
Opening Extract from...

Bellman & Black

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I HAVE HEARD it said, by those that cannot possibly know, that in the final moments of a man's existence he sees his whole life pass before his eyes. If that were so, a cynic might assume William Bellman's last moments to have been spent contemplating anew the lengthy series of calculations, contracts and business deals that made up his existence. In fact, as he approached the border with that other place – that border towards which we will all find our path turning sooner or later – his thoughts were drawn to those who had already crossed into that unknown territory: his wife, three of his children, his uncle, cousin and some childhood friends. Having remembered these lost, dear ones and being still some moments from death, there was time for one last act of remembrance. What he unearthed, after it had lain buried some forty years in the archaeology of his mind, was a rook.

Let me explain.

Will Bellman was ten years and four days old and the glory of his birthday was still fresh in his veins. He and his friends were in the fields that ran between the river and the woods, fields where the rooks descended, flapping and swooping, to jab robustly at the ground in search of leatherjackets. Charles, inheritor-in-waiting of Bellman's Mill, was Will's cousin. Their fathers were brothers – and though that sounds simple, it wasn't. Fred was the eldest son of the baker. His mother was from dairy people. He was said to be the best-fed boy in Whittingford, and he certainly looked as though he had been weaned on bread and cream. He had white teeth and solid flesh over his strong bones, and he talked about the bakery he would take over one day. Luke was one of the blacksmith's offspring. There would be nothing for him to take over: his older brothers were too numerous. His bright

copper hair could be seen a mile off; at least, it could when it was clean. He kept a safe distance from school. He didn't see the point. If it was a beating you wanted, you could get it just the same at home. Unless he was exceptionally hungry he kept a safe distance. from home too. When he couldn't feed himself by scrounging, he scrumped and when he couldn't scrump, he thieved. A boy had to eat. He was passionately devoted to William's mother who sometimes gave him bread and cheese and once a chicken carcass to pick.

The boys lived different lives at first, but something had drawn them together at the beginning of this summer, and it was their age. All had been born in the same month of the same year. The power of the symbolic anniversary had acted upon them like a physical force, and as the days of August slipped by, it was not only friendship that drew them back, day after day, to these hedgerows and these fields. It was competition.

They ran races, climbed trees, engaged in mock battles and arm-wrestling matches. Every yard run made them faster, every upper branch attained won them a broader horizon. They egged each other on, never refused a dare, took greater and greater risks. They laughed at grazes, bruises were badges of honour and scars trophies. Every minute and every day they measured themselves against the world and each other.

At ten years and four days old, Will was pleased with the world and with himself. He was a long way from being a man, he knew that, yet he was no longer a little boy. All summer long, woken early by the stony cawing of the rooks in the trees behind his mother's cottage, he had felt his power growing in him. He had outgrown the kitchen and the garden: fields, river and woods were his territory now, and the sky belonged to him. He still had a lot to learn, but he knew that he would learn it as he had everything else so far in life – easily. And while he learned he could enjoy each day this new and exultant sense of mastery.

'I bet I can hit that bird,' Will said now, indicating a far-off branch of a far-off tree. It was one of the oaks close to his home; the cottage itself was visible from here, half screened by hedges.

'You can't!' said Luke, and immediately he called to the others, scrambling up a bank and pointing into the distance. 'Will says he can hit that bird!'

'Never!' the other pair called, but they came running to see the attempt all the same.

The bird, a rook or a crow, was well out of range, on a branch half a field away.

Will pulled his catapult from his belt and made a great show of searching for a stone. There was a mystique around the best missiles for catapults. A reputation for recognising the right kind of stone was prized, and lengthy conversations were had comparing them by their size, smoothness, texture and colour. Marbles were superior of course, but rare was the boy ready to risk the loss of a marble. William's private hunch was that any roundish, smoothish stone was as good as another, but he knew the value of mystification as well as any boy, so he took his time.

Meanwhile, it was his catapult that interested the boys. He entrusted it to his cousin while he hunted the missile. Charles handled the weapon casually at first, then, feeling its fine balance, studied it more closely. The two prongs extended from the handle in a Y-shape almost too perfect to be natural. You could search an entire forest and not find a Y like that. Will had a good eye.

Fred joined him in studying it. He frowned and the corners of his mouth turned down, as if he was inspecting a churn of disappointing butter.

'It's not hazel.'

Will did not look up from his hunt. 'Hazel cuts easily. But you don't have to use it.' He had sharpened his knife, climbed, sawed patiently to excise the shape he had spotted. The elder was of an age to be strong, young enough for springiness.

The sling was familiar: Will had reused his old one, cut from the tongue of an outgrown shoe. Lines of small, neat slits made with a sharp blade allowed the leather to be stretched so that it made a bed for a small missile. But one element of the catapult was entirely novel. At the level where the sling was attached, Will had carved shallow

inch-wide grooves. In the centre of each groove were tied the narrow strips of leather that attached the sling. But above and below this knot, string was wound. It lay neat in the groove, above and below the leather laces. Charles ran his fingers admiringly over it. It was deftly done, but he couldn't see the reason for it.

'What's this for?'

Luke reached out and ran an appraising finger along the winding of string. 'Stops the sling riding down, does it?'

Will shrugged. 'I'm finding out. It's not shifted so far.'

Until today the boys had not known that a catapult so perfect could exist. They had always thought of catapults as things that were good or bad by the will of the gods, things of chance, of hazard. To use one was to pit your chances against fate, fifty to one you'd miss. There was nothing accidental about Will's catapult. It had been made, fashioned, engineered.

Luke tested the give of the leather strips. They were supple enough, but he couldn't resist the chance to contribute something to this enviable catapult. He spat onto his fingertips and applied the wetness lovingly to the leather strips.

By the time Will had identified the stone that satisfied him he was surprised the bird was still there. He took back his catapult and loaded it. He was adept. His eye was good, his hand steady. He practised a lot.

The bird was too far away.

Turning their attention from the weapon to the target the boys grinned and shook their heads. Will's boast was so ludicrous that he was half laughing with them. But then his ten accumulated years of observation, of growth, of strength and of power readied themselves in him and he fell deaf to the noise of his companions.

While his eye traced the arc – the impossible arc – between missile and target, his brain calculated, calibrated and instructed its tools. His feet shifted, his weight settled squarely, the muscles in his legs, back, shoulders prepared, his fingers altered their grip minutely on the catapult and his hands tested the tension. He drew the sling back.

At the moment of launching the stone – no, just before: it was the

second when it was too late to stop it – he knew a moment of perfection. Boy, catapult, stone. Brain, eye, body. He knew certainty, and the missile was released.

It took a long time for the stone to fly along its preordained trajectory. Or so it seemed. Time enough for William to hope that the bird, flapping into life, would rise upwards from the branch. The stone would fall harmlessly to earth and the rook's granite laughter would taunt them from the sky.

The black bird did not move.

The stone reached the apex of its arc and began its descent. The boys fell silent. William was silent. The universe was still. Only the stone moved.

There is still time, William thought. *I could cry out, and startle the bird into taking off.* But his tongue was thick in his mouth and the moment stretched out in time, long, slow, paralysed.

The stone completed its journey.

The black bird fell.

The boys stared in puzzlement at the empty branch. Had it happened? It can't have! But they'd seen it . . . Three heads turned as one to stare at Will. His gaze was fixed on the branch where the bird had been. He was still seeing it fall, trying to make sense of it.

Fred broke the silence with a great bellow, and three boys went haring over the field in the direction of the tree, Luke stumbling over the tree roots and furrows, always the last. Belatedly, William ran too. He came upon them crouching under the tree. They shuffled and shifted to make room for him to see.

There, on the grass: the bird. A rook. Juvenile, still black of beak.

It was true, then. He had done it.

He felt something move in his chest, as though an organ had been removed and something unfamiliar inserted in its place. A sentiment he had never suspected the existence of bloomed in him. It travelled from his chest along his veins to every limb. It swelled in his head, muffled his ears, stilled his voice and collected in his feet and fingers. Having no language for it, he remained silent, but felt it root, become permanent.

'We could bury it.' That was Charles. 'A ceremony.'

The idea of a ritual to mark the extraordinary event found favour. But before they could agree what to do, with a tentativeness that provoked laughter, Luke took hold of the tip of a wing and gently splayed it. A ray of light breaking through the foliage fell upon the dead creature and the black was suddenly not black: inky shades of blue, purple and green were released. This was colour that did not behave as colour should. It shifted and shimmered, alive with vividness that played tricks on the eye and the mind. Every boy wondered for a moment whether perhaps the bird was not dead after all – but it was. Of course.

The boys murmured and once again turned to look at Will. This beauty too belonged to him.

Emboldened, Luke picked the bird up.

'CRAA!'

He lunged the cadaver towards Fred, towards Charles – not in Will's direction – and the two boys stumbled back, exclaiming in alarm, laughing with relief. Then it was Fred who larked about with the dead creature, manipulating its wings, imitating flight, cawing and croaking with gusto. Will laughed weakly. There was the aftermath of turbulence inside him. His lungs were tired.

Before long Fred found something unpleasant in the slackness of the small body. They all did. It was the limp hang of the head, the way the feathers would not go back into place. In disgust Fred tossed the body away.

All thought of a burial was now forgotten and they turned their attention from the bird to the stone that had killed it. That stone had a value now. They spent a long time looking, picking up one round pebble after another.

'Too big,' they agreed.

'Wrong colour.'

'It didn't have that mark, there.'

The stone would not be found. Having accomplished its miracle it had divested itself of its uniqueness and was lying somewhere about, indistinguishable from any number of similar stones.

In any case, Charles suggested, and for once they all agreed, it wasn't really the stone. It was Will who had done it.

They told and retold the story, acted it out for each other. With imaginary catapults they killed whole parishes of imaginary rooks.

Will stood by. Like any ten-year-old hero, he took more than his fair share of teasing and shoving. He smiled, sick at heart, proud, abashed, guilty. He grinned and shoved back without conviction.

The sun sank low and the sky cooled. Autumn was coming, and they were hungry. It was time to go home. The boys parted.

Will lived closest, in only a few minutes he would be in his mother's kitchen.

On the brow of a bank of earth something prompted him to turn around. He looked back to where the bird had fallen. In the few minutes since the boys had left the place, rooks had come. They circled above the oak, fifteen or twenty of them. More were arriving from all directions. They stretched across the sky, loose skeins of dark marks, converging on this place. One by one they descended to alight in the branches of the tree. Ordinarily such a congregation would be accompanied by the noise of stony chatter as the birds flung sound at each other like gravel. This gathering was different: it took place in intent and purposeful silence.

Every bird on every branch was looking in his direction.

Will leapt off the earthbank and raced home, faster than he had ever run before. When he had the door handle in his grasp he dared to look behind him. The sky was empty. He stared at the branches of the tree but at this distance and with the late sun in his eyes it was hard to know whether he was seeing rooks or foliage. Perhaps he had imagined that many-eyed stare.

For a moment he thought one of his friends had returned to the oak. A boy, standing where he had stood in the shadow of the oak. But the figure was too short to be Charles, too slim to be Fred, and had not Luke's red hair. Besides, unless it was an effect of light and shade, the boy was clad in black.

With the next blink, the boy was gone, on his way home through the woods, probably.

Will turned the doorknob and went inside.

'What's got into you?' his mother wanted to know.

William was quiet that evening and his mother thought him pale. Her questions elicited little in the way of answers and she understood that her boy was old enough to have secrets now.

'Just think. In a week's time you'll be away at school with Charles.'

He leant surreptitiously into her side when she stood by him to pour his soup and when she put an arm around him he lingered instead of reminding her that he was ten now. Was her fearless boy nervous of leaving her for Oxford? That night, although it was not cold, she warmed his bed and left his candle burning. When she came to kiss him an hour later she stood and watched his sleeping face. How pale he looked. Was he really her son? They change so quickly.

Only ten and I am losing him, she thought. And then, with a pang, *Unless perhaps I have lost him already*.

The next day William woke with a fever. For half a week he stayed in bed being tended to by his mother. During this time, while his blood grew warmer and warmer and he sweated and cried out in pain, William applied his ten-year-old genius and power to the greatest feat he had ever attempted: forgetting.

He very largely succeeded.

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A rook is a familiar enough creature until you actually look at him.

His plumage is among the most extravagantly beautiful things nature can produce. As the boys saw that day, a rook's feathers can shimmer with dazzling peacock colours yet factually speaking there is no blue or purple or green pigment in a rook. Satin black on his back and head, on his front and towards his legs his blackness softens and deepens to velvet black. He is not just black, he is blacker than that. His is a luxurious superabundance of blackness never seen in any other creature. He is the essence of blackness.

So whence the glorious colour?

Well, the rook is something of a magician. His black feathers are capable of producing an entrancing optical effect.

'Aha!' you say. 'So it is only an illusion.'

Far from it. The rook is no theatrical conjuror with his top hat full of tricks, deluding your eye into perceiving what is not. He is quite the opposite: a magician of the real. Ask your eyes, *What colour is light?* They cannot tell you. But a rook can. He captures the light, splits it, absorbs some and radiates the rest in a delightful demonstration of optics, showing you the truth about light that your own poor eyes cannot see.

Nor is this spellbinding display of flamboyance the only trick he has concealed in his feathers. Though it is exceedingly rare, a handful of witnesses have seen this spectacle: on a bright summer's day, turning into the sun, a rook alters from black to angelic white. Mirror-bright he dazzles and glories in his whiteness.

Given his beauty and the dramatic and magical alterations he can bring about in his appearance, you might wonder why the rook is to be found in common fields, grubbing for larvae. Why are these supreme creatures not owned by princesses, housed in gilded aviaries,

fed dainty morsels from silver trays by liveried servants? Why do they spend their time with cows when they are surely the more natural companions to unicorns, griffins and dragons?

The answer is that the rook lives as he wishes. When he wants the entertainment of human company he is more likely to seek out the drunken poet or the wild-eyed crone than a damsel with a coronet. He is partial to a bit of dragon liver or unicorn tongue when he can get it though, and he wouldn't refuse griffin flesh if it came his way.

There are numerous collective nouns for rooks. In some parts people say a *parish* of rooks.

PART ONE

Verily, the rook sees far more than we give him credit for seeing,
hears more than we think he hears,
thinks more than we think that he thinks.

Revd Boswell Smith, *Bird Life and Bird Lore*

1

Six days out of every seven the area along the Burford Road resounded with the clattering, booming, clanging, rattling, thundering noise of Bellman's Mill. The shuttles that hurtled back and forth were the very least of it: there was also the churning, crashing roar of the Windrush as it turned the wheel that powered all this hectic toing and froing. Such was the racket that at the end of the day, when the shuttles were brought home to rest and the mill wheel ceased to turn, the ears of the workers still rang with the vibration of it all. This ringing stayed with them as they made their way to their small cottages, was still there as they climbed into their beds at night and, as often as not, continued to sound through their dreams.

Birds and other small creatures stayed away from Bellman's Mill, at least on working days. Only the rooks were bold enough to fly over, seeming to relish its clamour, even adding a coarse note of their own to the music.

Today though, being Sunday, the mill was peaceful. On the other side of the Windrush and down the high street, the humans were making noise of another kind.

A rook – or a crow, it is hard to tell them apart – alighted with aplomb on the roof of the church, cocked its head, and listened.

Oh come and dwell in me,
Spirit of power within,
and bring the glorious liberty
from sorrow, fear, and sin.

In the first verse of the hymn, the congregation was tuneless and as disorganised as a herd of sheep on market day. Some treated it as a competition where the loudest wins all. Some, having better things to

do with their time than sing, rushed to the end as quick as they could, while others, afraid of getting ahead of themselves, lagged by a safe semiquaver. Alongside and behind these singers was a mass of mill workers whose hearing was not what it had been. These created a flat background drone, rather as if one of the organ pedals had got stuck.

Thankfully there was the choir, and thankfully the choir contained William Bellman. His tenor, effortless and clear, gave a compass bearing, according to which the individual voices found north and knew where they were going. It rallied, disciplined and provided a target to aim at. Its vibrations even managed to stimulate the ear-drums of the hard of hearing, for the dull drone of the deaf was lifted by it into something almost musical. Although at 'sorrow, fear and sin' the congregation was bleating haphazardly, by 'Hasten the joyful day' it had agreed on a speed; it found its tune 'when old things shall be done away', and by the time it reached 'eternal bliss' in the last verse it was, thanks to William, as agreeable to the ear as any congregation can expect to be.

The last notes of the hymn died away and soon after, the church door opened and the worshippers emerged into the churchyard where they lingered to talk and enjoy the autumnal sunshine. Among them were a pair of women, one older and one younger, both abundantly decorated with corsages, brooches, ribbons and trims. They were aunt and niece they said, though some whispered otherwise.

'It makes you wish every day was Sunday,' the young Miss Young said wistfully, of William's voice, and Mrs Baxter, overhearing, replied,

'If you wish to hear William Bellman sing every night of the week, you need only listen at the window of the Red Lion. Though' – and her undertone was audible to William's mother standing a little way off – 'what is pleasant to the ear might be less so to the soul.'

Dora heard this with an expression of benign neutrality, and she turned the same face to the man now approaching her, her brother-in-law.

'Tell me, Dora. What is William doing these days, when he is not displeasing souls who loiter at the window of the Red Lion?'

'He is working with John Davies.'

'Does he like farm work?'

'You know William. He is always happy.'

'How long does he intend to stay with Davies?'

'So long as there is work. He is willing to turn his hand to anything.'

'You would not prefer something more steady for him? With prospects?'

'What would you suggest?'

There was a whole story in the look she gave him then, an old story and a long one, and the look he returned to her said, *All that is true, but.*

'My father is an old man now, and I have charge of the mill.' She protested but he overrode her. 'I will not speak of others if it angers you, but have *I* done you any injury, Dora? Have *I* hurt you or William in any way? With me, at the mill, William can have prospects, security, a future. Is it right to keep him from these?'

He waited.

'You have not wronged me in any way, Paul,' she said eventually. 'I suppose that if you don't get the answer you want from me, you will go to William directly?'

'I would much sooner we could all agree on it.'

The choristers had disrobed, and were leaving the church, William among them. Many eyes were on William, for he was as agreeable to look at as he was to the ear. He had the same dark hair as his uncle, an intelligent brow, eyes capable of seeing numerous things at once, and he inhabited his vigorous body with grace and ease. More than one young woman in the churchyard that day wondered what it would be like to be in the arms of William Bellman – and more than one young woman already knew.

He spotted his mother, widened his smile, and raised an arm to hail her.

'I will put it to him,' she told Paul. 'It will be for him to decide.'

They parted, Dora towards William, and Paul to go home alone.

In the matter of marriage, Paul had tried to avoid his father's mistake and his brother's. Not for him a foolish wife with bags of gold, nor love and beauty that came empty-handed. Ann had been wise and good-hearted – and her dowry had just stretched to the building of

the dye house. By being sensible and choosing the middle path, he had ended up with a harmonious domestic life, cordial companionship and a dye house. But for all his good sense and solid reason he chided himself. He did not grieve his wife's passing as a loving husband ought and in painfully honest moments he admitted in his heart that he thought more of his sister-in-law than was proper.

Dora and William went home.

The rook on the church roof gave an unhurried flap, lifted effortlessly from the roof and soared away.

'I'd like to do it,' Will told his mother in the small kitchen. 'You won't mind?'

'And if I do?'

He grinned and put an easy arm about her shoulders. At seventeen, there was still novelty in the pleasure of being so much taller than his mother. 'You know I wouldn't hurt you if I could help it.'

'And there's the rub.'

A while later, in a secluded spot screened by sedges and rushes, Will's easy arm was around another shoulder. His other hand was invisible beneath a mass of petticoat, and the girl sometimes placed her hand over his to indicate slower, quicker, a change of pressure. Clearly he was making progress, he thought. At the start she had kept her hand over his all the time. The girl's white legs were whiter still against the moss, and she had kept her boots on: they would have to make a run for it if they were disturbed. Her breath came in sharp gasps. It still surprised Will that pleasure should sound so like pain.

She fell abruptly silent and a small frown of concentration appeared on her face. Her hand pressed so hard over his it was almost painful and her white legs clamped together. He watched closely, fascinated. The flush on her cheeks and chest, the quiver of her eyelids. Then she relaxed, eyes still closed, and a small pulse beat in her neck. After a minute she opened her eyes.

'Your turn.'

He laid back, arms behind his head. No need for his hand to teach her. Jeannie knew what she was about.

'Don't you ever think you'd like to come and sit on top of me and do it properly?' he asked.

She stopped and wagged a playful finger at him. 'William Bellman, I mean to be an honest married woman one day. A Bellman baby is not going to get in my way!'

She returned to her task.

'Who do you take me for? Do you think I wouldn't marry you if there was a baby coming?'

'Don't be daft. Course you would.'

She caressed him, gently enough, firmly enough. It was just right.

'Well, then?'

'You're a good boy, Will. I'm not saying you're not.'

He took her hand and stopped it, propped himself up on his elbows to see her face properly.

'But?'

'Will!' Seeing he would not be satisfied without an answer, she spoke, hesitant and tentative, the words born straight from her thoughts. 'I know the kind of life I want. Steady. Regular.' He nodded her to go on. 'What would my life be if I were to marry you? There's no way of knowing. Anything might happen. You're not a bad man, Will. You're just . . .'

He lay back down. Something occurred to him, and he looked at her again.

'You've got someone in mind!'

'No!' But her alarm and her blush gave her away.

'Who is it? Who? Tell me!' He grabbed her, tickled her, for a minute they were children again, shrieking, laughing and play fighting. Just as quickly adulthood repossessed them and they set to finishing the business they were there for.

By the time the leaves and the sky came back into focus above his head, he discovered his brain had worked it out for him. It was respectability she wanted. She was a worker, unimpressed by the easy life. And if she was killing time with him, while waiting, it meant it was

someone who hadn't noticed her yet. There were not so very many candidates the right age, and most of them you could eliminate for one reason or another. Of the remainder, one stood out.

'It's Fred from the bakery, isn't it?'

She was appalled. Her hand flew to her mouth, then, more aptly but too late, covered his. The smell of both of them was on her fingers.

'Don't tell. Will, please, not a word!' And then she was crying.

He put his arms around her. 'Hush! I won't tell. Not a soul. Promise.'

She sobbed and hiccoughed and then was quiet and he took her hand in his. 'Jeannie! Don't fret. I bet you'll be married before the year is out.'

They washed their hands in the river and parted, heading off in different directions in order to arrive home by different paths.

Will walked the long route, upriver and over the bridge, down the other side. It was early evening. Summer was clinging on. It was a shame about Jeannie in a way, he reflected. She was a good sort of girl. A rumble came from his stomach and reminded him that his mother had some good cheese at home and a bowl of stewed plums. He broke into a run.