

Clorinda Walks in Heaven

By A. E. Coppard

Miss Smith, Clorinda Smith, desired not to die on a wet day. Her speculations on the possibilities of one's demise were quite ingenuous and had their mirth, but she shrunk from that figure of her dim little soul—and it was only dimly that she could figure it at all—approaching the pathways of the boundless in a damp, bedraggled condition.

“But the rain couldn't harm your spirit,” declared her comforting friends.

“Why not?” asked Clorinda. “If there is a ghost of me, why not a ghost of the rain?”

There were other aspects, delectable and illusive, of this imagined apotheosis, but Clorinda always hoped—against hope, be it said—that it wouldn't be wet. On three evenings there had been a bow in the sky, and on the day she died rain poured in fury. With a golden key she unlocked the life out of her bosom and moved away without fear, as if a great light had sprung suddenly under her feet in a little dark place, into a region where things became starkly real and one seemed to live like the beams rolling on the tasselled corn in windy acres. There was calmness in those translucent leagues and the undulation amid a vast implacable light until she drifted like a feather, fallen from an unguessed star, into a place that was extraordinarily like the noonday world, so green and warm was its valley.

A little coomb lay between some low hills of turf, and on a green bank beside a few large rocks was a man mending a ladder of white new-shaven willow studded with large brass nails, mending it with hard knocks that sounded clearly. The horizon was terraced only just beyond and above him, for the hills rolled steeply up. Thin pads of wool hung in the arch of the ultimate heavens, but towards the end of the valley the horizon was clouded with clouds torn and disbattled. Two cows, a cow of white and a cow of tan, squatted where one low hill held up, as it were, the sunken limits of the sky. There were larks—in such places the lark sings for ever—and thrushes—the wind vaguely active—seven white ducks—a farm. Each nook was a flounce of blooms and a bower for birds. Passing close to the man—he was sad and preoccupied, dressed in a little blue tunic—she touched his arm as if to inquire a direction, saying: “Jacob!” She did not know what she would have asked of him, but he gave her no heed and she again called to him: “Jacob!” He did not seem even to see her, so she went to the large white gates at the end of the valley and approached a railway crossing. She had to wait a long time, for trains of a vastness and grandeur were passing without sound. Strange advertisements on the hoardings and curious direction posts gathered some of her attention. She observed that in every possible situation, on any available post or stone, people had carved initials, sometimes a whole name, often with a date, and Clorinda experienced a doubt of the genuineness of some of these, so remote was the antiquity implied. At last the trains were all gone by, and as the barriers swung back she crossed the permanent way. There was neither ambiguity in her movements nor surprise in her apprehensions. She just crossed over to a group of twenty or thirty men, who moved to welcome her. They were bare-legged, sandal-footed, lightly clad in beautiful loose tunics of peacock and cinnamon, which bore not so much the significance of Colour as the quality of light. One of them rushed eagerly forward, crying: “Clorinda!” offering to her a long coloured scarf. Strangely, as he came closer, he grew less perceivable; Clorinda was aware in a flash that she was viewing him by some other mechanism than that of her two eyes. In a moment he utterly disappeared and she felt herself rapt into his being, caressed with faint caresses, and troubled with dim faded

ecstasies and recognitions not wholly agreeable. The other men stood grouped around them, glancing with half-closed cynical eyes. Those who stood farthest away were more clearly seen: in contiguity a presence could only be divined, resting only—but how admirably!—in the nurture of one’s mind.

“What is it?” Clorinda asked; and all the voices replied: “Yes, we know you!”

She felt herself released, and the figure of the man rejoined the waiting group. “I was your husband Reuben,” said the first man slowly, and Clorinda, who had been a virgin throughout her short life, exclaimed: “Yes, yes, dear Reuben!” with momentary tremors and a queer fugitive drift of doubt. She stood there, a spook of comprehending being, and all the uncharted reefs in the map of her mind were anxiously engaging her. For a time she was absorbed by this new knowledge.

Then another voice spoke:

“I was your husband Raphael!”

“I know, I know,” said Clorinda, turning to the speaker, “we lived in Judea.”

“And we dwelt in the valley of the Nile,” said another, “in the years that are gone.”

“And I too . . . and I too . . . and I too,” they all clamoured, turning angrily upon themselves.

Clorinda pulled the strange scarf from her shoulders where Reuben had left it, and, handling it so, she became aware of her many fugitive sojournings upon the earth. It seemed that all of her past had become knit in the scarf into a compact pattern of beauty and ugliness of which she was entirely aware, all its multiplexity being immediately resolved . . . the habitations with cave men, and the lesser human unit of the lesser later day, Patagonian, Indian, Cossack, Polynesian, Jew. . . of such stuff the pattern was intimately woven, and there were little plan-gent perfect moments of the past that fell into order in the web. Clorinda watching the great seabird with pink feet louting above the billows that roared upon Iceland, or Clorinda hanging her girdle upon the ebony hooks of the image of Tanteelee. She had taken voyaging drafts upon the whole world, cataract, jungle and desert, ingle and pool and strand, ringing the changes upon a whole gamut of masculine endeavour—from a prophet to a haberdasher. She could feel each little life hung now as in a sarsenet of cameos upon her visible breasts: thereby for these—these *men*—she was draped in an eternal wonder. But she could not recall any image of her past life in *these* realms save only that her scarf was given back to her on every return by a man of these men.

She could remember with humility her transient passions for them all. None, not one, had ever given her the measure of her own desire, a strong harsh flame that fashioned and tempered its own body; nothing but a nebulous glow that was riven into embers before its beam had sweetened into pride. She had gone from them childless always and much as a little child.

From the crowd of quarrelling ghosts a new figure detached itself, and in its approach it subdued that vague vanishing which had been so perplexing to Clorinda. Out of the crowd it slipped, and loomed lovingly beside her, took up her thought and the interrogation that came into her mind.

“No,” it said gravely, “there is none greater than these. The ultimate reaches of man’s mind produce nothing but images of men.”

“But,” said Clorinda, “do you mean that our ideals, previsions of a *vita nuova*—”

“Just so,” it continued, “a mere intoxication. Even here you cannot escape the singular dower of dreams . . . you can be drunk with dreams more easily and more permanently than with drugs.”

The group of husbands had ceased their quarrelling to listen; Clorinda swept them with her glances thoughtfully and doubtfully.

“Could mankind be so poor,” the angel resumed, “as poor as these, if it housed something greater than itself?”

With a groan the group of outworn husbands drew away.

Clorinda turned to her companion with disappointment and some dismay. . . . “I hardly understand yet—is this all then, just—”

“Yes,” it replied, “just the ghost of the world.”

She turned unhappily and looked back across the gateway into the fair coomb with its cattle, its fine grass, and the man working diligently therein. A sense of bleak loneliness began to possess her; here, then, was no difference save that there were no correlations, no consequences; nothing had any effect except to produce the ghost of a ghost. There was already in the hinterland of her apprehensions a ghost of her new ghostship: she was to be followed by herself, pursued by figures of her own ceaseless being!

She looked at the one by her side. “Who are you?” she asked, and at the question the group of men drew again very close to them.

“I am your unrealized desires,” it said. “Did you think that the dignity of virginhood, rarely and deliberately chosen, could be so brief and barren? Why, that pure idea was my own immaculate birth, and I was born the living mate of you.”

The hungry-eyed men shouted with laughter.

“Go away!” screamed Clorinda to them; “I do not want you.”

Although they went she could hear the echoes of their sneering as she took the arm of her new lover. “Let us go,” she said, pointing to the man in the coomb, “and speak to him.” As they approached the man he lifted his ladder hugely in the air and dashed it to the ground so passionately that it broke.

“Angry man! Angry man!” mocked Clorinda. He turned towards her fiercely. Clorinda began to fear him; the muscles and knots of his limbs were uncouth like the gnarl of old trees; she made a little pretence of no more observing him.

“Now what is it like,” said she jocularly to the angel at her side, and speaking of her old home, “what is it like now at Weston-super-Mare?”

At that foolish question the man with the ladder reached forth an ugly hand and twitched the scarf from her shoulders.

It cannot now be told to what remoteness she had come, or on what roads her undirected feet had travelled there, but certain it is that in that moment she was gone. . . . Why, where, or how cannot be established: whether she was swung in a blast of annihilation into the uttermost gulfs, or withdrawn for her beauty into that mysterious Nox; into some passionate communion with the eternal husbands, or into some eternal combat with their passionate other wives . . . from our scrutiny at least she passed for ever.

It is true there was a beautiful woman of this name who lay for a month in a deep trance in the west of England. On her recovery she was balladed about in the newspapers and upon the halls for quite a time, and indeed her notoriety brought requests for her autograph from all parts of the world, and an offer of marriage from a Quaker potato merchant. But she tenderly refused him and became one of those faded grey old maids who wear their virginity like antiquated armour.