

THE SONGBIRDS OF CLOGE

Seduced from her studies by the summer sun, Therese left the lassitude of revision by way of a gentle cycle to, nowhere in particular.

After some little while she came upon a crossroads and stopped her bicycle to gaze up at the old wooden finger posts, but her journey was not prescribed and so she felt the signs pointed impartially in each direction.

One sign said simply 'Church', indicating a road that dipped gently away to an old granite spire in the distance, and it was this route which she eventually chose to follow.

The steady tick of her gears was the only sound as she free-wheeled through the French countryside to the church of Cloge, and before too long she was sitting in the churchyard on a bench inscribed to some erstwhile village notary.

Her youth typically allowed her to enjoy the day but not appreciate it and soon she slept that unique sleep of summer, of distant sounds and mischievous insects.

From a sleep so gentle, church bells easily prised open Therese's eyes which slowly focused through the haze of sun upon the benign countenance of Father Emile, the curé of Cloge who shared the bench while she slept.

"You have come to hear our famous songbirds?" he asked of Therese.

And at that moment, as if orchestrated, the birds began to sing.

Therese was about to reply but the curé raised a finger and sighed deeply in appreciation, closing his eyes throughout the melody, and for some time after, as if afraid to break the spell cast by their beautiful singing.

When the churchyard fell silent Father Emile looked at Therese and smiled as he was in no doubt that she wished to learn the history of the Cloge songbirds and, with that look of pleasure one sees in the expression of a story teller, he began.

You see the birds wheel and circle above, they perch and peck throughout the churchyard but, only as they sit or hop at that headstone do they sing."

He pointed to a simple stone at a neatly tended grave, before continuing.

"That is the resting place of Helen Remmes, daughter of Monsieur Henri et Madame Charlotte of the celebrated Remmes wine label. Helen had a sister, Madeleine, four years her senior, whose sublime beauty and sophistication inspired her to arrogance.

Her parents doted on Madeleine and for several years felt heaven blessed but, such is human nature, blessings were counted less frequently as they slowly conceded to desire."

"We would love our daughter no less if ",and here Henri Remmes broke off briefly to gaze at their rolling vineyards, and what followed clearly conveyed his thoughts as he continued.

"If a son were born to us."

Charlotte embraced him and tears filled her eyes as she recognised the import of his words.

In Nature's time Madame Remmes announced her maternity and later, to Henri and Charlotte Remmes, their daughter Helen was born.

She was unattractive, not particularly bright and as her dimpled hands suggested, would always be the victim of obesity.

Such characteristics, while perfectly acceptable to the Remmes in a male heir, were viewed differently in the light of disappointment and, as is often the case, Helen was punished for her sex. Even more spiteful and enduring than this, her life and achievements would never be compared favourably, seen through the eyes of embittered parents.

Such favouritism can affect descendants in different ways. Some rebel, seeking the attention sadly denied them, even if at times it be in the glare of shameful behaviour, while others, like Helen, retreat further into the shadow cast by their kin.

Helen felt no jealousy or anger towards Madeleine, and always bore with remarkable dignity, but some confusion, the knowledge of her subordination.

As the sisters grew older, during those times when parents watch and hope that their children will excel artistically or academically, it became obvious that Madeleine's distinction would be confined to her good looks and the attention such beauty encouraged.

This blow to the Remmes' pride, pride the child of vanity, fortunately for them was not compounded by any obvious talents inherent in Helen.

And in this state, as with many families, life's prosaic parameters were acknowledged and aspirations became exclusively the domain of wealth and procreation.

That is until Madeleine's twenty-third birthday when, with familiar extravagance toward her, the Remmes bought her, a magnificent grand piano.

At a concert Madeleine had remarked, when her fantasies saw her basking in the beautiful young pianist's glory, "Oh papa, I wish I could play."

Then, considering the musical talent and application required she continued by way of an excuse, "But we don't have a piano."

Following the arrival of the piano, lessons were arranged and after two years she was able to play a number of pieces but, play them mechanically and dispassionately, in that all too familiar manner of reluctant pupil.

An attitude elevated and competence flattered by her besotted parents.

Maintaining her lessons would appear to have been Madeleine's only concession and sacrifice for her parents.

But then love easily extinguished her feckless musical endeavour and brief spell of magnanimity as, without apology, she would rush to the arms of her lover at the expense of all else.

She no longer played the piano and by all but one of the family the piano was ignored, left to stand full of promise but silent.

Somehow this neglect increased Helen's desire and when left alone in the house she would sit for long periods gazing at that perfect musical instrument, wondering if she dare to play, and at these times her mood was of uncharacteristic defiance and excitement but always at the last moment her courage would desert her and her resolve weaken.

And then one evening, as the hypnotic amber of sunset bathed Madeleine's piano, Helen found herself irresistibly drawn to its keyboard.

At first she tentatively fingered the notes but the sound was jumbled, discordant, almost as if nature needed reassuring before bestowing the gift of music upon this fragile young woman. She stopped playing and lay her hands in her lap, and when the last note's resonance faded, a strange silence reigned as she contemplated her actions and emotions.

By playing her hallowed sister's piano, for the first time in her life she had experienced not only the joys of making music but, she had denied the lifelong rule tacitly imposed by her parents. 'Never to try, for fear of excelling beyond her sister's capabilities.'

She felt as if she were acting not of her own volition, as her hands hovered above the keys, waiting for guidance, in that diffident manner of apprentice, rather than the spontaneous movements of experience.

For a long while she sat motionless, waiting, not knowing why but knowing she must, and then, rewarding her patience, a bird landed on the tree beyond the French windows and began to sing.

At once Helen started to play, in perfect harmony with the songbird perched upon his trembling branch and, filled with the joy of music, Helen was transformed. The room, its contents, which for so long seemed dark and oppressive were suddenly alive.

Lugubrious ancestors hitherto frowning at her from their gilt framed eternity, took on a pleasant aspect and ornaments no longer intimidated her by their extravagance. From that day onwards she was vitalised and music was to be her passion, the songbird her inspiration, and in this way whenever the house was empty, the bird would appear and they would sing and play together.

Helen, wanting somehow to repay the little bird, decided to buy a beautiful cage and every day leave morsels and fresh water for her friend and place his cage beneath the tree with its door left open so he could feed and bathe but was never a prisoner.

The splendid blackbird came every day and loved his open cage but only sang when they were alone, almost as if he knew that Helen dare not sit at the piano in front of her family.

One day, as soon as her parents and sister had left the house, Helen rushed to the piano and waited for her friend to appear.

She watched the sky above the branches of his favourite tree but the drifting blue and white remained empty.

She looked at his cage where he would peck and drink behind the brass lattice-work of bars, but still he did not come.

Helen sat at the piano hoping the bird would soon arrive but as the hours passed she began to feel despair.

Sunset's rage left the room and as it grew late, darkness enveloped her as she sat pitifully in silence with only the distorted shadows of furniture for company.

Eventually she rose from the piano stall and moved to the winged armchair from where she peered into the darkness beyond the French windows, vainly hoping to see or hear her beloved songbird. In tears she kept her vigil until, at last she fell asleep.

At first light the dawn chorus woke her and with wild excitement she rushed to the piano. But here were not the sounds that inspired her, not the mellifluous song which led her fingers deftly across the keys.

It was simply the pleasant but familiar voice of daybreak, in disparate multitude, and for another day she sat alone, in tears, at the piano.

Helen's heart was never touched by love and for that reason she did not imagine the cause of her songbird's absence.

Never dreamed that he had left to be with his mate, to coo and raise their young. And in her ignorance Helen grew angry and bitter. Never sitting at the piano. Ignoring the cage's deterioration as it hung from the lowest branch at the mercy of the elements and itinerant birds. Helen became reclusive, staying in her room day after day, but her malady remained a mystery to her parents and, familiarly, ignored by her sister.

She lost her appetite and grew weak.

Inclination and energy were banished by depression, and sleep became a way of life, a paregoric. One warm afternoon as she lay on her bed, gazing abstractedly at the ornate plaster ceiling, she was roused from her reverie by the sound she had waited so long to hear.

She covered her ears, afraid to acknowledge that which she had heard. Afraid she would know the joy of rediscovering it, only to experience the pain of its loss, once again.

But the blackbird's song rose clearly above all else, filling Helen's bedroom, summoning her to the window, from where she saw her precious friend in full voice, looking magnificent despite the dilapidation of his cage.

She ran into the garden and with tears of joy choking her voice she spoke to the delicate creature. "Oh you naughty boy, where have you been? Promise me you will never ever leave me again. Promise?"

As she said this she deftly clipped the door of his cage shut and continued, "No harm will come to you now, you'll see. Oh we will be so happy."

At that moment the crackle of carriage wheels heralded the return of Helen's parents and, blowing the blackbird a kiss she fled to the house for fear they may discover her secret.

Each day she stole into the garden to put fresh food and water into the cage and each day she whispered to the little bird.

Oh my dear friend you look so forlorn, and you haven't touched your food."

She drew closer still to the cage and whispered softer, for fear that anyone would hear her voice. "I know why, it's because you can not sing as we are never alone. But don't be sad, soon the house will be empty and we can sing and play together once more."

Tears spilled on to her face as she kissed the bars of his cage and for the first time in her life she felt the pure joy of love, but it was that hopeless love which deludes us with its power. A power to convince fools their love is returned.

Helen did not realise that his heart was broken because he feared he may never again be free.

Free to see his mate and their young ones. Free, himself, to enjoy the gift of flight, a gift man clumsily attempts to emulate. Free to live, at liberty.

Early Saturday morning, barely suppressing her excitement, she waved to her parents and Madeline as they left for the station, and when the sound of their carriage was no longer audible she rushed to the blackbird's cage.

At first, when she saw the empty perches she thought he had flown but the door was firmly shut and he could not possibly have left the cage.

She lifted the cage from its branch and looked closer, but did not dare believe what she saw.

Her little friend laying motionless, staring at her through eyes that did not see.

She reached into the cage before placing it on the ground and held the small songbird in the palm of her hand, lightly stroking the down of his breast.

But he was dead and would sing to her no more.

Hysterically she threw him to the ground, but it wasn't death that horrified her, it was guilt.

The Remmes returned and when eventually they began to wonder of Helen, they discovered her body in the garden.

She had taken poison and was able to swallow the lethal dose with the aid of wine. Wine of the famous Remmes label, which had given her parents their wealth and acclaim.

Father Emile looked wistfully at the heavens before rising from the bench to offer his hand in farewell but, not until the curé's retreating figure finally disappeared into the church did Therese trace the gravel path and stand at the grave of Helen Remmes.

She paused there for a while, moved by the priest's story, and on the journey home could not help but wonder

Of the headstones we gaze upon, little of a life is revealed other than its duration.