

Lineage

Whoever suggested it was ‘self-evident, that all men are created equal’ hadn’t been looking into the steady barrel eyes of a loaded shotgun. I was feeling distinctly unequal in the fading forest light.

“Drop it,” came the nasal growl from behind the weapon.

“Which?”

I cursed my silliness... as the notion of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness passed incongruously through my mind.

The growl was repeated without words, so I dropped the warm pheasant. Wrong choice clearly, judging by the rising pitch.

“Oh, the gun, you mean?” My teenage chirpiness belied the nerves suddenly playing havoc with my pelvic region. But even as my muscle control was being tested, I was running off at the mouth in a way that bewildered me. “Billy’s my name, what’s yours?”

My rifle was resting on its stock. I let it fall gently away from me... and not towards my unhappy aggressor.

His eyes watched and his threatening gun hadn’t moved an inch. That damned American verse was still niggling away at me, ‘endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.’ They had no idea what it was like to stand in my shoes.

“On the ground. Face down. Arms and legs spread.” Given my limited options, I hurried to follow the instructions. “Slowly.”

“Okay!” Why alienate the power in front of me?

Flat on the ground, but looking up at him, he appeared huge – a green giant in his estate tweeds. The gun had moved only to tilt down at me. I hoped I looked obedient and not a smartass. Unfortunately, I was by nature more the latter than the former.

“Face into the ground.”

I buried my face into a mat of last season’s oak and beech leaves. It occurred to me that, come autumn, new falling leaves might sprinkle over my remains as a challenge for some future detective. Yet, I’m normally optimistic by nature.

I heard him carefully move my gun away, a toy compared to his; then he picked up the bird. How bizarre that it should come to this? My mother would not be impressed. She had only just arrived at the manor house, with my father.

I felt the pressure of a huge boot between my shoulder-blades.

“You are thief – no more than a thief.”

I wanted to argue. My housemaster at Shrewsbury might have highlighted a range of my character flaws, but stealing wouldn't have made the list. Certainly, I had been branded irreverent – difficult.

I credit that housemaster for giving my questioning spirit a direction, a form, a status. Learning how to think, he called it; studying the great philosophers of the age of reason... and how their ideas had become mantras for new world thinking. I owed it to my mother, he had said, to understand.

The boot twisted on my spine. I could feel the rough hard sole cracking the bones in my back.

“We have ways of dealing with thieves.”

The reason I was remaining silent had everything to do with fear. My brain was whizzing with a catalogue of thoughts. I should be trying to engage my captor in distracting conversation. But the presence of his boot and the huge shotgun seemed to have paralysed my vocal chords.

“On the very day when the new Lord and Lady have taken up residence, you would shame our village.”

Ah ha! He was worried about shame, not the bird. I could tell him something about shame – being sent away to boarding school, to remove me from the scene; being called a bastard.

Was I? Who had a choice in how we were conceived?

Apparently, though, I was – a bastard.

To keep their marriage intact, the future Earl had excused my mother's dalliance – accepting, and effectively legitimizing, me as his own – but her concession to him was for me to be out of his sight, boarded, while they made their successful lives in America, the land of her birth. She had told me the gist gently, over time, by correspondence; but not her co-conceiver's identity. The housemaster clearly knew something – perhaps tolerantly experienced in such semi-discreet rumoured situations – while he taught me about the USA independence declaration and the context of my maternal line. He guided me away from anger at my innocent past.

Tomorrow was to be an auspicious day. The Earl would be officially invested with his inheritance; his wife – my mother – would be Her Ladyship. Both had

returned to place of my genesis and from which they had chosen quiet banishment over disgrace. But now they were back – with me, their solitary heir; redeemed from acceptable exile; scandal apparently expunged.

I had walked in the evening woods, .22 over my arm, when the pheasant appeared. A single shot – clean, instinctive. The stately home would be mine someday anyway, with all its chattels and game-birds, if the status quo remained.

“I’m not from the village,” I managed to spit out through the leaves; and the boot pressure relaxed.

“Turn over,” he commanded.

As I obeyed, he continued, “Where are you from?”

Hell of question to ask a bastard child. “Shrewsbury.”

“Billy, you say. Why are you here?”

“My mother...”

“Get up!” Naturally, I obeyed again. The barrel of his gun was now broken open, safe, in the crook of his arm. “Pick up the bird.” He had my .22 in his left hand. “You’re here with Her Ladyship?”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t be out here shooting without me knowing. How old are you, Billy?”

“Seventeen.”

“Right.” Thoughtful cough and pause. “Right. Head back up to the big house,” returning my .22.

“What’s your name?”

“Walker. Gamekeeper here. Seven generations. William Walker. Tell Her Ladyship you saw me.”

“Wouldn’t she know you’d be here?”

“She might. All a long time ago. I stay in the woods.”

“You know who I am then, William?”

“That I do, Sir. Now I do.” His eye twitched; his voice lost its formality. “And why you are such a good shot with that old gun.”