

Graham Seal

THE ARTIST

AFTER I HAVE CLOSED the door of the greenhouse I can still hear them coming: the boots scuffing the gravel of the driveway; hob-nailed boots scarring the turf of the manicured lawns. Soon they will be in the house, the men in blue or white, racketing up the stairs, filling the upper rooms with their voices. There will be no more silence; not a piece of furniture left undefiled by their casual fists. They will find an empty house, the servants gone, and then they will start to search for me. I do not move, do not try to escape. Where should I run? My ownership has expired. My house is theirs, as soon I shall be: the property of the men in blue, or white.

I feel no guilt, no fear. Nothing. Standing here in this damp green jungle with the night descending, I can see him, a dim outline in the corner where he slept for five years, a broken L, lying on a heap of sacks.

He always lay like that, his heavy gardening boots ballooned to cartoon size, so that on entering to water the tomatoes, admire the flowering yucca on a damp November evening, one was left with the impression of a body grafted like an afterthought on the obtrusion of his feet; and then the eyes, hooded, peering without expression over the patches of his corduroyed knees.

His seeming comfort in the early days filled me with a sense of assurance, distillation of peace and intangible serenity, but later this gave way to irritation: that one could remain so inactive, so inert among mouldy sacks, giving nothing, expecting nothing. This feeling grew as the winter aged, and the evening sky was shot with bands of purple and green. Closing the door behind me and feeling the first welcome waves of humidity, it was as though the fog had not so much followed me in, but was an emanation from that silent figure in the corner, a mist rising from the mildewed sacks on which he slept, brooded, dozed through so much of the day.

Yet he got things done. The grounds were immaculate. Tomatoes flour-

ished, the yucca grew; the small potted plants, failures under the hands of men more obsequious to their masters, spilled richly over the deep red of the clay pots. Though I never actually saw him working, believing this at first to be an affectation, one of life's failures contriving a final self-esteem by an arrogant detachment of manner, no amount of cynicism could sustain for long under the contemptuous appraisal of those hooded eyes, and the insolence of his obtrusive boots; and in the five years he was with me marrows under his brooding care loomed magnificent under the yellow awning of the grand marquee, venue for the Witherington Annual Horticultural Show, and were carried out, festooned with red and yellow ribbons, testaments to their perennial superiority. On such occasions his indifference infuriated. Such terrible detachment offended the critic in me: that calm appraising centre which, seeing the vanity in all our actions, futility of triumph, unimportance of public acclaim, feels bound to make some concession to the spaniel in one: consoling pat, encouraging tones: deference to man's mortality. Even I, merely the humble bearer, albeit the owner of the marrow, feeling acutely on first entering the tent the absurdity of this ritual, fell yearly under its spell: the rows of supine marrows touched by the fingers of men who, by that strange law of English life, seemed to grow in importance in proportion to the absurdity of their function. Who else but the English, so personality-conscious, could make an act of benediction out of the touching of a marrow? Or by the fixing of a white disc inscribed "Judge" on a man's lapel, transform him into a lesser god, one who, in spite of one's achievements, could detonate some dormant atavism in one, so that once more one's cockney ancestry fell under the implacable spell of the playing fields of Eton?

Yes, let me confess, on that one day of the year, when the Marchbank marrow led all the rest, I could have wished myself in a country where democracy was not such a fetish and by the mere crooking of one's finger, some two or three jack-booted figures would have been pressed into uprooting that lump of idleness, that symbol of emotional stagnation, and by various kicks and pushes have propelled him into that tent and thrust his head over his marrow while the ribbons were affixed, then kept him there, awake and on his feet until, by some smile or drop of the head he acknowledged our "well-damn-it-what's-wrong-with-it-anyway?" human applause.

And walking back down the lane on those evenings, marrow under one arm, the fields still and darkening as the sun waned, warm, let me confess, for the first mile, in the glow of victory, the smiles of those crinkle-faced judges: retired generals, barristers of note; myself momentarily a man of importance among men of importance; then feeling the first cold fingers of disquietude as the hedges grew and shut out the light from the fields, and the lane narrowed in the dark, and the marrow

grew in weight, an absurd encumbrance in its red and yellow ribbons, and the dialogue beginning to shout in my brain, yet never spoken between His Lordship on his rotting sacks and my ineffectual presence with the triumphant marrow: "It's won again, your marrow! What do you care?" And his voice, surly on the rare occasions when he condescended to speak: "Marrows are for eating." What an artist! My God. What a prince of the spirit! A ragged clodhopper nesting in sacks. Green fingers? Marrows for fingers! Oaf! The lane darkening and cold, and the marrow, ridiculous object, hanging now from my aching fingers like a gross appendage.

And then the lights of the house; beacons of welcome, heralds of warmth, reminders of tradition's comfort; an English country house, snug, solid, impregnable; the dream of Everyman to be owner, and squire of parish: affable, benevolent and wise, dispensing largesse, and an inexhaustible sense of security and well-being though the world may die to-morrow. The feudal world of Confucian order where all fit and stay in their places; the movement of figures in some slow arabesque on a shadowed stage, moving together and apart, yet circling always, inescapably bound to a way of life built and fashioned by generation unto generation. Smoke carried over sleeping villages, the benediction of church bells, the benediction of God: God of the family, God of the hearth and home.

But who is *his* God, and what role is *his* in this life of humble ritual? The cultivator of a marrow, you will say, and a prize marrow at that. His god is the joy he has in the simplest act of creation. But then you have not seen his eyes, or those great feet. I would not have conceived of entering the greenhouse when on his feet he manoeuvred between the marrows and the yucca. There would not have been space enough. He exhausted space as he exhausted my patience, coming in squierarchal interest, longing to say: "Well Joe, how's the marrow?" assessing its growth, discussing its merits, the mutual interest of artists. No, not so much as a raised eyebrow on those rare occasions when I dared to enter, let alone a touched forelock. A man less successful in life might have objected to such lack of courtesy on the part of his employees, but I, who had realised the dream of Everyman, I was immune to such trivialities. My house, my acres, my possessions are sufficient testimony to my talents. I scarcely need the genuflection of some down-and-out to make my life complete.

I must confess that the marrow made a difference to my life here. I am, perhaps, better known as the owner of the Marchbank marrow, than for my past exploits in business. It served as a means of introducing myself to the villagers. I spoke of it as "my marrow", a human failing for which I hope I was excused. What

did he care anyway—rotting on his sacks, filling the greenhouse with his gross presence? Sometimes, on a warm day, with the sun filling the village street with gold and making the benevolence flow from me like liquid honey, I realised to the brimming full the importance of the marrow, as the peasant faces leaned over their gates like lesser suns, and reflected my mood. The marrow united us, a warm familiar object, of the earth, absurd and somehow touching, like the human condition.

Why the sacks? Why this wretched embrace of poverty? I begged him, I implored him to move into the small cottage at the end of the garden, traditional home of the House's gardeners through the centuries. Rent free. No strings attached. One thing I asked in return: the formula. Don't talk to me of green fingers! One successful marrow may be beginner's luck; continued success bespeaks a formula. With such knowledge the annual prize for the Marchbank marrow would be a foregone certainty; from the seed planted to the final vegetable, no queasiness of uncertainty, no dissembling of pride for the sake of a possible failure, no sense of isolation in the sun because, for one unspeakable year, the marrow *had* failed. No lingering bitterness because one's peace of mind was so dependent on the so-called inspiration of some ragged anti-social lout. Could he not have made that one concession? I was prepared to open my books, give step-by-step analysis of my path to success. That's how the world goes, isn't it? By each of us giving a little of ourselves to others. Not a thing. Not a word. A stranger in my own greenhouse, and behind my back the villagers complaining that I kept my gardener no better than a dog!

Five years! Five years I endured his insolence for the sake of a wretched marrow. Oh, pleasant enough when the sun shone and I could forget my wretched dependence on his one trivial talent. Pleasant in the sun when a man could fool himself that but for his patronage the marrow would never have been grown. But of course the marrow would grow anywhere under those fingers. Those great, bulbous fingers! I squirmed to think of some neighbour carrying off the yearly prize.

I am not a humble man. Let me confess that my life owes nothing to that paltry virtue. That my happiness should depend so much on one man hurt me more than I dared admit to myself, and walking out of the sun for the last time two days ago, I felt the bitterness turning to a deep hatred, filling my frame, tingling at the ends of my finger tips. My finger tips biting into the flesh of the marrow! Looking down I expected to see blood flowing, but there was nothing but a yellow pulp which I shook off into the gathering dark. What a great club of a thing is a mar-

row! Yet my hands are big, and spread about its girth. Beyond the greenhouse in the west, a vivid streak of red, like an open wound in the evening sky; a sense of awful desolation as though the world were ending. But the marrow felt real enough, as solid and implacable as the hate I felt as the door swung to behind me, and the heat folded about me like a damp sheet. The smell of decay, a deep feeling of revulsion. A forgotten jungle full of things rotting and decaying. Behind the boots a gentle snore. A complacent snore. What right had he to snore so complacently? What had he done in life that entitled him to lie back now as though mountains and rivers of adversity were behind him? A few rotting sacks in the corner of a greenhouse, that was the extent of his achievement, while I who had sweated from nothing to my present estate, broken my immortal soul in two to realise an ambition which ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have envied, I . . .

. . . swung the great club of a marrow, solid, firm, prize flesh, once, twice, in great arcs over that loathsome head, then again and again, listening to the grunts like those of a pig dying, seeing the yellow pulp sliding down his cheeks, and the thin trickles, the thin trickles of blood zig-zagging between the yellow furrows . . .

. . . I can hear them now, their great boots crashing on the path, their fists hammering on the door: boots hammering in my brain, fists against my heart, as I wait in the gathering dark . . .