

The Poet's Sister

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We have in this story, perhaps, an illustration of just how frail beauty can be when confronted by the barbarous real.

For by 1842 Richard Stanhope had been widely recognized as one of England's premier lyric poets. His two volumes, *Blackwood* and *A Darkness Sits 'Tween Hills*, contained the most gorgeous verse written in English since Wordsworth. And yet, if we read the desperate facts of his last years correctly, these incredible powers were useless before life's difficulties.

The particulars of Stanhope's last years begin, even as suggested by the foolish romanticists of his fall, with his move from his London dwelling to a rural setting in the west, in Devonshire; the selfsame place that Stanhope's great favorite and lyric predecessor, Herrick, lived and wrote, sung "of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers," and penned lines unwittingly prophetic for S.

Here she lies, a pretty bud,
Lately made of flesh and blood.

So in 1842 Stanhope and his sister, Madelyn, threw off their London life, their busy life of writing, publishing, having to enjoy the constant attention given the lionized, the darlings of the academy and sat themselves in a cottage a few hundred yards from the currents of the Dean-Bourne River.

The beauties of their cottage and the nearby woods are well known. A little too well known, a discerning voice might add. They've been eulogized to excess by the dithering ladies who write for the magazines of "good grace." But there is a reason that these ladies have so much to chat about, a reason that is of interest to those of us who can cast a cooler, though by no means dispassionate, eye on the Stanhopes' circumstances. For Madelyn Stanhope found, with the dropping off of their London things-to-do, that she had time not pre-

viously marked for some other purpose, time during which she could indulge herself and keep, purely for her own pleasures, a diary, a journal of her days at Devonshire and her life with her brother.

Of course, one of the most remarkable things that we have learned from her diary is, indeed, that she, Madelyn, was Stanhope's sister. It had never, for whatever reason, been mentioned in any of their private correspondence (no "Dear Sister"), nor in any of Stanhope's numerous tributes in verse to the lovely Madelyn. Even their own time appears to have been strangely unaware. Not that there was ever any misapprehension, from what we can see; no person or paper referred to her as his wife or otherwise; there are simply no positive statements one way or another. Curious, yet most serious students of Stanhope's life have reaffirmed what was previously understood, that Madelyn went under a fictitious surname and was understood, by polite society, to be Stanhope's private secretary.

Unfortunately, some writers of more recent times, times less conscious of professional propriety, less concerned with a man's right to his good name even after death, have made much of the information found in the diary. Let it be clear, however, that there is nothing in Miss Stanhope's diary (and I have read and studied it from its first to its last pages) that suggests any indecency or corruption in her personal life. It is warm, amusing, even poetic, but it never tells us anything that we do not want to know, that causes us to suspect the genuineness of the cordial person we find in these most private thoughts. But the sensationalist scribblers of our own depraved (I call it so!) time, load Madelyn's words with their own saccharescent bile, tinge her musings with their own ill-thought and contemptible yellowings. But enough, their perversities deserve no more naming than they have already had, and our doings with them (even in impugning them) only further discomfort those who love the woman they have found in Miss Stanhope's work.

At any rate, the Stanhopes settled in Devonshire on Dean-Bourne in the Spring of '42. Those initial months in their new rustic setting must have seemed an auspicious sign to the poet, he must have thrilled to the prospect of new artistic vistas, new realms of thought and beauty to search out, to lay bare with his deft, unforgettable phrases; for in those early months the world's weather (in whatever sense you'll take it) seemed to the brother and sister as clean, crisp, and cloudless as any weather could be. Madelyn's diary is filled with lengthy, bubbling passages that capture us as if they were the most daintily expressed eclogues true from the pen of some unsung Sydney. But they are diary entries: a passage ends and is followed by a date and the recounting of another day's most exquisite perceptions, as if in some unearthly garden in some pure air.

And Stanhope indeed found himself and his art felicitously taken by the season and the situation. For the first time in a decade he returned to consider the graces of Spring—reconsiderations to be hoisted to near sublimity by twelve years' increased awareness and skill in meter. We can accurately imagine him, I think, tucked into some myriad-petaled forest cove, seated on some rude appendage or stone, pencil and pad in hand. Perhaps there he found the first quatrain of his famous "Now Persephone has Come Into the World of Life."

Now lithe Persephone has come into
the World of Life. Left blackest Dark

where brute Hades was wont to Woo.
Returned to Light, her mother's Arc, blest Heart.
The world of life and light it was for some few months.

There's a sketch that has managed to come down to us done by a Devon neighbor who had early befriended the poet. It was quickly done and, one rather suspects, half posed for, half imagined (there are some peculiarities in Stanhope's build, for, though a thin man, he was not so thin as the sketch would have us believe), and yet there are certain expressions in the sketch that harmonize completely with what we know about Stanhope's genius. S. stands before his cottage in a loose posture, one rather too thin (it really is gaunt) leg rested on the crown of a large stone, his hands at his sides. It is his face, however, and the intent look in it, that tells us most. The broad planes of his face have fully caught the angling light of the sun, but his eyes remain brooding, hooded, completely intent. Intent on what, at that moment or imagined moment, it is impossible for us to know, still it is a characteristic concentration that tells us, perhaps, something about what life requires of a poet: an oppressive, sometimes damning, need to understand—even to understand one's happiness. What lives at happiness' most interior level.

(Some effort has been expended by recent critics to establish that the sketch is a telling portrait of brother and sister. Out of whatever caprice, the artist has seen fit to etch, in a darkened cottage recess, the faint indication of a woman in a long skirt. One faintly perceives an arm and hand at rest. This, explained the critics, is the work of an incipient psychological portraitist who has placed the sister in a somewhat symbolic position. It is entirely clear what these critics are attempting to get at, and we shall have cause to return to this point in the course of our investigation.)

Which brings us to a grimmer consideration: the fact that somehow (an ill-starred somehow, certainly) the ghastly tale of Jarrel Poole is involved.

Jarrel Poole's extraordinary instance begins with an episode bizarre enough in that home-place of Arcadian beauty and rest. One day (a Wednesday or a Thursday, some random, inconsequent day in the midst of peaceful country days) a woman was murdered. The facts about that murder are apparently these: she was a single woman, about thirty-five, who lived alone—though hardly quietly—in the easternmost area of the district. Although shocked by the fact, most of the woman's neighbors felt that there was something fitting in that this particular person should be murdered. She kept unlikely hours. Men were often seen entering and leaving her hut. It's obvious enough that this small concern was caused by the feeling that she was a "Nelly," boldly, and that she had been cut short by a "friend." Well, one less the better, ran their thoughts.

The circumstance of the murder lent support to gossip's theory. Jane (let us call her "Jane") was found stripped down to stockings and tossed out on her bed. There was other evidence of what we can't say politely, and certain devices were discovered which were thought to be used on occasion by persons of certain inclinations (piping was found, a carpenter's rasp, paraphernalia).

Jane had no hurts to her body, but she did have two large, powerful thumb marks on her neck. So powerful, in fact, that they had quite crushed her windpipe.

The tendency on the part of neighbors to feel that the murder was somehow an acceptable thing, a small act of somewhat aberrant justice, was, of course, drastically changed in the following week when the mutilated body of Mrs. Willow was found. Mrs. Willow, entirely unlike Jane, was a much loved person, a mother of three young children. Yet that fine fellow Poole saw fit to so treat Mrs. Willow that naughtier Jane's fate looked a mercy. Mrs. Willow was discovered fouled at every aperture (Poole had taken his pleasure variously), disemboweled crudely with a small dull-axe, and finally hefted, skewered, and left to totter obscenely on the handle of her own butter churn. In mad counterpoint to this butchery, neatly crafted into the base of the churn was the legend:

JARREL POOLE
WAS HERE

And, indeed, for the people of Devon, Jarrel Poole had come and was going at least to stay as a fear possessing simple country hearts. Now behind each sweet, once familiar flowered bush crouched what-

ever was Jarrel Poole. No one thought of a quiet walk without simultaneously conceiving of sharing the path with one who would in a quick frenzy slice a good man into scattered flesh and cloth.

If that not another, then, thorn be added to thicket of human misery, that we who will write insist upon others, I would have done with my journal work. But I'll not quarrel with myself more, as I have quarreled too long this day in aching self-dissension, wonder of worth, I am thorough for the writing of it now, and would dissuade myself (and so have I successfully dissuaded) of any hurt likely for my musings.

I have spent the good part of the day at such tough thinking, thus is it proper that I find it journal stuff.

But today, I gaily resolve, will find no such thoughts troubling (and causing throb) my head. Today I will free myself to such sweet views that woody vale, river, and clear-crest hill may afford me. And tonight I will observe only the beauties of the moon (and speak quietly to my brother of it, add notes to his artist's lyre). "Very very beautiful the moon." Freely, for 'tis my way.

Afternoon: And my heart was so full that I could not speak! (All's one, the woods did want ears.) 'Mongst sturdier trees, a school of stragglers, then a patch-covered all round-of most delicate flowers and quaint leafy greens. There was the purplish Turtle's Back, for so we call 'em, which did make seem to crawl with the motion I caused the grass (for so close tucked was all). And chief amid them the Fairy's Lamp, and that all delightful yellow. Brightest of all your bloody-crimson Nogger's Shell, craning its neck out above the rest, its heavy red flower turning brightly down. And all, O all all, lightly touched with an heavenly dew, for no light is ever so hot in that flower's cove.

The place seemed to me so quiet and so new foundly mine, that, I blush for myself even here to hide it, I was bold and pleased enough to let bare my small legs and did sit skirtless. Thus I sate for some hours, careful 'gainst bruising any of my stemmed loves, and found the cool damp of the grass pleasing. All about me were the Turtle's Back and Fairy's Lamp and Nogger's Shell and Sturdy Boys and what have you; and in the branches the lusty business of the watchful tree chats, curious on my mood; and the Bunny's Ear—for so we call 'em—a fine tickler.

Even though Stanhope and his sister maintained their characteristic reclusiveness and reluctance to more than casual involvement with the people of Devonshire, they could not avoid becoming familiar with reports of Poole's bloody doings. Even if they hadn't been told of it (they were told, in fact, graphically, as it occurred, by one who happened early on Mrs. Willow's still unordered remains), it is just as likely that Stanhope would simply have taken it from the air—there, perhaps, as an all-present trembling, or ache. Indeed, according to reports at the time, Devon experienced Poole and his acts not as mere facts—gory facts, to be sure—that were separable from a still sane,

and quietly functioning reality, but as a sudden settling climate, like foul gases drifted from some bog or fen, that reconstituted the world's disposition like a medieval humor changed for bad.

For sensibilities, like Stanhope's, so acutely fixed to life's every nod, its every shift and nuance, the air's sordid drift was sufficient; the related particulars—too real from a neighbor's mouth—served only as unrequired bludgeon strokes. The happy life of pious brother and sister was saddened, Arcadia sombered, God's first garden refound turned mortal, again the subject of time's vagaries. No more was needed. And yet—too hard, world!—more was precisely what was to come.

It is, unfortunately, understandable that terror and tragedy will work strange moods in men (our doctors of the present speak antiseptically of its category: common-hysterics, masses moved to violence). Well, the people of Devon were afraid. Women were fearful of being torn apart. Men were fearful of having their women torn apart. Many of the men refused even to leave their homes for work, but sat all day straight-backed in chairs, hatchets at their sides, waiting out Jarrel Poole.

The waiting and inability to calm their urgencies led horribly, on several occasions, to careless and misdirected violence. The particular of interest to us was basically this: one evening at about sunset (after half-enjoyed and half-digested suppers) a group of village men went after one Tom Belldown, a laughable lunatic and layabout, always harmless greenhead. Poor Tom was to be, it seemed, their surrogate Poole, since Poole himself declined to reappear. Well Tom, who had never earlier done anything more vicious than drool on some porch or stoop while seeking a penny for ale, was struck terrified by the murderous host that set toward him, but, surprisingly, responded almost nimbly—in an arm flopping, lolloping way—and led a long chase with ostrich gait and trailing strands of spittle.

Which ended—and we come here to our point—before Stanhope's cottage, before Stanhope. Belldown was finally gained by the men, and tackled to earth. Perhaps he gestured futilely at Stanhope, perhaps he extended an awful, pointing finger. Then stones and stout limbs were brought down on him, and his poor brains and blood spilt out on the dirt.

Still I crossed the road, but as I did he signed me to him. And I might have said, "Nay," but I went, curious beyond reason and good watch for his tossed-about look. And I said, "Hullo, what go you by?" and he said, "Tom if you will, Drake's Mess if you want." And he got me a laugh. And I said, "What need you of me, a woman able for few favors?" And he says, "I did but catch you to give you news." "Aye?" "Mathew Jobson's lost a cow. Aiiye! And Tommy

Slackwork's two good horses strayed. Aiiye! And Tommy sleeping the while." With the talking his spittle grew on chin-point, and so I sought an end of it. "And is there more?" "Aye, lady, poor Jimmy Jones's cow's broken her horn." And with this he fetched me so full mirthly that I took him pathetic by the sleeve and led him home where I knew his want: porridge. And he ate two quarts.

Evening: a quiet evening with a cheery fire. We sate by our fresh found servant, our "learned Theban," and he was set to talk, so full he was with our gruel, of modo and mahu and black things a-boding. He helped speed the night. We at last had our way with him, briefly, and then showed him out.

Stanhope watched helplessly. Perhaps there was a knotting of muscles and a false step forward, but there were really no alternatives braver than watching for him to adopt. Men were turned animals and would destroy. Tom Belldown was collected up in Death's cold arms.

These are together, then, the gathered elements (climate turned fetid, men gone beast-like) that led to the tragic and long perplexing fact of Madelyn Stanhope's fatal illness. Within a year of the move to Devonshire, she was dead. Why a woman so much in the strength of her emotional and intellectual first-breath should so suddenly sicken and die is not something easily understood. How possible? we wonder. The village practitioner (who, although early replaced by London specialists, had first theory) suggested—he wrote to Stanhope—that Madelyn had taken the disease while drinking from the crystal pools of the Dean-Bourne, there, he suspected, through the "ill graces of human waste" added to the river's currents.

And—sadly—Stanhope, a tireless nurse to his sister, took the disease. In the next year he sickened and died. With his sister gone, he had no powers with which to oppose death.

There is a tradition that has long circulated among the rustics of Devon (and yet always seemed too incredible even to a normally rumor-mongering literary world) that holds that Stanhope, following his sister's death, became (whimsically? bitterly?) his own strangler, his own Poole. They say that he ate nothing but tall marsh grasses and the flesh of forest wrens. They say that beneath his trousers he kept the skin flayed, his legs pustulous and sore. They say that he yammered in the village about mad things, about kissing at hot sweat, about an incestuous rage.

And I confess with this last revealing that I must appear dull to my own theory to continue to maintain that the relationship of Madelyn and Richard Stanhope was unequivocally "innocent." Let us say that it is possible that they loved each other in a way that our farsighted world has not yet come to allow. What of it? It is innocence still when considered alongside Poole.

But, to tell you the truth, I'm a little tired of my opinions. The

simultaneous presence of the poet Stanhope and the murderer Poole in Devon seems to me now inconsequential. Originally a flame, my idea seems now only a "position" to be defended among "colleagues" (I should like to "position" certain of these carpers on Mrs. Willows' churn). And I worry that I've created a hateful thing: a palimpsest, perhaps, which holds beneath its thin outer tissue a mirror (not an impress in believable clay), a mirror reflecting whatever extravagance, shameless conceit critics are capable of. It might be that whatever there is of truth in my observations is the direct result of private passions I have nowhere mentioned. For many a time I myself have been half in love with Madelyn Stanhope, have set aside her journal and put out my bedside candle only to see her come spectrally to my dark, lonely life. I have more than once drawn her coolly to my side and kissed away her pain and my own during a long night of love. And think what you will about the Stanhopes or myself, can it ever be said that one does wrong in loving?

I slice and peel back the sheath of my insight and allow this truth to be seen carved in its flesh.

And my beloved and I rest happily in a meadow's slight cull, a rough half-fence above us locating some rustic's flock. And a lamb looked on us and stood still some time, for the animals are curious on man's doings. Richard was content and did gaze on sky and tree's green margin, and said to me thus wisely and strangely, "Ah, Mad, for the grave to be so gentle! To feel one's love and kin near in the dirt, to be allowed still such visitings with earth and air. It wouldn't be so hard. But, cry you mercy, it won't be so! Something darker I see. Not like life. 'Tis edged with goblin's jaw, and devil's retch."

How I was grieved when I was so informed!