends of the Cornish Saints, like a chip in porridge. If you love simplicity, I think it may amuse you.

Lovey Bussow was wife of Daniel Bussow, a tin-streamer of Gwithian Parish. He had brought her from Camborne, and her neighbours agreed that there was little amiss with the woman if you overlooked her being a bit weak in the head. They set her down as "not exactly." At the end of a year she brought her husband a fine boy. It happened that the child was born just about the time of year the tin-merchants visited St. Michael's Mount; and the father—who streamed in a small way, and had no beast of burden but his donkey, or "naggur"—had to load up panniers and drive his tin down to the shore-market with the rest, which for him meant an absence of three weeks, or a fortnight at the least.

So Daniel kissed his wife and took his leave; and the neighbours, who came to visit her as soon as he was out of the way, all told her the same story—that until the child was safely baptised it behoved her to be very careful and keep her door shut for fear of the Piskies. The Piskies, or fairy-folk (they said), were themselves the spirits of children that had died unchristened, and liked nothing better than the chance to steal away an unchristened child to join their nation of mischief.

Lovey listened to them, and it preyed on her mind. She reckoned that her best course was to fetch a holy man as quickly as possible to baptise the child and make the cross over him. So one afternoon, the mite being then a bare fortnight old, she left him asleep in his cradle and, wrapping a shawl over her head, hurried off to seek Meriden the Priest.

Meriden the Priest dwelt in a hut among the sandhills, a bowshot beyond St. Gwithian's Chapel on the seaward side, as you go out to Godrevy. He had spent the day in barking his nets, and was spreading them out to dry on the short turf of the towans; but on hearing Lovey's errand, he good-naturedly dropped his occupation and, staying only to fill a bottle with holy water, walked back with her to her home.

As they drew near, Lovey was somewhat perturbed to see that the door, which she had carefully closed, was standing wide open. She guessed, however, that a neighbour had called in her absence, and would be inside keeping watch over the child. As she reached the threshold, the dreadful truth broke upon her: the kitchen was empty, and so was the cradle!

It made her frantic for a while. Meriden the Priest offered what consolation he could, and suggested that one of her neighbours had called indeed, and finding the baby alone in the cottage, had taken it off to her own home to guard it. But this he felt to be a forlorn hope, and it proved a vain one. Neither search nor inquiry could trace the infant. Beyond a doubt the Piskies had carried him off.

When this was established so that even the hopefullest of the good-wives shook her head over it, Lovey grew calm of

a sudden and (as it seemed) with the calm of despair. She grew obstinate too.

"My blessed cheeld!" she kept repeating. "The tender worm of 'en! But I'll have 'en back, if I've to go to the naughty place to fetch 'en. Why, what sort of a tale be I to pitch to my Dan'l, if he comes home and his firstborn gone?"

They shook their heads again over this. It would be a brave blow for the man, but (said one to another) he that marries a fool must look for thorns in his bed.

"What's done can't be undone," they told her. "You'd best let a two-three of us stay the night and coax 'ee from frettin'. It's bad for the system, and you so soon over child-birth."

Lovey opened her eyes wide on them.

"Lord's sake!" she said, "you don't reckon I'm goin' to sit down under this? What?—and him the beautifullest, straightest cheeld that ever was in Gwithian Parish! Go'st thy ways home, every wan. Piskies steal my cheeld an' Dan'l's, would they? I'll pisky 'em!"

She showed them forth—"put them to doors" as we say in the Duchy— every one, the Priest included. She would have none of their consolation.

"You mean it kindly, naybors, I don't say; but tiddn' what I happen to want. I wants my cheeld back; an' I'll *have'n* back, what's more!"

They went their ways, agreeing that the woman was doited. Lovey closed the door upon them, bolted it, and sat for hours staring at the empty cradle. Through the unglazed window she could see the stars; and when these told her that midnight was near, she put on her shawl again, drew