

The Beating of his Wings

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Extract

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A brief report on Thomas Cale, Lunatic. Three conversations at the Priory on the Island of Cyprus.

(NB This appraisal took place after Mother Superior Allbright's stroke. The notes she filed have been mislaid along with Cale's admission details. This report needs to be read in the light of this absence and so I will not be held liable for any of my conclusions.)

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Medium stature, unusually pale. Middle finger of his left hand missing. Depression fracture to the right side of his skull. Severe keloid scar tissue in wound in left shoulder. Patient says he experiences intermittent pain from all injuries.

SYMPTOMS

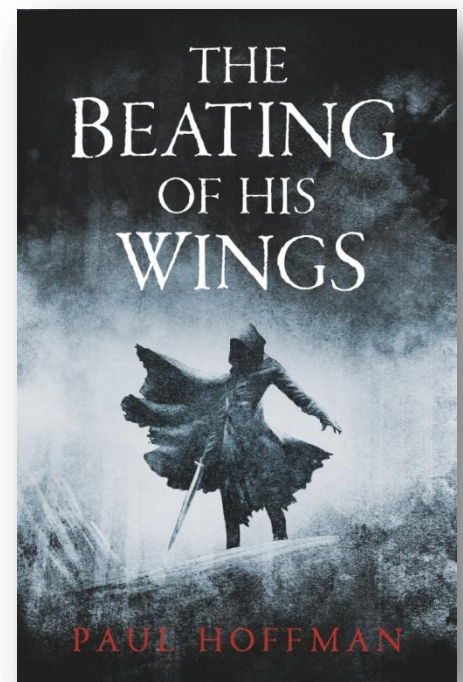
Severe retching, usually in mid-afternoon. Exhaustion. Suffers insomnia and bad dreams when able to sleep. Loss of weight.

HISTORY

Thomas Cale suffers no hysterical delusions or uncontrolled behaviour beyond that of his sour nature. His mid-afternoon retching leaves him speechless with exhaustion, after which he sleeps. By late evening he is able to talk, although he is the most sarcastic and wounding of persons. He claims to have been bought for sixpence from parents he does not remember by a priest of the Order of the Hanged Redeemer.

Thomas Cale is droll, not his least irritating affectation, and always tries either to make his interlocutor unsure as to whether he is mocking them or, by unpleasant contrast, to make it abundantly clear that he is. He tells the story of his upbringing in the Sanctuary as if daring me to disbelieve the daily cruelties he endured. Recovering from an injury which caused the dent in his head he claims – again it is not possible to tell with what degree of seriousness – that his already great prowess (he seems boastful in hindsight, but not at the time) was greatly increased as a result of the injury and that since this recovery he is always able to anticipate in advance any opponent's movements. This sounds unlikely; I declined his offer of a demonstration. The rest of his story is as improbable as the most far-fetched children's story of derring-do and swashbuckling. He is the worst liar I have ever come across.

His story briefly. His life of deprivation and military training at the Sanctuary came to a dramatic end one night after he accidentally came upon a high-ranking Redeemer in the middle of performing a live dissection upon two young girls, some kind of holy experiment to discover a means to neuter the power of women over mankind. Killing that Redeemer in the ensuing struggle, he escaped from the Sanctuary with the surviving young woman and two of his friends, with more Redeemers in vengeful pursuit. Evading their pursuers, the quartet ended up in



Memphis where, plausibly, Thomas Cale made many enemies and (rather less plausibly) a number of powerful allies, including the notorious IdrisPukke and his half-brother, Chancellor Vipond (as he then was). Despite these advantages his violent nature asserted itself in a brutal but unusually non-fatal altercation with (so he says) half a dozen of the youths of Memphis in which (of course) he emerged triumphant but bound for prison. Nevertheless, Lord Vipond again mysteriously intervened on his behalf and he was sent into the countryside with IdrisPukke. The peace of the Materazzi hunting lodge where they were staying was interrupted shortly after he arrived by a woman who attempted to assassinate him, for reasons he was unable to clarify. His murder was prevented not by his own wonderful abilities – he was swimming naked at the time of the attack – but by a mysterious, unseen and insolent stranger who killed his would-be assassin by means of an arrow in the back. His saviour then vanished without explanation or trace.

By now the priests of the Sanctuary had discovered his general whereabouts and attempted to flush him out (he claims) by kidnapping Arbell Materazzi, daughter of the Doge of Memphis. When I asked him why the Redeemers would risk a ruinous war with the greatest of all temporal powers for his sake, he laughed in my face and told me he would reveal his magnificent importance to me in due course. The inflated mad, in my experience, take their importance most seriously but it is a feature of Thomas Cale that his demented state only becomes apparent a few hours after a conversation with him comes to an end. While you are in his company even the most implausible stories he tells cause you to suspend disbelief until several hours later, when a most irritating sensation creeps over you, as if you had been tricked by a marketplace quack into parting with ready money for a bottle of universal remedy. I've seen this before in a lunatic, though rarely, in that some are so powerfully deluded and in such a strange way that their delusions run away with even the most cautious of anomists.

Of course, Thomas Cale rescues the beautiful princess from the wicked Redeemers but, it must be said, not by means of the fair and noble fight against overwhelming odds but by stabbing most of his opponents in their sleep. This is another unusual feature of his delusion – that each one of his endless triumphs is not generally achieved by heroism and noble audacity but through brutal trickery and conscienceless pragmatism. Usually such madmen present themselves as gallant and chivalrous, but Thomas Cale freely admits to poisoning his enemies' water with rotting animals and killing his opponents in their sleep. It's worth recording briefly one of our exchanges in this regard.

ME

Is it a matter of course with you that you always kill unarmed prisoners?

PATIENT

It's easier than killing armed ones.

ME

So you believe the lives of others are a matter for sarcasm?

PATIENT

(NO REPLY)

ME

You never consider showing mercy?

PATIENT

No, I never did.

ME

Why?

PATIENT

They wouldn't have shown it to me. Besides, what would I do but let them go only to find I'd have to fight them again. Then I might become their prisoner – and be killed myself.

ME

What about women and children?

PATIENT

I never killed them deliberately.

ME

But you've killed them?

PATIENT

Yes. I've killed them.

He claimed to have built a camp to sequester the wives and children of the Folk insurrection and that because of his having been removed elsewhere almost the entire cantonment of five thousand souls died through famine and disease. When I asked him what he felt about this he replied: 'What should I feel?'

To return to his story. After his brutal rescue of the beautiful Arbell Materazzi (are there any merely plain princesses in the world of the delusional?) he was promoted, along with his two friends, to guard the young woman towards whom he maintained throughout our three long conversations a deeply held resentment as to her ingratitude and disdain for him. This bitterness seems to hold a great sway over him because of his belief that when Memphis later fell to the Redeemers, it did so because the Materazzi failed to execute his plan to defeat them. (He is, by the way, very insistent that his skill in generalship is greater even than his talent for personal savagery.)

Usually sarcastic and matter-of-fact as he boasts of his great rise to power – again, his droll tone makes it seem not like boasting until one reflects upon his claims in tranquillity – he became most indignant as he recounted the way in which he was caught by the Redeemers after the Battle of Silbury Hill (certainly a disaster for us all whether or not Thomas Cale was involved). It is possible he was caught up in the battle in a minor way; his description of the events there has the note of real experience. Like all skilled romancers he can use his actual events to make the imagined ones truly plausible. For example, he frequently expresses repentance for any noble or generous actions he has performed. He says that he risked his life to save a Materazzi youth who had bullied and tormented him – an act of sanctity which he says he now bitterly regrets. When I asked whether it was always bad to act generously towards others he said that in his experience it might not be bad but it was always a 'bloody catastrophe'. People thought so well of doing good, he said, that in the

end they always decided it should be done at the end of a sword. The Redeemers thought so highly of goodness they wanted to kill everyone including themselves and start again. It turns out that this was the reason his former mentor, Redeemer Bosco, wanted him back at any price. Thomas Cale is (of course) no ordinary boy but the manifestation of God's wrath and destined to wipe his greatest mistake (you and me, for the avoidance of doubt) off the face of the earth. I have treated shopkeepers who thought they were great generals and men who could barely write who thought they were poets of unparalleled genius but I have never encountered an inflation of such magnitude before – let alone in a child. When I asked him how long he'd had such feelings of importance he began to backtrack and – with very bad temper – said that this was what Bosco thought, not what he, Thomas Cale, thought. More circumspectly, I asked him if he believed Redeemer Bosco was mad and he replied he had never met a Redeemer who wasn't and that in his experience a great many people who seemed to be right in the head, once you got to see them 'put under grief', were 'completely barking' – an expression I have not encountered before though its meaning was clear enough.

He is clever, then, at avoiding the implications of his delusions of grandeur: in the opinion of great and powerful men he is mighty enough to destroy all the world but this delusion is not his but theirs. When I asked him if he *would* do such a thing his reply was extremely foul-mouthed but to the effect that he would not. When I asked whether he had the *ability* to do such a thing he smiled – not pleasantly – and said he had been responsible for the deaths of ten thousand men killed in a single day, so it was only a question of how many thousands and how many days.

After his recapture by the Redeemer Bosco, his role of Angel of Death to the world was explained to him in detail and he was put to work by his former mentor. This 'Bosco' (the new Pope is called Bosco but Thomas Cale clearly likes a big lie) is much hated by Cale although, since buying him for sixpence, training him and then elevating him to the power almost of a god, Bosco is paradoxically the source of all his excellence. When I pointed this out he claimed to know this already, though I could see I had scored a hit to his vanity (which is very great).

He then detailed an endless series of battles, which all sounded the same to me, and in which he was, of course, always victorious. When I asked if, during all these successes, he had not suffered even a few setbacks he looked at me as if he would like to cut my throat and then laughed – but very oddly, more like a single bark, as if he could not contain something very far from high spirits or even mockery.

These numerous triumphs led in turn to his being less watched over by Bosco than formerly. And after yet another great battle, in which he overcame the greatest of all opponents, he slipped away in the resulting chaos and ended up in Spanish Leeds, where he suffered the first of the brain attacks that brought him here. I witnessed one of these seizures and they are alarming to watch and clearly distressing to endure – his entire body is wracked by convulsions, as if he is trying to vomit but is unable to do so. He insists he has been sent here by friends of some power and influence in Spanish Leeds. Needless to say, of these important benefactors there is no sign. When I asked why they had not been to see him he explained – as if I were an idiot – that he had only just arrived in Cyprus and that the distance was too great for them to travel to see him regularly. This great distance was a deliberate choice in order to keep him safe. 'From what?' I asked. 'From all those who want me dead,' he replied.

He told me that he had arrived with an attendant doctor and a letter for Mother Superior Allbright. Pressed, he told me that the doctor had returned to Spanish Leeds the next day but that he had spent several hours with the Mother Superior before his departure. Clearly Thomas Cale must have come from somewhere, and there might indeed have been some sort of attendant who arrived with him bearing a letter and who spoke with the Mother Superior prior to her stroke. The

loss, as it were, of both letter and Mother Superior leaves this case somewhat in the Limbo in which unbaptized infants are said to wait out eternity. Given the violent nature of his imaginings (though not, to be fair, his behaviour) it seems wisest to place him in the protective ward until the letter can be found or the Mother Superior recovers enough to tell us more about him. As it stands, there is no one to whom I can even write to make enquiries about him. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs and it is not the first time by a long chalk that records have gone missing. I will discuss the alleviation of his symptoms when the herbalist comes the day after tomorrow. As to his delusions of grandeur – in my opinion, treating those is the work of many years.

Anna Calkins, Anomist

For weeks Cale lay in bed, retching and sleeping, retching and sleeping. He became aware after a few days that the door at the end of the twenty-bed ward was locked at all times, but this was both something he was used to and, in the circumstances, hardly mattered: he was not in a fit state to go anywhere. The food was adequate, the care kindly enough. He did not like sleeping in the same room as other men once again but there were only nineteen of them and they all seemed to live in their own nightmares and were not concerned with him. He was able to stay quiet and endure.