

THE QUARRY

Cassandra Cochrane

Didus Ineptus

(Extract from Novel in Progress)

Edward came home with a parcel under his arm.

‘Mother, Doodles,’ he said, taking the parcel to the table and unwrapping it. A leg of lamb. Granny took one look at it and burst into tears.

What was he thinking? Nothing got past Granny. Of course a leg of lamb was the kind of extravagant offering that dreams might be made of on nights when trudging up to bed after an unsatisfying Antarctica¹ supper. But Clem, being naturally suspicious, did not squeal with delight. For when Edward walked through the door with that Trojan lamb up his sleeve, the look on his face had not been a celebratory one. The gift of lamb was indeed an offering of some kind – Clem had an intuition for these things, and an expensive treat, minus the usual whooping that should accompany a celebration, could only mean one thing. Doom.

* Antarctica like tripe and onions, leek and potato soup or bread and dripping, is the meal you have when you haven’t the money to afford anything better. It is a meal made to stretch over a matter of days, or a meal made of bits of other meals. Antarctica, in the Littles’ house, was a thin stew of bones of whatever animal was available: cow, sheep, pig (if you found any meat on them you were lucky) a carrot or onion or two, a bit of left over boiled potato from previous evenings, and lumps of weevilly, tasteless dumplings (the icebergs) hence, it had been christened ‘Antarctica’ in an effort to glamorise it. It was not glamorous. It was stale dumpling, and bare bones. Even Taffy turned up his nose at it.

Granny, weeping, carted the lamb out to the kitchen. In spite of herself, she lit the agar and got to work rubbing oil into its skin. Delicious smells emanated from the kitchen as she stuffed it with garlic cloves and rosemary sprigs. She emerged from the kitchen with a pan of potatoes for Clem to peel, and glared at Edward.

‘It’s all arranged. *Royal Engineers*,’ said Edward in an almost preternaturally cheerful way, and then he went upstairs to pack a small bag. Clem noticed that he also took a few of Taffy’s old beef bones, which he wrapped in calico, and he had a selection of tools packed into a soft leather wrap. ‘Something to while away the lonely nights,’ he said when he caught Clem looking at the bone fragments. ‘I can whittle away my boredom with a bit of scrimshaw. Like the sailors of old.’

Her father’s face told her the things he wasn’t saying. He stopped mid sentence, and the buoyant elation of a moment ago, vanished. ‘I’m sorry Doodles.’ He held his hand at arm’s length from Clem; his fingers curled around an item in his hand; his fingers fitted its shape, as though the object itself were somehow part of his own body; a small branch of himself, which in a way, it was. Clem could see a shimmer of bright metal through his curled fingers, and she knew what it was. The key. It was the key to his workshop.

He pressed the key into her hand. ‘Trust your old Pa.’

Truth and trust were Edward’s sometime companions; chaps he purported to know more intimately than he actually did, mere acquaintances, really. Clem’s definitions of truth and trust therefore, were Edwardised definitions. When he said ‘Trust your old Pa’ (a phrase she’d heard countless times since birth) her association with the phrase was one of comfort. But ‘trust your old Pa’ was only words, only a mouthful of sounds. He was leaving.

They ate the lamb, and then Edward emerged from his room dressed in a smart wool uniform. He looked important. Granny peered at him over her half glasses.

‘Never seen such clean fingernails.’

Edward squeezed Clem so hard she thought he might wring the life from her, but she buried her face in his scratchy jacket, and remembered what he smelt like. He had kept it from them, just like that.

Clem felt her breath all fluttery in her chest. She put her hand over her lips so that Granny wouldn’t see her lips wobble. Granny leaned into the street, balancing on her stick, straining her head from under the bulky collar of her two sizes, too big nutria skin coat that Edward had picked up at an estate clearance some months before.

She looked like a long necked turtle. They waited until the last bits of Edward disappeared over the rise of the hill. Clem stepped quickly inside, but Granny stood there a moment. Clem heard her say ‘idiot.’

All the young men went to war. It is a strange thing, let me tell you, if you have not known such a time, to find a manless village, and yet, Dawlish was a town devoid of its lads, who had formerly filled the pubs, worked the fields, and swung like a rusty farm gate in rows of three and four, link-armed of a Friday night, drunk, along the cobbled roads home after a night on the tiles. Clem had become used to the sight of them staggering along the road or foreshore, or sitting around beach bonfires singing their songs at night, some kind of harmless drunkard’s lullaby that mewled up to her through the shuttered windows, that sent her off to sleep, settling, in its own discordant way.

The new silence brought on by the mass exodus of the town’s boys was unsettling. Clem missed them, for all their rowdiness, and the young women of Dawlish missed them, and the old grandfathers worried for them, and the pubs were empty and the streets silent at night.

You may think that Edward’s absence leaves a huge gap in the story – rather like a hole in a jumper that glares out annoyingly, but you’d be wrong. He went to war, and he fought. Personally I can’t tell you about what went on in France and Salonika because I wasn’t there. You may think that without him the story should come to a staggering halt, because like most men who fought in the Great War, he was away for AGES. Three years in fact. But life goes on, even in the face of downtimes and dull moments. And in their thickskinned Devonian way, Granny and Clem sucked up their loss and rode roughshod over the dull moments. Though to be honest, there weren’t so many of those, and I’ll tell you why.

Edward clearly hadn’t as he put it: ‘Planned for ages.’ To go to war. If he *had* planned it for ages, he would have tied up his dealings, but he clearly had not.

The Key sat for a long time on Clem’s bedside table. She could not bring herself to visit her father’s workshop. It was sure to be cold and dusty without his presence. Every pot or label, every chisel mark on every carpented object or note written in his hand, cut his absence deeper. Without him she felt like a trespasser.

How normal things look, she thought, when they are not normal at all. The darkening sky, not quite black but a deep Prussian blue, was incredibly pretty, as it

always was. And the moon, a bright sliver of fingernail – or a smile – Clem shifted her head on the pillow – not a smile, a sad face. What if he did not come back?

By the second week of his absence, the first of his letters arrived: It was written on the thinnest onion skin paper and headed: *Church Army Recreation Hut: on Active Service with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force*. This heading was accompanied by a printed illustration in red, of two soldiers firing a canon (with smoke coming out of it.) It looked frighteningly official. It said:

Dearest Doodles,

It is searingly hot here by day & freezing at night & mosquitoes intolerable. As for food, Antarctica would be nectar of the gods compared with the godforsaken slop they call sustenance here. Did you get P.O. from WHS for adzes? Hunt through workshop (I think cabinet RHS of front door) for 1. Kaka Parrot Perch – Skinner will be interested in that & in same drawer should find a very fine Tiki and pair of adzes. Send on to Skinner – small amount of duty (note price in book) pack carefully in straw & box up send on to address as per his last letter. I shall write telling him to expect them & asking price: Parrot perch £4.10, Tiki £8. Adzes £2.10 the pair – Under present circumstances will take best offer. Sorry for uninspired note, war is no picnic – (as if he thought it was going to be!)

All my love

Pa

This was the type of letter Clem received weekly. Being wartime, she was often forced to write to Edward telling him she had received no news from clients at all. In one or two cases word came from the post office telling her that ships had been sunk and parcels lost. There was no security in running a mail order business during war.

Clem held off going up to the workshop for as long as possible, but in the end it was an intriguing letter that forced her up there, and this is what it said:

December 5, 1916

Miss. C. Little, for Edward J. Little, Dealer of Curios.

Dear Miss Little,

I enclose postal order for sum of £3.50 towards the purchase of six adzes, and promise to pay the balance in one month's time. Your father has recently written to me of a DODO skeleton in his possession— one of only three in existence. He says he will send it to me on his return. I have written to inform him of my great interest in this item.

I do hope this letter finds your family well during these turbulent times and that your father is shortly to be returned home to you safely.

I remain,

Yours Truly,

William H Skinner

Surveyor of Lands, Blenheim, New Zealand.

Clem read this letter with great curiosity: DODO? She had never heard of a dodo in Edward's possession. Indeed, if he had had a dodo, she felt sure she would have heard about it, as she was well aware of the rarity of such a thing.

She marched up to the workshop that morning with the specific intention of hunting down that dodo, but was distracted from her task. What she found in fact, was a not a *what*, but a *who*. She found Jock Macleod. Or rather, bits of him.

Don't panic, this is not a murder mystery. Edward was not capable of cold blooded killing (not even as it turned out, during war.) Though Clem had a terrible fright and for one awful minute thought she'd stumbled across a real dead body! She was distracted from her dodo-hunt, by a shadowy rack, hanging at the back of the workshop. At first glance it looked like a collection of Warbridge family uniforms, but on closer inspection it turned out to be an archive of eclectic antique clothing. Every conceivable costume lurked there. It was fascinating: Eighteenth century dresses with tiny bodices, huge silk skirts with jewel encrusted decoration, all covered with black baize cloths to protect them from dust, and it was just as she slipped a dust cloth from a hanger that she looked up – and spotted Jock Macleod.

Clem leapt backwards into Edward's workbench. Partially winded, she cowered on the ground, half expecting the gruff Scotsman to make some snide comment– as he

was wont to do. But he just hung there. A queasy sweat began to spread over her— had he KILLED HIMSELF? But when she lifted her eyes, she saw it wasn't Jock himself pinned to the rail, but a dishevelled red wig, topped with a deerstalker hat, attached to the hanger; a tweed jacket, checked shirt, wool trousers and lined up underneath, Jock's polished chestnut brogues. Everything fastidiously laid out as though by a costume designer for a character in a play. Even the smallest detail had been thought of. Pinned to the lapel of the jacket was a hairy ginger caterpillar: Jock's moustache.

The relief of not finding the real Jock either alive or dead, was immense, if strange. Clem remembered why she'd come to the workshop in the first place, to hunt for the dodo, but though there were other bird skeletons up there, including a tin labelled 'bones; pheasant, partridge, turkey etc.' and another tin labelled 'bones misc.' and another labelled 'bones; mutton, lamb etc.', there was no box labelled 'dodo etc.'

She had seen a dodo in the British Museum during their trip to London. There had been an enormous crowd gathered around its cabinet. She had sketched its skeleton at the time. A label on the cabinet read: Skeleton of *Didus Ineptus* (DODO) bird, now extinct: One of only three complete skeletons in existence.

Imagine the clamour from the world's top museums, if there was another complete skeleton up for grabs? Edward might name his price.

Clem felt the same growing sense of panic she'd experienced when Edward arrived home with the leg of lamb: Doom. Not to put too fine a point on it. She raced home from the workshop and opened the tin trunk at the end of her bed, which contained mainly old lacework of Elsie's, but also some of Clem's baby things, a few early scribbles and school reports and collections of drawings, etcetera. She had put her dodo sketch in there. In fact, she and Edward had looked through her drawings only a few weeks before he went away. The dodo was in a large notebook with a blue cloth cover, but to Clem's surprise on leafing through the book, she discovered that several pages had been removed. Her dodo was nowhere to be seen.

Dear Father, (Clem wrote in her weekly letter)

What is all this about the DODO??

I found Jock Macleod. You cut pictures out of my drawing book.

Yours,

D

Clem was beginning to see things she had previously tried to ignore. She had put all those other evidences aside, because Edward was so clever and generous. It is easy to excuse our loved ones of their petty failings. Little things (excuse the pun) can be easily overlooked but it is not nearly so easy to excuse big things like whole people (Jock Macleod) who turn out to be not who you imagine them to be. The bone fragments were adding up too, to form a skeletal outline of Edward's intentions for them; E.g. The night she caught Edward with Taffy's mutton bones, and those tins of misc chicken, partridge etc. bones at the workshop...and now these larger than life promises to his clients of an extremely rare extinct bird. Not only did she feel as though she existed in some surreality; because who in their right mind would believe that a lowly, part time curio dealer, could have got his hands on one of the rarest things in the world? She began to worry for Edward's sanity.

A week went by. Clem received no letter from her father. She got a receipt from WHS, and one from Captain Fuller. Final payments of monies owed. She wrote to Skinner:

Tue 23rd

To Mr W H Skinner

Dear Sir,

I must thank you for money order received £4. Thank you yes my father is keeping well when I heard from him two weeks ago. Will tell him I have heard from you he will be glad. This war is terrible, shall be glad when it is over.

Thanking for this

Truly,

Clementine Little

P.S. I find no trace of Dodo skeleton you mention in his workshop. I would not pin hopes to it.

She wrote (again) to her father:

Pa,

There is no Dodo in the workshop; just a few tins of animal bones. I said as much to Mr Skinner when I wrote to thank him for the £4 outstanding which he sent.

Your loving,

D

The letter had the desired result.

Pioneer E Little

270 Company

Royal Engineers

British Forces, Salonika

Dearest Doodles,

Do not tell me you wrote to Skinner to say I had no Dodo. I do have a Dodo. I don't keep him at the workshop because it is not safe. He is in a lockup in London if you must know. I can't believe you doubted me. & with regard to Jock, it is rather unjust of you to leap to conclusions simply because you found items in my workshop which might at first glance look suspicious. Poor Jock was proud of his once ample crop of hair but suffered terrible alopecia. I did not realise this at first, it was not until I met with him here that I discovered it: he approached me one day in Salonika & I failed to recognise him without hair or eyebrows. It all fell out he said at age 22. When he was conscripted the army refused to let him bring his wig, which is why no doubt you found it with his things in the workshop. I believe he also left some make-up with his things (he told me) & admitted he was vain & proud of his rugged appearance. In fact I have sad news: I have witnessed with my own two eyes tragic circumstances regarding Jock: He has lost more than just eyebrows as he was trapped under Zeppelin fuselage when it crashed on the Vadar swamp. Tragic: My loss & Scotland's, for though he had his failings, he was essentially a loyal chum.

Oh Doodles. In another time this place might be quite the holiday destination but it is far from that at present.

I hope this answer satisfies.

Yours,

Pa