

“Meteor”

John Wyndham

The house shook, the windows rattled, a framed photograph slipped off the mantel-shelf and fell into the hearth. The sound of a crash somewhere outside arrived just in time to drown the noise of the breaking glass. Graham Toffts put his drink down carefully, and wiped the spilt Sheny from his fingers.

‘That sort of thing takes you back a bit,’ he observed. ‘First instalment of the new one, would you think?’

Sally shook her head, spinning the fair hair out a little so that it glistened in the shaded light.

‘I shouldn’t think so, Not like the old kind, anyway — they used to come with a sort of double-bang as a rule,’ she said

She crossed to the window and pulled back the curtain. Outside there was complete darkness and a sprinkle of rain on the panes.

‘Could have been an experimental one gone astray?’ she suggested.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. The door opened, and her father’s head looked in.

‘Did you hear that?’ he asked, unnecessarily. ‘A small meteor, I fancy. I thought I saw a dim flash in the field beyond the orchard.’ He withdrew. Sally made after him. Graham, following more leisurely, found her firmly grasping her father’s arm.

‘No!’ she was saying, decisively. ‘I’m not going to have my dinner kept waiting and spoiled. Whatever it is, it will keep.’

Mr Fontain looked at her, and then at Graham.

‘Bossy; much too bossy. Always was. Can’t think what you want to marry her for,’ he said.

After dinner they went out to search with electric lamps. There was not much trouble in locating the scene of the impact. A small crater, some eight feet across, had appeared almost in the middle of the field. They regarded it without learning much, while Sally’s terrier, Mitty, sniffed over the newly turned earth. Whatever had caused it had presumably bulied itself in the middle.

‘A small meteonte, without a doubt: said Mr Fontain, ‘We’ll set a gang on digging it out tomorrow.’

Extract from Onns ⁱs Journal:

As an introduction to the notes which I intend to keep, I can scarcely do better than give the gist of the address given to us on the day preceding our departure from Forta by His Excellency Cottafits. In contrast to our public farewell, this meeting was deliberately made as informal as a gathering of several thousands can be,

His Excellency emphasised almost in his opening words that though we had leaders for the purposes of administration, there was, otherwise, no least amongst us.

‘There is not one of you men and women^f who is not a volunteer,’ looking slowly round his huge audience. ‘Since you are individuals, the proportions of the emotions which led you to volunteer may differ quite widely, but, however personal, or however altruistic your impulses may have been, there is a conunon denollinator for all — and that is the determination that our race shall survive.

‘Tomorrow the Globes will go out.

‘Tomorrow, God willing, the skill and science of Forta will break through [he threats of Nature. (512)

“Secrets”

Bernard MacLaverty

He had been called to be there at the end. His Great Aunt Mary had been dying for some days now and the house was full of relatives. He had just left his girlfriend's home they had been studying for 'A' levels together — and had come back to the house to find all the lights spilling onto the lawn and a sense of purpose which had been absent from the last few days,

He knelt at the bedroom door to join in the prayers. His knees were on the wooden threshold and he edged them forward onto the carpet. They had tried to wrap her fingers around a crucifix but they kept loosening. She lay low on the pillow and her face seemed to have shrunk by half since he had gone out earlier in the night. Her white hair was damped and pushed back from her forehead. She twisted her head from side to side, her eyes closed. The prayers chorused on, trying to cover the sound she was making deep in her throat. Someone said about her teeth and his mother leaned over her and said, 'That's the pet,' and took her dentures from her mouth. The lower half of her face seemed to collapse. She half opened her eyes but could not raise her eyelids enough and showed only crescents of white.

'Hail Mary full of grace . the prayers went on. He closed his hands over his face so that he would not have to look but smelt the trace of his girlfriend's handcream from his hands. The noise, deep and guttural, that his aunt was making became intolerable to him. It was as if she were drowning. She had lost all the dignity he knew her to have. He got up from the floor and stepped between the others who were kneeling and went into her sitting-room off the same landing.

He was trembling with anger or sorrow, he didn't know which. He sat in the brightness of her big sitting-room at the oval table and waited for something to happen, On the table was a cut-glass vase of irises, dying because she had been in bed for over a week. He sat staring at them. They were withering from the tips inward, scrolling themselves delicately, brown and neat. Clearing up after themselves. He stared at them for a long time until he heard the sounds of women weeping from the next room.

His aunt had been small — her head on a level with his when she sat at her table — and she seemed to get smaller each year: Her skin fresh, her hair white and waved and always well washed. She wore no jewellery except a cameo ring on the third finger of her right hand and, around her neck, a gold locket on a chain. The white classical profile on the ring was almost worn through and had become translucent and indistinct. The boy had noticed the ring when she had read to him as a child. In the beginning fairy tales, then as he got older extracts from famous novels, Lorna Doone, Persuasion, Wuthering Heights and her favourite extract, because she read it so often, Pip's meeting with Miss Havisham from Great Expectations, She would sit with him on her knee, her arms around him and holding the page flat with her hand. When he was bored he would interrupt her and ask about the ring. He loved hearing her tell of how her grandmother had given -it to her as a brooch and she had had a ring made from it, He would try to count back Lo see how old it was. Had her grandmother got it from her grandmother? And if so what had she turned it into? She would nod her head from side to side and say, 'How would I know a thing like that?' keeping her place in the closed book with her finger.

'Don't be so inquisitive,' she'd say. ⁴Let's see what happens next in the story. (675 words)

“The Signalman”

Charles Dickens

“Halloa! Below there!”

When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing at the door of his box, with a flag in his hand, furred round its shon pole. One would have thought, considering the nature of the ground, that he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came; but instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting nearly over his head, he turned himself about, and looked down the Line, There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so, though I could not have said for my life what. But I know it was remarkable enough to attract my notice, even though his figure was foreshortened and shadowed, down in the deep trench, and mine was high above him, so steeped in the glow of an angry sunset that I had shaded my eyes with my hand before I saw him at all.

.Halloa! Below!

From looking down the Line, he turned himself about again, and, raising his eyes, saw my figure high above him.

'Is there any path by which I can come down and speak to you?' He looked up at me without replying, and I looked down at him without pressing him too soon with a repetition of my idle question, Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation, and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had force to draw me down. When such vapour as rose to my height from this rapid train had passed me, and was skimming away over the landscape, I looked down again, and saw him refurling the flag he had shown while the train went by.

I repeated my inquiry. After a pause, during which he seemed to regard me with fixed attention, he motioned with his rolled-up flag towards a point on my level, some two or three hundred yards distant. I called down to him, 'All right!' and made for that point. There, by dint of looking closely about me, I found a rough zigzag descending path notched out, which I followed.

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The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy stone, that became oozier and wetter as I went down. For these reasons, I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he had pointed out the path.

When I came down low enough upon the zigzag descent to see him again, I saw that he was standing between the rails on the way by which the train had lately passed, in an attitude as if he were waiting for me to appear. He had his left hand at his chin, and that left elbow rested on his right hand, crossed over his breast. His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it.

I resumed my downward way, and stepping out upon the level of the railroad, and drawing nearer to him, saw that he was a dark sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective in the other direction terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world.

(653 words)

“The Village Saint”

Bessie Head

People were never fooled by fagades. They would look quietly and humorously behind the fagade at the real person — cheat, liar, pompous condescending sham, and so on — and nod their heads in a certain way until destiny caught up with the decrepit one. The village could be rocked from end to end by scandal; the society itself seemed to cater for massive public humiliations of some of its unfortunate citizens and during those times all one's fanciful, heretical, or venal tendencies would be thoroughly exposed. Despite this acute insight into human nature, the whole village was aghast the day it lost its patron saint, Mma-Mompoti. She had had a long reign of twenty-six years, and a foolproof fagade.

Oh, the story was a long one. It was so long and so austere and holy that it was written into the very stones and earth of village life. And so habitual had her own pose of saintliness become to her that on the day her graven image shattered into a thousand fragments, she salvaged some of the pieces and was still seen at the head of the funeral parade or praying for the sick in hospital.

Mma-Mompoti and her husband, Rra-Mompoti, belonged to the elite of the village. At the time of their marriage, Rra-Mompoti held an important position in tribal affairs. It was so important that he lived in a large, white-washed, colonial-style house with many large rooms. A wide porch, enclosed with mosquito netting, surrounded the whole house. It was to this house that the elders of the tribe retired to discuss top-secret affairs and it was in this house that Mma-Mompoti first made her debut as the great lady of the town.

Their only son, Mompoti, was born a year after marriage into this state of affairs — he was born into the Bamangwato tribe, which, as most people know, was famous or notorious for a history of unexpected explosions and intrigues. The child was welcomed tenderly by his father and named Mompoti — my little travelling companion. All three members of the family were spectacular in their own ways, but people tended to forget the former names of the parents — they were simply known as Father of Mompoti or Mother of Mompoti. The child, Mompoti, hardly fulfilled the forecast of his name.

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Indeed, he travelled side by side with his father for sixteen years, he travelled side by side with his mother for another ten years but when he eventually emerged as a personality in his own right, he became known rather as the warm-hearted, loud-voiced firm defender of all kinds of causes — maniage, morals, child care, religion, and the rights of the poor.

Mompoti started his career early in that great white-washed colonial house. Whenever an explosion occurred, and there were many at one stage, the elders or the tribe did not wish the people to know of their secret deliberations and this left the people in an agony of suspense and tension. Some people, under cover of dark, would try to creep onto the wide porch of the house and hold their ears near the window to try and catch only one word of the hush-hush talks. A little patrolman soon appeared on stocky, stubby legs with a set, earnest expression who took turn after turn on duty around the porch to keep all eavesdroppers at bay. Seeing Mompoti, the eavesdroppers would back away, laughing and shaking their heads in frustration.

'It was no good,' they would report to the people. 'The little policeman was on duty, '

And so life went on in that great house. The tribal intrigues and explosions came; the intrigues and explosions became irrelevant. The great lady of the town, Mma-Mompoti, was seen everywhere. She had the close, guarded eyes of one who knows too much and isn't telling. She presided over teas and luncheons in her home, just like any English lady, with polished etiquette and the professional smile of the highborn who don't really give a damn about people or anything. (675 words)