

LETTERS HOME

Arnold stared listlessly down the narrow, dripping, tree lined, lane. In any other year he, like most mortals, would have relished the pure Spring air. He would have nurtured joy and compassion from the galactic range of wild flowers that commanded the high banks. He would have heard, with comfort and a feeling of well being, the sharp, sparkling, bird song and the gentle, caressing, ripple of the streaming, tadpole swarming, brook. He would have stood, fascinated, and watched in benign amusement the gambolic playfulness of the lambs on the surrounding Mendipean slopes. All around him, buds unfolded, leaves stretched themselves, blossom burst forth. Nature, disciplined by late frosts, was casting off the bonds of Winter. Life was born anew.

In any other year Arnold would have seen all this and been inwardly rejuvenated. This was the sole season when the countryside and people came again to life before slumbering in the long, sun-drenched, days of Summer. Yet Arnold saw none of this. It passed him by. Instead, with the mesmerised, blinkered, vision of one deeply hypnotised, he looked vacantly ahead from his garden vantage on the bend, straight down the lane, and saw nothing. There was no sign of Jones, and it was getting late.

Almost imperceptibly his heart stumbled and missed a beat. Arnold noticed this. It was a strange, uncomfortable, disquieting, phenomenon which had recently become apparent, since, maybe, he had time to think and dwell on such matters. He now maintained a large catalogue of such ailments. For a start, he appeared to be far more tired than usual, yet it seemed he was not sleeping properly. When he did sleep, he would suddenly awake to find himself bathed in a clammy, cold, sweat or gripped by a paralysing numbness in his limbs. And there was the taut pain, sharp, sometimes breath-snatching, there in his chest. Or was it in his back? He did not know as it did not matter much. Little mattered. It was there, inside him, and it hurt.

He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to picture what she looked like. That was it, wasn't it? He was hurt, cut with a knife. Part of his life, amputated. And he was jealous. These symptoms were imaginary, fragment of his self-pity which grew, like a parasite, out of this enforced solitude. The fatigue resulted from the long winter and the late nights spent lambing. And the pain arose from indigestion due to his careless, un-nutritious, diet. That was what Dr Sharp had said, wasn't it?

In the deep, consumptive, misery of his wretched hypochondria, he had visited Dr Sharp. It was the first time since Nathaniel was born, the first time in seven years. What else had the doctor said? He had remarked that he had not seen Molly since Christmas, and Arnold had bristled. Reacting this way had surprised him. He really thought he had overcome that.

His father had been right from the very beginning. One evening, as the sun slipped behind Arthur's Mount, the old man had placed a seldom hand in his only son's shoulder. "Never 'e marry a younger woman than 'e, my son," he had said. "No, not younger." Goodness! How right he had been! Here was the living proof of it!

What was he thinking? So, Molly was younger but, then, in their twelve years of married life there had never been the slightest hint of - no, nothing. Not he, neither.

What else had Dr Sharp said? "None of us is getting any younger." It was strange, this unbridgeable chasm of age between him and Nathaniel - a paradox. As he waited for the lad to grow, for his young chest to expand, his limbs to strengthen, muscles develop; while he waited it was he who aged and grew weak. One day Nathaniel would take over the farm, as had he from his father, and his father before him. It could not be passed to Ruth. There it was, a race against time, while there was still time to race against.

Ruth was one of his biggest disappointments. Why had she been born first? In three years' time she would be fifteen, but it would be another eight years before the boy..... Why did she have to come first? In eight years' time he would be fifty-five.

Where was Jones? He had not been around yesterday, not the day before. What had happened to him?

Ruth was small and slight, wasn't she? One could mistake her for a nine year old. He shook his head sadly and bit on his pipe. Ruth would never make a farmer's wife. Something would have to be found for her. What were they doing now? It was two months since the fateful day when Jones had brought the mews. What a position of extraordinary power he had! To be able to arrive like that and completely change the course of people's lives and the drop of a piece of paper. Quite extraordinary! Yet he would not be coming that day. It was too late, now. Sad, Arnold turned and walked slowly back into the farmhouse. Maybe tomorrow?

The sun was high in the sky as Molly crossed its bright pool on the landing and carried the tray into the bedroom. "I've brought you something to eat, Mother," she said. From the snowy depths of the bed, a withered hand waved and dismissed her. "You must eat," she persisted, settling onto the counterpane edge. "Let me feed you."

Her mother glared at her from recessed eyes. "Don't bother. I won't be with you long. I won't bother you for much longer - my time is near. I know I am a nuisance, but"

"I've received another letter from Arnold," said Molly, softly, trying a diversion. "Would you like me to read it to you?"

"That fool can't write!" snapped her mother.

"I have heard from Arnold," Molly insisted. "He says that he is fine and that I am to stay here until you are better, even if it takes all summer!"

"Oh, I won't last that long."

"Mother, you are not to say things like that! I can stay as long as it takes to get you better."

"The children" began the old woman, despairingly.

"You are not to worry about the children. They are quite happy up in Yorkshire with Amy."

"Amy," sighed her mother, and looked away. Later, when Molly collected the untouched tray she paused for a moment to watch her mother in her sedated sleep. Then, with a secret smile, Molly went downstairs and quietly slipped away, out of the house.

Jones sat below the low ceiling in the vast farmhouse kitchen, sipping from a steaming, stained mug of hot, watery, tea. "A letter from Weston, then? What does she say, that wife of yours?" Arnold stared wistfully at his wife's small and neat hand writing. The characters were blurred and indistinct, but he thought he could detect the meaning. "Is she coming home, yet?" continued the postman, recovering from another sip.

"Mmmmm," murmured Arnold, turning the sheet and recognising the characteristics of his children's names coupled with the word "love". "No," he said. "It doesn't appear that her mother's any better. She's staying there."

"Shame," sipped Jones with a thinly disguised attempt at sympathy. Arnold collapsed into a chair at the other side of the table and stared at the blackened range.

"Not coming home yet," he repeated, once aloud, then to himself. A feline touch brushed his ankle and comforted him. Automatically he reached down.

"I must be on my way," said Jones, cheerfully. He was the winged messenger, the bearer of good and bad news, of crippling bills, mortgage determinations, re-possession, disaster, death and misfortune. He enjoyed his job. Alone, Arnold sighed. In the parlour he surveyed the dust-covered piano and casually lifted the lid. A damp, musty, smell greeted him. He pressed a

pitchless key. The piano was Molly's. She was the musical one, although Ruth appeared to have inherited her mother's useless artistic fancies.

He studied the letter again, holding it awry to his nose, angled towards the brighter light. He had made no mistake in the kitchen. The message was exactly the same. She was not coming home.

"I am sorry. Your mother's condition is worse and she is slowly sinking. I am afraid there is little I can do but wait and hope. It is purely a matter of time. Oh, I have sedated her again, so she will feel no pain. I'll call again in the morning. Good evening." Molly watched the doctor descend the glistening steps and along the rain-swept pavement until he was out of sight. Before her mother's bed her heart raced. What would she do when her mother finally died? Her answer was already crystallising in her mind. Wearing her inward smile she went downstairs and, collecting her coat, went out into the night.

Arnold winced as he watched the rain lash against the dusty windows. His attention wandered up, past the curtains, to the spreading damp patch on the ceiling. In the background he heard Dr Sharp's bag snap shut. "I will give you something for your chest," he said in his best, impersonal, bedside manner. "But you are your own worst enemy. Look at you! Take better care of yourself, man, before you go to rack and ruin like this place of yours. And where's that pretty, young, wife of yours? Why is she not here to look after you when you need her?"

Arnold's heart subsided, sinking under the unbearable weights of his worldly worries and anxieties. "She's nursing her sick mother," he said, praying that it was true.

"And the children?"

"Oh, they're with her," he growled. "At Weston."

The doctor paused and studied his patient with a level, knowing, look which had grown from years of experience in diagnosing his patients' problems. "It has taken a fair long time," he said quietly. "If it is to be any longer you should get someone in to look after you. When did you last have a proper cooked meal?"

Arnold shrugged. "I'm too busy," he grunted. "Too busy. I'll get by." Dr Sharp was in the doorway.

"I'll speak to Mrs Farrell," he said. "Perhaps she can call in and help."

"I don't want that prying old busy-body around here," muttered Arnold, but the doctor had gone.

The funeral was simple and followed the customary form. Molly stood alone, dry eyed under the veil, dry skinned under the umbrella, as she watched the coffin lowered into the soaked earth. It tilted, and a cascade of water fell, preceding it. Near her familiar words were being uttered, but her thoughts were far removed. Her movement forward to scatter the dry earth that had been handed her was automatic as someone nudged her elbow. It was the last impediment and she felt no remorse. She had done all that was necessary and the small silent prayer that rose from her conscience was stimulated more by the emotion of the occasion rather than daughterly love.

As the rain dripped from her umbrella she added a new prayer. Let it wash her life clear of the past. Let the past be interred with the mortal remains of her mother. Let her bury them both here, and not look back on what she had done.

The service was over. Near the bushed at the entrance stood a familiar figure who stepped forward to greet her as she approached.

"Another letter for you," said Jones, enthusiastically, his spirit undaunted by the weather. "This one's posted in Yorkshire. Been a bit of a gap since the last one."

Arnold coughed deeply. "She's been busy nursing her sick mother. She doesn't get much time to write letters, what with her and the children to look after." He coughed again and the pain made him wince.

"What does she say, then?" said the postman, standing on tip-toe to peer over Arnold's shoulder. The envelope was soggy and the damp had penetrated through to blur Molly's neat writing into a mass of illegible hieroglyphics. Here and there a word had survived and was discernible, but the meaning was far from being instantly detectable.

"It is wet through!" cried Arnold in disgust.

"It is the rain, you know," muttered Jones, edging his way towards the door.

"I'll put it on the range to dry off," grumbled Arnold and returned to his convulsive coughing.

When Mrs Farrell arrived late that afternoon she discovered Arnold, soaked to the skin, in a state of feverish collapse. She had to run nearly two miles to fetch Dr Sharp. "I tried to get him straight to bed," she explained once they had made their way in the doctor's car back to the farm, "but he is such a big man. So I've made him up a bed in the parlour. It's so damp in there. We ought to send for Molly, even if she is looking after her mother. She could surely leave her for a few days?"

Dr Sharp shook his head. "That is not so," he said sadly. "She is not looking after her mother. A colleague of mine in Weston told me that her mother has been dead and buried for nearly three weeks."

Mrs Farrell's eyes narrowed and her face became grim. "Dead for three weeks?" she echoed. "That may explain this!" She went over to the kitchen table and collected together a small pile of fragile fragments of charred paper. "I found it on the top of the range. It's all that remains of a letter home from Molly. It must have come today. Look! She has run out on him! Here's the word "Canada", and here's "man". She has left him and taken the children and gone to Canada, the hussy!"

"Shush, Mrs Farrell," said the doctor. "The door's open - he'll hear you!"

In the parlour Arnold ceased to listen. He had been unable to make any sense of the words in the letter, Now it no longer mattered. He turned over onto one side and shut his eyes. Images floated before him, first blurred and abstract, then clear and defined. There was Molly, young and pretty, sunny and gay, as she had been when the first met and he had fallen in love with her. There she was as he would always remember her, always. His breathing, at first heavy and laboured, gradually became lighter and easier, then slower, until it stopped altogether.

Molly glanced nervously along the darkening platform. Under the awning they were protected from the rain but strong gusts of wind from the darkness beyond made the feeble light of the gas lamps flicker. "Oh, no crying, please, Ruth," she said. "Mummy's got to go away. It won't be forever. One day you will understand."

She looked at Nathaniel who, catching his mother's eye, instinctively reached out and took his sister's hand. "Now," she said. "I have written home to your father and told him everything and the train you will be on. He will meet you at Bristol. I've not told Aunty Amy, but I will write to her, and to you, my darlings, from Canada. Now, you must get on the train before it leaves."

As she spoke to them, Molly wondered if she was being truthful. Did she really mean what she said? She looked back at the barrier. He was there, waiting for her, and they had little time to get to Liverpool. A clear choice he had said. She had made it. A clean start, he had added. Perhaps she could start again, and forget her past. "I will try and write," she whispered.

Molly stood and watched the train as it slowly, almost reluctantly, steamed out of the station. She was haunted by the vision that she carried with her to her dying day, of two white

faces pressed tearfully against the carriage window as it slid past her and disappeared into the night.

On the thirteenth day of October 1928, the 10 pm Leeds to Bristol express, running at sixty miles and hour, collided with two other trains near the village of Charfield in Gloucestershire. The wreckage burned for twelve hours and amongst the fifteen souls that perished on that night were found, charred and unrecognisable, the bodies of two young children. They were never identified.

THE END