

Diggers and Dreamers

a novel

by

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Brimstone Press

First published in 2006
by
Brimstone Press
PO Box 114
Shaftesbury
SP7 8XN

www.brimstonepress.co.uk

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Printed in Baskerville by
Antony Rowe Ltd
Eastbourne BN23 6QT

Cover design by Linda Reed and Associates

ISBN 0-9548171-2-5

Some definitions

The Diggers were radical dissenters in mid-seventeenth-century England who cultivated abandoned land and advocated social and political reform. The name and philosophy were adopted by activists in the late 1960s.

To dig: 'to understand, appreciate, experience (*informal, dated*)'. ConciseOED.

Dreamers: 'unpractical persons; idealists'. Concise OED.

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For

Sebastian Hayes

PART I:

RETURN TO THE HILLS

Chapter 1: Albi

I watch the cream and red train disappear slowly round the long bend. The last I see of Jane is her hand sticking out of the window, her fingers spread out like the ribs of a broken fan. I stare along the empty line until the noise of the train dies away and the rails no longer rumble and the humming wires fall silent, and then for some time after. I turn and walk through the dark station and out onto the dazzling dust area in front. It is midday and very hot and the white dust is endless. I stop, shadowless and blind, aware suddenly of the space all around me, aware that I do not have to do what I intended to do when she left, the thing I promised myself I would do for her, so that she can return, the one big thing. I stare up at the enormous sun. Then I walk quickly to the car and, instead of getting in and driving back up into the hills, I take out my bag and walk towards the centre of town.

We walked up this road eighteen months ago, rucksacks on our backs (Jane's was new and she wore it awkwardly), hand in hand, distant. We had left our trunks at the station.

As we passed this little house, I exclaimed 'Yvonne de Galais' house, that *le grand Meaulnes* used to stand outside!' and turned to her, laughing. She smiled a thin smile.

We stayed, that first night, at this hotel, an old place superficially modernised with plate glass door and formica desk. We sat on the bed, beneath the aged flowered wallpaper and the picture of Jesus, staring across the red roofs to the hills, green, grey and white. I was excited, saying I hoped we'd find a place soon so we could start preparing the ground to be ready for spring:

'Shallots can go in in February, you know. And there's still time to sow broad beans. If you start behind, you never catch up. Imagine – our own place, growing our own food. Two acres and a cow, Cobbett says that's all you need – and

that's to feed a family! Of course we'll have goats instead. They eat anything. And you can freeze goats' milk, but not cows' – something to do with the cream.'

And on and on. Jane sat in silence. Then she got up quickly, went into the bathroom and was sick. Maybe we should have turned round and gone back then. But we'd emigrated, given away everything we couldn't carry, were making a fresh start. And for me there was more to it than that.

The next day we caught the bus up into the hills, to buy a place, to live, to be free. Within two months we had moved into our own house, with our own land, our own vines. And I had planted the shallots, late.

'You do still love me, don't you?' Her last words as the train began to move, her eyes searching my face. Or maybe memorising.

'Of course I do. Close the door.'

At the building site a crane turns slowly across the sky. An orange crane, a blue sky, the orange and blue complementary colours, of the same intensity, shapes that vibrate against each other; when I screw up my eyes I can't tell which is in front of which – I can fancy the shape of the crane to be an absence of blue, a cut-out revealing the orange beyond as it turns slowly, a moving absence. But what, then, is the orange? How strange to be alone! To stop spontaneously, to follow my nose, not having to explain or make sense of things, with Jane not here.

The train will be crossing the plain of Gaillac; she will be looking out over endless rows of soft green vines, where the woad once grew that built the towers of Toulouse, long ago.
Pastel.

And now I reach the anchor, the huge anchor set on a plinth, eighty miles from the sea. I sniff it to see if I can smell the sea. It smells of iron and heat. How fierce the sun is! I

cross the park and plunge into the public baths.

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I stand in the white-tiled cubicle and let the hot water beat on me until I am almost senseless. Endless hot running water – imagine what it is like to someone who draws his water from a well and heats it in a black polythene bag in the sun.

I remember reading of South American women moved from squatters' shacks into apartments, showering a dozen times a day, astonished at this miracle, not knowing where it came from, not realising that, unlike a miracle, they would have to pay for it with more than faith.

At last I come to, and wash myself voluptuously, moving into and out of the hot cascade. I examine my hands, enlarged and roughened by hard work, no longer the hands of a student, an academic, a bureaucrat. I look at the scabs – each the fading record of an incident; at the scars – intensifying with time, as if growing confident of their permanence, fixing events. I feel my broadened shoulders and my thickened arms, the product of two years of carpentry, eighteen months on the land. At thirty I have grown into myself, filled the shape I was meant to be, ready at last to take my place with the other men of my family.

But now I have become hard and stiff. So much for the healthy outdoor life. Thoreau writes that the farmer, that image of the healthy man, is not healthy, because he has lost his elasticity; he has become an overworked buffalo, stiff leather in stiff leather. And Jane and I have become ox-like, starving our imaginations, blinkering our visions to the narrow world of our house and land. She is right to go back to London; not just to earn the money we need, but for her own sake. And I am right to stay: for I must remain within this small compass until there is a resolution. And Thoreau's prescription for the farmer? "It would do him good to be thor-

oughly shampooed to make him supple”. I apply the soap thickly to the sponge and rub myself all over. As I wash my soft, white places, I remember the softness of her body, our nakedness together, even in that last, fear-filled grappling. We have never been apart. As the water pours onto my head, drips like tears from my eyelashes, I realise the seriousness of what we have done; that what seemed a few hours ago sensible and rational, is a leap off the edge. We have acted as if we believe in fate. I wonder if we do. I grip the sponge and whisper her name.

I wash my hair, shave, clean my teeth, dry myself, put on white cotton trousers, a white collarless shirt, sandals. And – as I comb my long hair in the misted, rubbed-clean mirror – Thoreau’s definition of health? “One sensible to the finest influence; he who is affected by more or less electricity in the air”. Ah.

I stuff my dirty clothes into my bag, step out of the steamy cubicle into the cool, echoey building, and go out into the full heat of the sun.

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Nothing moves. I can feel the surface of my damp hair crisping in the heat. The town sleeps, coshed by the sun; or spellbound. In front of me the war memorial, a triumphal red brick arch tattooed all over with the hundreds of names of the dead, set in rectangles of sharp white gravel and beds of vermilion flowers, bounded by low dark box hedges exactly clipped, a double row of black cypresses leading to and from it. The wide square, Di Chirico shadowed, empty. Nothing moves.

Except behind the buttressed walls of the vast red cathedral that rises hallucinatingly above and shadows the town. Within, the level of blood rising slowly, gurgling – spouts suddenly from gargoyles, bursts out through windows, pours down the walls darkening with crimson the scarlet brick,

floods the narrow streets that now echo with screams and the crackle of fire, bursts in a foaming wave from the narrow streets, surges across the square, laps around the bases of the still black cypresses. I hold my breath as the roots eagerly suck in the blood. The tops of the cypresses, at first still, begin to vibrate, shiver – then burst open, flower, with a soft white oozing that shapes, re-shapes then fixes into the forms of heads. There is a head on the top of each of these black cypresses, and each the head of a hero. My heroes, the heroes of my life: long haired and shaven headed; bearded and fresh faced; composed and falling apart; gazing ecstatically still and chattering madly; singing; yelling angry obscenities; mouthing endless concentrated monologues – altogether a welter and babble of noise and movement that somehow makes sense, that is – my world. I gaze enraptured.

And then the tall orange crane turns slowly through the blue sky; the hook descends and lifts the great anchor high into the sky, turns again and the anchor rattles down and, with its arrowed barb, hooks under the arch and lifts. The arch, on its circular pedestal, rises, brick foundations falling, revealing a black emptiness; and down it swirls the blood, with maelstrom twist, gurgles, and is gone. The heads are silenced and stilled, turned to stone... begin to topple... smash to white gravel. The cypresses shiver and then are still. I close my eyes. “Oxidise the water-spouts”, I murmur; “stuff boudoirs with the fiery powder of rubies”. Such things I see, inside my head!

Out there, a creaking sound. I open my eyes. Everything – arch, anchor, crane – is in its given, habitual place. A cyclist in a big cap is cranking slowly across the square. A grey shutter squeaks open and a man in a blue vest looks blearily out, scratches himself, yawning. The first car, a Dauphine, patched and particoloured like a circus car, appears in the street. The pendulum resumes and the clock ticks on.

Was it vision? Memory? Premonition? Or imagination, simply, long buried, emerging....

Smartly dressed figures appear and walk purposefully with brief-cases. The streets fill with cars and motor cycles and the air grows blue with petrol fumes. Slim, trim shop assistants in white blouses wind open window shutters. A clock strikes twice. And then another, deeper. I run my fingers through my dried hair. Jane will be in Toulouse, waiting for the Paris train. I go to the car, stow my bag and walk into town, a tourist.