

Reunion

I. PROLOGUE

Alderbere was a hill--top cottage with an appropriate post-code EX6 8EX. Very near to the tiny village of Kenton in Devon, it enjoyed the quiet beauty of its pond, friendliness of the rural England, as well as the city conveniences offered by a city like Exeter or even Bristol. A few days during the summer holidays were busy and memorable days in Alderbere; where family and friends gathered to enjoy the hospitality of a cousin. A few who travelled from London, Canada or the States stayed at or near the cottage, the rest drove in from all near and not so near places. These intense days re-affirmed the sense of belonging for people who were scattered all over the globe and emphasised the feeling that even with the much improved electronic instant communication, a hug from aunt Mollie could not be replicated at a distance. The moments before the dawn or dusk were especially beautiful. The shadows looked like past generations taking a leisurely walk or dancing to an ancient tune of rustling leaves.

II. SWAN OF ALDERBERE

Alderbere pond, a largish, man-made body of water with a proper dam, a small and thickly wooded island, and a gazebo where one pretended to Read or work while taking an afternoon nap. The pond was the home of a beautiful swan called big boy. He lost his mate many years ago to an unbelievable cruelty of some men. All efforts to introduce him to another beautiful lady was in vain. While he never forgot his friends, he was eternally suspicious of strangers. Early in the morning, if I did not bring a slice of fresh bread for him, he did not come close to me all day, and a digestive biscuit was the expected food from my wife. Digestive from me and bread from her did not work at all.

III. THE ROYAL MAIL

The leisurely mail lorry trundled along hedge lined narrow roads along the fields and orchards and occasionally stopped to let another car go by or to say good morning to an early walker. The importance of the Royal Mail lorry was the delivery of the delivery of The Guardian / Observer and The Daily Telegraph. The mail and the unending catalogues were of secondary importance or a nuisance to

be attended as the day went by. Based on long established beliefs the newspapers provided the all-important topics for the afternoon tea, cricket scores, and radio programme for any international tries. Often there were letters from the family and friends who could not come to the reunion. Strangely it always arrived after the hedgehog banker ambled to his office.

IV. MORNING WALK

The neighbouring house to Alderbere was an old manor house with a typical Georgian architecture. The border between Oxton house orchard and the flower garden of Alderbere was remarkably well preserved old brick wall, even though it numerous ground level holes which housed a variety of animals. One such animal was a hedgehog who transversed the lawn with great seriousness. Always early in the morning and always from the rookery to the wall. We imagined him to be the banker or at least a functionary of the denizens of the wall, going to his office with his bowler hat and umbrella. Just before the dusk he returned with the same serious demeanour and punctuality. Those who liked to take a morning walk, did so after the banker was safely settled in his office. So far as I know, nobody tried to find his office or disturbed any of the wall residents, although occasionally a few field mice scurried away from the path into the bushes.

V. TEA IN THE AFTERNOON

Tea in the afternoon was a long affair, in good weather considerable amount of biscuits, small pies and tea pots were carried down to the gazebo by the pond, tables were set to be convenient to everybody and the Coleman stoves were put into good working order. This activity started just after lunch and by some magic everything was in perfect order by the tea time. During the tea any subject was open to discussion, but mostly we talked about the year since the last gathering, although everybody knew the important achievements or disappointments; somehow, re-telling them felt more intimate. After tea, clearing up and carrying everything back to their proper places was done at a lightning speed, as after that it was the concert hour – to the performers it always felt like a command performance, at least in Wigmore Hall if not the Royal Albert Hall itself.

VI. EPILOGUE:

NARRATOR: Each year, in the last day of the stay, one did not want to do anything but resent the time that went by so quickly. Unless we planned another visit to somewhere else or drove in, the departure was taking the late train from Exeter-St. Davids to Paddington. A good local friend, Marilyn almost always drove us to the station after endless goodbyes, mostly at the door after saying goodbye in the house several times. My last visit to Alderbere was not a reunion. I had to be in Manchester for a few days and my wife decided on an impromptu visit to Alderbere. Trying to reason that for the number of days available, the length of the flight from the States and back would be too strenuous was of no use - so off we flew to Heathrow. After the usual Heathrow - Paddington express and settled in her train. It was a beautiful April day and I walked Euston for my train to Manchester for a comfortable ride during which I reviewed the lecture I was to give the next day. After the lecture, there was a working dinner. These details are crystal clear as if they happened yesterday. After I finished my lecture, a colleague handed me a note asking me to ring up Alderbere immediately. When I did so, I found out that cousin Edith died literally in my wife's arms. I don't remember how I returned to Alderbere. A few days later we took the late train to Paddington for the last time; because, within two months, the lovely girl I was proud to call my wife for 36 years succumbed to the debilitating and incurable illness she fought so valiantly for almost 15 years. Since then, I did not return to Alderbere. I doubt that if I ever will. I don't know who lives there now. But I know that at dawn or dusk, if you look at the pond you will see our shadows taking a leisurely walk or dancing with a beautiful swan to the tune of an ancient air played by the rustling leaves.