

I

The Five Beginnings

I am, I discover, a very untidy man.

Look at me. Without my periwig, I am an affront to neatness. My hair (what is left of it) is the colour of sand and wiry as hogs' bristles; my ears are of uneven size; my forehead is splattered with freckles; my nose, which of course my wig can't conceal, however low I wear it, is unceremoniously flat, as if I had been hit at birth.

Was I hit at birth? I do not believe so, as my parents were gentle and kindly people, but I will never know now. They died in a fire in 1662. My father had a nose like a Roman emperor. This straight, fierce nose would neaten up my face, but alas, I don't possess it. Perhaps I am not my father's child? I am erratic, immoderate, greedy, boastful and sad. Perhaps I am the son of Amos Treefeller, the old man who made head-moulds for my father's millinery work? Like him, I am fond of the feel of objects made of polished wood. My telescope, for instance. For I admit, I find greater order restored to my brain from the placing of my hands round this instrument of science than from what its lenses reveal to my eye. The stars are too numerous and too distant to restore to me anything but a terror at my own insignificance.

I don't know whether you can imagine me yet. I am thirty-seven years old as this year, 1664, moves towards its end. My stomach is large and also freckled, although it has seldom

Restoration

been exposed to the sun. It looks as if a flight of minute moths had landed on it in the night. I am not tall, but this is the age of the high heel. I strive to be particular about my clothes, but am terribly in the habit of dropping morsels of dinner on them. My eyes are blue and limpid. In childhood, I was considered angelic and was frequently buttoned inside a suit of blue moiré, thus seeming to my mother a little world entire: sea and sand in my colours, and the lightness of air in my baby voice. She went to her fiery death still believing that I was a person of honour. In the scented gloom of Amos Treefeller's back room (the place of all our private conversations), she would take my hand and whisper her hopes for my splendid future. What she couldn't see, and what I had not the heart to point out, was that we no longer live in an honourable age. What has dawned instead is the Age of Possibility. And it is only the elderly (as my mother was) and the truculently myopic (as my friend, Pearce, is) who haven't noticed this and are not preparing to take full advantage of it. Pearce, I am ashamed to admit, fails to understand, let alone laugh at, the jokes from Court I feel obliged to relay to him on his occasional visits to me from his damp Fenland house. The excuse he makes is that he's a Quaker. This, in turn, makes me laugh.

So, to me again – whither my thoughts are extremely fond of returning.

My name is Robert Merivel, and, although I'm dissatisfied with other of my appendages (*viz.* my flat nose), I am exceedingly happy with my name, because to its Frenchness I owe a great deal of my fortune. Since the return of the King, French things are in fashion: heels, mirrors, sedan-chairs, silver toothbrushes, fans and fricassées. And names. In the hope of some preferment, a near neighbour of mine in Norfolk, James Gourlay (an ugly, rather disgusting person, as it happens), has inserted a 'de' into his otherwise Scottish-sounding name. So far, the only reward to come to the

The Five Beginnings

pompous de Gourlay is that a French wit at my dinner table dubbed him 'Monsieur Dégueulasse'. We giggled a great deal at this and some new scarlet breeches of mine were stained with the mouthful of raisin pudding I was forced to spit out in my attack of mirth.

So this is how you might imagine me: at table, rustling with laughter in a gaudy suit, my migrant hair flattened by a luxuriant wig, my freckles powdered, my eyes twinkling in the candlelight, my pudding being ejected from my mouth by that force within me which snorts at sobriety and is so greedy for foolishness. Do not flatter yourself that I am elegant or worthy in any way, but yet I am, at this moment that you glimpse me, a rather popular man. I am also in the middle of a story which might have a variety of endings, some of them not entirely to my liking. The messy constellations I see through my telescope give me no clue to my destiny. There is, in other words, a great deal about the world and my role in it which, despite all my early learning, I utterly fail to understand.

There was a beginning to the story, or possibly a variety of beginnings. These are they:

1. In 1636, when I was nine years old, I carried out my first anatomical dissection. My instruments were: a kitchen knife, two mustard spoons made of bone, four millinery pins and a measuring rod. The cadaver was a starling.

I performed this feat of exploration in our coal cellar, into which, through the coal hole, came a crepuscular light, augmented a little by the two candles I placed on my dissecting tray.

As I cut into the thorax, a well of excitement began to fill and glimmer within me. It rose as I worked until, with the body of the starling opened and displayed before me, I had, I suddenly recognised, caught a glimpse of my own future.

2. At Caius College, Cambridge, in 1647, I met my poor friend, Pearce.

His room was below mine on the cold stairway. We were both by then students of anatomy and, though our natures are so antipathetic, our rejection of Galenic theory, coupled with our desire to discover the precise function of each part of the body in relation to the whole, formed a bond between us.

One evening, Pearce came up to my room in a state of hilarious perturbation. His face, habitually grey-toned and flaky, was rubicund and damp, his stern green eyes suddenly afflicted with a louche brightness. ‘Merivel, Merivel,’ he babbled, ‘come down to my room. A person is standing in it who has a visible heart!’

‘Have you been drinking, Pearce?’ I asked. ‘Have you broken your vow of No Sack?’

‘No!’ exploded Pearce. ‘Now come down and you will see for yourself this extraordinary phenomenon. And, for a shilling, the person says he will permit us to touch it.’

‘Touch his heart?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not a cadaver then, if its mind is on money?’

‘Now come, Merivel, before he flees into the night and is lost to our research for all eternity.’

(Pearce, I report in parentheses, has this flowery, sometimes melodramatic way of speaking that is interestingly at odds with the clipped, odourless and self-denying man he is. I often feel that no anatomical experiment would be capable of discovering the function of these ornate sentences in relation to the whole, soberly-dressed person, unless it is a universal but contradictory fact about Quakers that, whereas their gait, habit and ritual are monotonous and plain, their heads are secretly filled with a rapturous and fandangling speech.)

We descended to Pearce’s room, where a fire was burning in the small grate. In front of the fire stood a man of perhaps

The Five Beginnings

forty years. I bade him good evening, but he only nodded at me.

‘Shall I unbutton?’ he asked Pearce.

‘Yes!’ said Pearce, his voice choking with anticipation. ‘Unbutton, Sir!’

I watched as the man took off his coat and lace collar and began loosening his shirt. He let the shirt fall to the floor. Bound to his chest, and covering his heart, was a steel plate. Pearce, at this moment, took a handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his moist brow. The man removed the plate, under which was a wad of linen, a little stained with pus.

Carefully, he unbound the linen and revealed to us a large hole in his breast, about the size of a Pippin apple, in the depths of which, as I leaned forward to look more closely at it, I saw a pink and moist fleshy substance, moving all the time with a regular pulse.

‘See?’ exclaimed Pearce, the heat of whose excited body seemed to fill the room with a tropical dampness. ‘See it retract and thrust out again? We are witnessing a living, beating heart!’

The man smiled and nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘A fracture of my ribs, occasioned by a fall from my horse two years ago, was brought to a terrible suppuration, voiding such a quantity of putrefaction that my doctors feared it would never heal. It did, however. You can see the sconce of the old ulcer at the edge of the hole here. But its ravages were so deep as to expose the organ beneath.’

I was dumbfounded. To observe, in a living being, standing nonchalantly by a fire, as if about to welcome friends for a few rounds of Bezique, the systole and diastole of his heart affected me profoundly. I began to understand why Pearce was in such a lather of excitement. But then – and this is why I set down the incident as a possible beginning to the story now unfolding round me – Pearce produced a shilling from the greasy leather purse in which he kept his pitiful worldly