The Good Father

Marion Husband

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Extract

Chapter 1

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Hope came to the funeral. I noticed her as I followed the coffin through the church porch, where I had to pause whilst the bearers shifted their load discreetly on their shoulders. Standing at the back of the church, she turned to me and smiled that delicate schoolgirl's smile of hers, lowering her eyes almost at once, not expecting me to respond perhaps, possibly believing that smiling was some breach of funeral etiquette. And maybe it was, but I smiled all the same, although she didn't see me. No one saw me because my father's coffin blocked the congregation's view of my face. For those few seconds, as the undertaker's men synchronised themselves and Hope lowered her eyes from her brief, shy smile, I thought how lovely she was; if I were poetical I would say that my heart seemed to expand a little, that I felt suddenly generous and good and hopeful. As the bearers began their slow progress up the aisle, I made my face solemn again.

We sang 'I Vow to Thee My Country' and 'Jerusalem' and 'The Lord's My Shepherd', hymns my father had chosen years ago, planning for his death well in advance, as he planned everything. There were not many mourners. Dr Walker was there of course, Mrs Hall, Mr Hall, a few of the neighbours my father so despised. I had informed cousins whom he had not seen for years and I have never met, but they declined to attend, citing ill-health and old age. So I

stood in the front pew alone. The wreath of white chrysanthemums that graced the dark coffin filled the air with its peppery scent, and the bright cubes of light from the stained-glass window were cast at my feet as I sang the hymns and said the prayers, all the time thinking that if I turned around I would see Hope, her head bowed to her hymn book. I thought I could hear her voice above all the others, sweet and clear, singing the too-familiar words of lambs and green pastures; I thought too that I could feel her eyes on me, her soft, concerned gaze. How wrong it would be to turn around, what a bad impression I would give of myself, a man who couldn't concentrate on his grief, on the solemnity of the occasion, but glanced about the church like a tourist. But it would have only been a glance. And although I longed to, I didn't. I was as well-behaved as ever in my father's presence. I was right and proper and straight-backed, and I sang not too quietly, not too loudly but clearly and with my head raised so that I looked straight at the window that shed its coloured light at my feet, the window that depicted the Good Shepherd, a benign and sadly smiling Christ, pale and blond and tender as Hope herself.

The vicar, the congregation and I followed the coffin out into the graveyard. The sun shone and the sky was a rare, beautiful blue, the blue one only ever sees in England in springtime. Earlier, the verger had cut the grass around the old graves and there was a neatness and tidiness about the place, enhanced by the daffodils that grew beneath the sticky-budded chestnut trees and along the gravel path. The gravel whitened my shoes and felt sharp beneath their thin soles, making me think of penances and returning my mind to the funeral lunch. Mrs Hall had prepared a tongue and salads, bread and butter and a fruit cake. Too much food, as though she was expecting hungry hordes of mourners and not just this sad little gathering. I thought she knew my father better.

Beside the grave with its mound of lumpy clay earth, I

watched Hope walk away along the path that led through the graveyard. Of course she would not stay, would not come back to the house as I had hoped. She would not wish to 'intrude' as she would think of it. I had to hold myself back from running after her. I had to bow my head and clasp my hands together and close my eyes in prayer, as sons do at their father's funeral as the coffin is lowered and the words said.

Hope was wearing her school uniform, the navy blazer and skirt and long, brown socks that show her pale, still childish knees. Although she is very slim and tall, the blazer makes her look rather square and bulky. There was a long, golden hair on her shoulder, shining against the dark cloth. Lately there has been a kind of shyness between us. We are all awkward smiles and side-steps; she bristles away from me when once she would throw herself with such force into my arms I'd be momentarily winded. I tell myself I always knew that one day she'd grow away from me.

Later, when I had the house to myself again, when even Mrs Hall had gone home, having cleared away the sorry remains of the funeral lunch, I walked through the empty house, going from room to room and thinking how silent it was, how full of silent things. Oil paintings, china ornaments of flower baskets and pug dogs, tapestry fire-screens in dull faded threads that made me wonder why their makers worked in such dismal colours. All I now own seems to be in a shade of brown that was chosen for its ugliness. The heavy drapes and swags at the windows are an odd shade of mink, faded because they've hung at these windows all my life at least.

Everything in this house is as it was in my childhood. Even when I returned home from the war I realised after a few days, not really caring, that in the six years of my absence not so much as an umbrella had been moved from its place. It seemed too that my father had hardly moved,

sitting at his desk when I returned just as he had been when I left. I remember how, on my return, he looked up at me from a letter he was writing, saw what a poor, wretched shadow I had become and shook his head. ‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re back.’ No bunting for me, then, no girls to throw flowers or children waving flags, no mother to cry and laugh with relief. The war – even my war, the Japanese war – had been over for almost a year. No one cared at all that I should have returned. Not even I cared very much. In those days I felt nothing but the cold.

As I stood in the window, framed by the faded swags and tails, I remembered how my father had got up from his desk and crossed the room to stand before me. He looked me up and down quite deliberately, theatrically almost, frowning sardonically. He was shorter and stockier than me, and I felt like a great, lanky weed beside him, just waiting to be cut down. Nothing had changed between us; six years of experience might just as well have been six hours, the time I had spent away from his study nothing more than an evening at the pictures for all it helped me to stand up to him. I left as a boy and returned as a boy, only with worse dreams, nightmares that could compare with his. Soon both of us would be screaming the house down at night, neither admitting to the other that he had been disturbed.

A week ago, Dr Walker had come down from my father’s sickbed and found me in the kitchen preparing my lunch. I felt embarrassed, caught in the greedy act of seeing to my stomach as my father lay dying upstairs. Ham, bread, butter and mustard pot were arranged on the kitchen table, the kettle whistling cheerily on the stove; the wireless was on, BBC voices discussing the news, and I was spooning tea from the caddy into the teapot when, from the kitchen doorway, Walker cleared his throat.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

I quite often look startled, I think. Scared, even. I flinch often, on buses, in the street when someone brushes past me

too closely or shouts out too loudly. I am a bag of nerves that was once merely a bag of bones. Now I am fleshed out a little, my nerves have jangled and jolted back to life, and Dr Walker was right – he did startle me. I had been lost in thoughts of the illustration of the Frog Prince I'd been working on, the minute changes I might make to improve the gravity of the Prince's expression, and I hadn't expected the doctor to be finished upstairs so quickly.

Stepping towards me, he placed a steadying hand on my arm, and said, 'Should I make the tea?'

Dr Walker had fought in the trenches, as had my father. It should have been possible to imagine that my father would have liked him more because of this – although I know as well as anyone that it isn't necessarily so that we should bond over the horrors. As it was, my father disliked Walker as he disliked everyone – more, perhaps, because the doctor is kind and patient, qualities my father thought of as weaknesses. Now this kind, patient man sat opposite me at the kitchen table, regarding me with some concern. He made me feel squirmy, inadequate. I remember that I hadn't shaved and that I wore a soft, collarless shirt, its sleeves rolled up; no doubt my fingers were inky. I itched to get back to the Prince and knew that I would lose the thought I had, about his expression and how it should convey his longing, if I didn't finish him soon. But it was obvious that Dr Walker wanted to talk, so I made myself look as though I wanted to listen.

He said, 'How are you coping, my boy?'

'Fine!' I smiled, bright as a button, hoping he would take my word for it and allow me to get on but he only searched my face as though he longed to examine me. I hold quite a fascination for doctors – they'd like to know how I survived. I said, 'I'm coping very well, and Mrs Hall is a great help. She sits with him if I have to go out.'

'You look tired.'

'No, not really.'

As if I hadn't spoken he went on, 'And your father is worried about you.'

I laughed, astonished that this sensible man should be so taken in by the old devil.

Gently, Walker said, 'Peter, you know you can talk to me if anything is worrying you, if you feel uneasy in yourself, anxious . . .'

It dawned on me just what he was getting at: my father, even as close to death as he was, still had the energy for malice. I imagined him clutching the doctor's hand, attempting to sit up as he desperately tried to impress on him how sick I was, on the verge of a nervous-breakdown so that it would only take his dying to push me over the edge. He would like the good doctor to certify me, of course that was it, and so he sowed his seeds of doubt about my ability to cope, gloating no doubt as he imagined this conversation we were having.

Firmly I said, 'Doctor Walker, I'm quite well, you don't have to concern yourself with me.' I almost said that I was fitter, happier even, than I had ever been, that I felt like a prisoner who had been told that his release was only a matter of days away. He would think that my eagerness for my father's death was heartless, perhaps even one of the manifestations of madness. So I only repeated that I was well, saying for good measure that perhaps I *was* tired, just to keep him happy.

The doctor is a handsome man, tall and blond as a Viking, although his fine hair is thinning. He has the resigned look of a man who has seen a great deal of suffering and over the years has realised he can't do much to put a stop to it, that he has failed in his youthful ambition to do good. I would like to sketch him; his could be the face of the benevolent King in *Sleeping Beauty*. As I sat opposite him at the kitchen table I realised I was studying his face rather too closely – his eyes are a particularly pale shade of blue – and sensed that I was making him self-conscious. I

looked away at once, apologising. He stood up, patting my arm as he made to leave. ‘If ever you need to talk, Peter. . .’

What would I talk about, I wonder.

I was a prisoner of the Japanese for four years.

I have no idea now how I survived, although I believe a great deal in luck.

I illustrate collections of fairy tales.

I think about Hope often. She is sixteen and the most beautiful, precious thing in my life.

What would Walker say to this last confession? How would those near-colourless eyes look at me then?

At the graveside today was a man I didn’t recognise – a tall, distinguished-looking figure. He stood a little way back from us few official mourners, his head bowed respectfully; I noticed that he crossed himself when the vicar said the final amen – a Catholic. Interested, I watched him, and he caught me watching and held my gaze, frank, unsmiling, sad. He looked as though he truly mourned my father, the only one amongst us that did. I began to make up a story for him, that he is an old soldier, an officer by that expression of his, and wealthy. I imagined ways he might have made his fortune – gun-running, perhaps, because he had a look of new money, of having come from nowhere. But old soldiers don’t make money from wars, they would risk too many ghosts coming back to haunt them.

As I considered, the vicar interrupted my thoughts, briskly solicitous, wanting me out of his churchyard and safely home. As I was escorted away, I glanced back to see if the stranger still stood there. He did, close to the grave’s edge now, ignoring the grave-digger who moved in from his hiding-place with his shovel. I saw this stranger toss a handful of dry earth down onto the coffin. Perhaps it’s a ritual Catholics feel they have to attend to. Hope is a Catholic. I remember her in white at her first Holy Communion; she looked so breathtakingly beautiful and innocent as a lamb.

Weary from the business of the funeral, I went upstairs for a rest. Downstairs, the house is stuffed with furniture – old, ugly, heavy furniture that collects dust in its intricate carvings, scrolls and beading; my room, however, is quite bare, like a servant's room, empty but for my wardrobe, bed and bedside table. I suddenly realised that I could get rid of everything that belonged to my father and clear the house once and for all of his brooding presence. Never again would I enter a room and get dragged into some unhappy moment in the past by merely glancing at a sideboard or a chair. I could make the house bright and modern. I could make it so I would be less ashamed when Hope came for her lessons.

Yes, I resolved, that is what I would do. More than anything, I wanted for Hope to be happy when she came here, to treat this house as her home. Charged with purpose, I went downstairs again and made a start.