

T H &
COLLECTED TALES
OF
A. E. Coppard



ALFRED A KNOPF

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THE
COLLECTED TALES
OF
A. E. COPPARD



To Earl E. Fisk of Green Bay



THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK,
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FOREWORD

IN preparing this American omnibus collection of my tales I debated whether to risk saying one or two things about them—and myself. For there are dangers either way. Twenty years ago my *Collected Poems* were published by Mr. Knopf and in the introduction I committed the indiscretion of stating that I had nothing much to say about my poems except that I liked them myself. This unbearable effrontery annoyed some reviewers; you might truly have thought I had tried to sell the American public a lot of junk, which I now immodestly declare was then, and still is, very far from being my opinion.

So now about these tales: I refrain from owning that I like them myself merely as a precautionary measure, justifiable on the grounds of previous experience and present expedience, and not as an indication of my regard for them one way or the other. My blatant humility is urging me not to leave it at that, but there are just two things I really must say about short stories in general and their principles of manufacture. First, I want to crush the assumption that the short story and the novel are manifestations of one principle of fiction, differentiated merely by size, that the novel is inherently and naturally the substantial and therefore the important piece of work, the bale of tweed—you may suppose—out of which your golfer gets his plus-four suit, the short story being merely a remnant, the rag or two left over to make the caddie a cap. In fact the relationship of the short story to the novel amounts to nothing at all. The novel is a distinct form of art having a pedigree and practice of hardly more than a couple of hundred years; the short story, so far from being its offspring, is an ancient art originating in the folk tale, which was a thing of joy even before writing, not to mention printing, was invented. Put the beginning of English printing in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and you light on a date when the folk tale lost its oral or spoken form and issued as a printed short story. Moreover, it was only through that

same device of printing that the novel became even a possibility; it did not materialize until the eighteenth century, its forerunners being *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

The folk tale ministered to an apparently inborn and universal desire to hear tales, and it is my feeling that the closer the modern short story conforms to that ancient tradition of being spoken to you, rather than being read at you, the more acceptable it becomes. One of the earliest delights of childhood is to be told a tale, and the queer pleasure does not lessen or leave us until we ourselves are left in the grave. Cut off a person from all contact with tales and he will assuredly begin to invent some—probably about himself. I don't know why this is, or what is the curious compulsion that urges some to take to the job of telling the tale, that unconscionable lying which is styled the Art of Fiction, but for good or ill I seem to have been that sort of liar. It has been a pleasant business for me, and I hope it will not be too bad for those about to receive these fabrications.

The second principle I would like to urge is that unity, verisimilitude, and completeness of contour are best obtained by plotting your story through the mind or consciousness of only one of your characters, a process that I used to think might be the secret hinted at in Henry James's tale "The Figure in the Carpet."

Of course one does not adhere to literary principles any more than one does to political or moral ones—we accept them for guidance, not for use in dictatorship. As long as mine served and were not too difficult to embody, I was virtuous; whenever they became irksome or incurred some loss of interest, I took the primrose path and hoped for the best.

A. E. COPPARD.



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THE
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THE HIGGLER

ON a cold April afternoon a higgler was driving across Shag Moor in a two-wheeled cart.

H. WITLOW

DEALER IN POULTRY

DINNOP

was painted on the hood; the horse was of mean appearance but notorious ancestry. A high upland common was this moor, two miles from end to end, and full of furze and bracken. There were no trees and not a house, nothing but a line of telegraph poles following the road, sweeping with rigidity from north to south; nailed upon one of them a small scarlet notice to stone-throwers was prominent as a wound. On so high and wide a region as Shag Moor the wind always blew, or if it did not quite blow there was a cool activity in the air. The furze was always green and growing, and, taking no account of seasons, often golden. Here in summer solitude lounged and snoozed; at other times, as now, it shivered and looked sinister.

Higglers in general are ugly and shrewd, old and hard, crafty and callous, but Harvey Witlow though shrewd was not ugly; he was hard but not old, crafty but not at all unkind. If you had

eggs to sell he would buy them, by the score he would, or by the long hundred. Other odds and ends he would buy or do, paying good bright silver, bartering a bag of apples, carrying your little pig to market, or fetching a tree from the nurseries. But the season was backward, eggs were scarce, trade was bad—by crumps, it was indeed!—and as he crossed the moor Harvey could not help discussing the situation with himself.

“If things don’t change, and change for the better, and change soon, I can’t last and I can’t endure it; I’ll be damned and done, and I’ll have to sell,” he said, prodding the animal with the butt of his whip, “this cob. And,” he said, as if in afterthought, prodding the footboard, “this cart, and go back to the land. And I’ll have lost my fifty pounds. Well, that’s what war does for you. It does it for you, sir,” he announced sharply to the vacant moor, “and it does it for me. Fifty pounds! I was better off in the war. I was better off working for farmers; much; but it’s no good chattering about it, it’s the trick of life; when you get so far, then you can go and order your funeral. Get along, Dodger!”

The horse responded briskly for a few moments.

“I tell ye,” said Harvey adjuring the ambient air, “you can go and order your funeral. Get along, Dodger!”

Again Dodger got along.

“Then there’s Sophy, what about Sophy and me?”

He was not engaged to Sophy Daws, not exactly, but he was keeping company with her. He was not pledged or affianced, he was just keeping company with her. But Sophy, as he knew, not only desired a marriage with Mr. Witlow, she expected it, and expected it soon. So did her parents, her friends, and everybody in the village, including the postman, who didn’t live in it but wished he did, and the parson, who did live in it but wished he didn’t.

“Well, that’s damned and done, fair damned and done now, unless things take a turn, and soon, so it’s no good chattering about it.”

And just then and there things did take a turn. He had never been across the moor before; he was prospecting for trade. At the end of Shag Moor he saw standing back in the common, fifty yards from the road, a neat square house set in a little farm.

Twenty acres, perhaps. The house was girded by some white palings; beside it was a snug orchard in a hedge covered with blackthorn bloom. It was very green and pleasant in front of the house. The turf was cleared and closely cropped, some ewes were grazing and under the blackthorn, out of the wind, lay half a dozen lambs, but what chiefly moved the imagination of Harvey Witlow was a field on the far side of the house. It had a small rickyard with a few small stacks in it; everything here seemed on the small scale, but snug, very snug; and in that field and yard were hundreds of fowls, hundreds of good breed, and mostly white. Leaving his horse to sniff the greensward, the higgler entered a white wicket gateway and passed to the back of the house, noting as he did so a yellow wagon inscribed

ELIZABETH SADGROVE
PRATTLE CORNER

At the kitchen door he was confronted by a tall gaunt woman of middle age with a teapot in her hands.

"Afternoon, ma'am. Have you anything to sell?" began Harvey Witlow, tilting his hat with a confident affable air. The tall woman was cleanly dressed, a superior person; her hair was grey. She gazed at him.

"It's cold," he continued. She looked at him as uncomprehendingly as a mouse might look at a gravestone.

"I'll buy any mottal thing, ma'am. Except trouble; I'm full up wi' that already. Eggs? Fowls?"

"I've not seen you before," commented Mrs. Sadgrove a little bleakly, in a deep husky voice.

"No, 'tis the first time as ever I drove in this part. To tell you the truth, ma'am, I'm new to the business. Six months. I was in the war a year ago. Now I'm trying to knock up a connection. Difficult work. Things are very quiet."

Mrs. Sadgrove silently removed the lid of the teapot, inspected the interior of the pot with an intense glance, and then replaced the lid as if she had seen a black-beetle there.

"Ah, well," sighed the higgler. "You've a neat little farm here, ma'am."

"It's quiet enough," said she.

"Sure it is, ma'am. Very lonely."

"And it's difficult work, too." Mrs. Sadgrove almost smiled.

"Sure it is, ma'am; but you does it well, I can see. Oh, you've some nice little ricks of corn, ah! I does well enough at the dealing now and again, but it's teasy work, and mostly I don't earn enough to keep my horse in shoe leather."

"I've a few eggs, perhaps," said she.

"I could do with a score or two, ma'am, if you could let me have 'em."

"You'll have to come all my way if I do."

"Name your own price, ma'am, if you don't mind trading with me."

"Mind! Your money's as good as my own, isn't it?"

"It must be, ma'am. That's meaning no disrespects to you," the young higgler assured her hastily, and was thereupon invited to enter the kitchen.

A stone floor with two or three mats; open hearth with burning logs; a big dresser painted brown, carrying a row of white cups on brass hooks, and shelves of plates overlapping each other like the scales of fish. A dark settle half hid a flight of stairs with a small gate at the top. Under the window a black sofa, deeply indented, invited you a little repellingly, and in the middle of the room stood a large table, exquisitely scrubbed, with one end of it laid for tea. Evidently a living-room as well as kitchen. A girl, making toast at the fire, turned as the higgler entered. Beautiful she was: red hair, a complexion like the inside of a nut, blue eyes, and the hands of a lady. He saw it all at once, jacket of bright green wool, black dress, grey stockings and shoes, and forgot his errand, her mother, his fifty pounds, Sophy—momentarily he forgot everything. The girl stared strangely at him. He was tall, clean-shaven, with a loop of black hair curling handsomely over one side of his brow.

"Good afternoon," said Harvey Witlow, as softly as if he had entered a church.

"Some eggs, Mary," Mrs. Sadgrove explained. The girl laid down her toasting-fork. She was less tall than her mother, whom she resembled only enough for the relationship to be noted. Silently she crossed the kitchen and opened a door that led into

a dairy. Two pans of milk were creaming on a bench there, and on the flags were two great baskets filled with eggs.

"How many are there?" asked Mrs. Sadgrove, and the girl replied: "Fifteen score, I think."

"Take the lot, higgler?"

"Yes, ma'am," he cried eagerly, and ran out to his cart and fetched a number of trays. In them he packed the eggs as the girl handed them to him from the baskets. Mrs. Sadgrove left them together. For a time the higgler was silent.

"No," at length he murmured, "I've never been this road before."

There was no reply from Mary. Sometimes their fingers touched, and often, as they bent over the eggs, her bright hair almost brushed his face.

"It is a loneish spot," he ventured again.

"Yes," said Mary Sadgrove.

When the eggs were all transferred her mother came in again.

"Would you buy a few pullets, higgler?"

"Any number, ma'am," he declared quickly. Any number; by crumps, the tide was turning. He followed the mother into the yard, and there again she left him, waiting. He mused about the girl and wondered about the trade. If they offered him ten thousand chickens, he'd buy them, somehow, he would. She had stopped in the kitchen. Just in there she was, just behind him, a few feet away. Over the low wall of the yard a fat black pony was strolling in a field of bright greensward. In the yard, watching him, was a young gander, and on a stone saddle beside it lay a dead thrush on its back, its legs stiff in the air. The girl stayed in the kitchen; she was moving about, though, he could hear her; perhaps she was spying at him through the window. Twenty million eggs he would buy if Mrs. Sadgrove had got them. She was gone a long time. It was very quiet. The gander began to comb its white breast with its beak. Its three-toed feet were a most tender pink, shaped like wide diamonds, and at each of the three forward points here was a toe like a small blanched nut. It lifted one foot, folding the webs, and hid it under its wing and sank into a resigned meditation on one leg. It had a blue eye that was meek—it had two, but you could only see one at a time

—a meek blue eye, set in a pink rim that gave it a dissolute air, and its beak had raw red nostrils as though it suffered from the damp. Altogether a beautiful bird. And in some absurd way it resembled Mrs. Sadgrove.

"Would you sell that young gollan, ma'am?" Harvey inquired when the mother returned.

Yes, she would sell him, and she also sold him two dozen pullets. Harvey packed the fowls in a crate.

"Come on," he cried cuddling the squalling gander in his arms, "you needn't be afeared of me, I never kills anything afore Saturdays."

He roped it by its leg to a hook inside his cart. Then he took out his bag of money, paid Mrs. Sadgrove her dues, said: "Good day, ma'am, good day" and drove off without seeing another sign or stitch of that fine young girl.

"Get along, Dodger, get along wi' you." They went bowling along for nearly an hour, and then he could see the landmark on Dan'el Green's Hill, a windmill that never turned though it looked a fine competent piece of architecture, just beyond Dinnop.

Soon he reached his cottage and was chaffing his mother, a hearty buxom dame, who stayed at home and higgled with any chance callers. At this business she was perhaps more enlightened than her son. It was almost a misfortune to get into her clutches.

"How much you give for this?" he cried, eyeing with humorous contempt an object in a coop that was neither flesh nor rude red herring.

"Oh crumps," he declared when she told him, "I am damned and done!"

"Go on with you, that's a good bird, I tell you, with a full heart, as will lay in a month."

"I doubt it's a hen at all," he protested. "Oh what a ravenous beak! Damned and done I am."

Mrs. Witlow's voice began indignantly to rise.

"Oh well," mused her son, "it's thrifty perhaps. It ain't quite right, but it's not so wrong as to make a fuss about, especially as I be pretty sharp set. And if it's hens you want," he continued

triumphantly, dropping the crate of huddled fowls before her, "there's hens for you; and a gander! There's a gander for you, if it's a gander you want."

Leaving them all in his cottage yard he went and stalled the horse and cart at the inn, for he had no stable of his own. After supper he told his mother about the Sadgroves of Prattle Corner. "Prettiest girl you ever seen, but the shyest mottal alive. Hair like a squirrel, lovely."

"An't you got to go over and see Sophy tonight," inquired his mother, lighting the lamp.

"Oh lord, if I an't clean forgot that. Well, I'm tired, shan't go tonight. See her tomorrow."

II

Mrs. Sadgrove had been a widow for ten years—and she was glad of it. Prattle Corner was her property, she owned it and farmed it with the aid of a little old man and a large lad. The older this old man grew, and the less wages he received (for Elizabeth Sadgrove was reputed a "grinder"), the more ardently he worked; the older the lad grew, the less he laboured and the more he swore. She was thriving. She was worth money, was Mrs. Sadgrove. Ah! And her daughter Mary, it was clear, had received an education fit for a lord's lady; she had been at a seminary for gentlefolk's females until she was seventeen. Well, whether or no, a clock must run as you time it; but it wronged her for the work of a farm, it spoiled her, it completely deranged her for the work of a farm; and this was a pity and foolish, because some day the farm was coming to her as didn't know hay from a bull's foot.

All this, and more, the young higgler quickly learned, and plenty more he soon divined. Business began to flourish with him now; his despair was gone, he was established, he could look forward, to whatever it was he wanted to look forward, with equanimity and such pleasurable anticipation as the chances and charges of life might engender. Every week, and twice a week, he would call at the farm, and though these occasions had their superior business inducements they often borrowed a less formal tone and intention.