

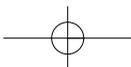


I

THE UNOILED HINGE JOINED ITS MELANCHOLY WHINE TO the opium-dosed whimper of the patient who sat gagged in his chair, and to the swift rasping of the saw. The door creaked ajar in the very moment that the doctor sawed off the leg of Sukey's Pa.

—B-b-best done fast, Dr Darwin was saying, and whether Mr Bent, who performed the operation, was following advice, or moving fast by instinct, to get the whole cruel necessity over as quickly as possible, who was to say? Certainly not a child aged two, who saw it through the crack in the door: the saw going through flesh and bone, the blood splashing.

No one had intended the child to be within earshot, or sight, of the gruesome event. But the Brick House was not especially large. When the child was born, her mother's screams could be heard not only in every corner of the house, but in every house for yards around in Burslem, that undulating little village. Indeed, all the thirty hands in the adjoining works had heard her hollering. But today, when the Master was to undergo his 'execution', as it had been termed by Heffie Bowers, the hands were quiet, going about their business in a subdued mood, speaking in hushed voices, as if a death had occurred. As well it might. Most died from the pain and the shock of amputation, which is why, both doctors said, it could not be done fast enough. Heffie said that when one of her uncles, who went





A. N. Wilson

for a soldier, had his arm off, he'd passed out just at the sight of the saw. Rusty. *It wanna clane, lahk*, and looked as if the blood of other executions still clung to it.

You'd hope better from Mr Bent, of course. He was the best surgeon in the district, and rode over from Newcastle-under-Lyme to administer potions to the hands. Bent had delivered all three of Mrs Wedgwood's children.

Richard, the baby, was scarcely a year old on the day of the execution, and himself sickly that day. John, almost always known as Jack, was a puling twenty months. It was the knowing little Sukey who was at large, in the next room. Sally, her mother, had assumed that Heffie was minding her. Baby Richard was screaming, it was only colic, Heffie was sure, and he had woken Jack, who was letting out his usual roars, and Annie the nursery maid was unable to quiet either of them. Such a commotion was the last thing that either Mr Bent or Mr Jos would want at that moment, and Heffie had gone upstairs to loll and lah and rock the little ones.

So Sukey was alone in the little panelled eating-room. In the adjoining parlour, with its pretty apple-green panels, the patient sat, without his breeches, in a chair covered with Turkish towels. His wife, Sally, held one of his hands, and Dr Darwin stood with a hand on one of his shoulders. Mr Bentley was there too, Josiah's friend and business partner.

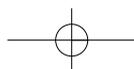
—Oh, Jos, said his wife.

—Do you feel the effects of the laudanum, sir? Mr Bent had enquired. There was a quaver in his voice as he had produced the fret-saw from its case.

—What must be done, must be done, said Josiah Wedgwood.

The evenness with which he spoke, the absence of slurring, demonstrated to his horrified hearers that he was still conscious.

—Perhaps w-w-we should wait a few more minutes, s-s-sir, for



The Potter's Hand

the narcotics to take effect, stammered Dr Darwin, whose large fleshy hand stopped kneading the patient's shoulder and reached out for Sal's hand.

It was then, with the whine of the uncoiled hinge, that the door had swung open a few inches. It was easily wide enough for Sukey to view the spectacle. Afterwards, it became part of the family legend that she had spied on the execution. She 'remembered' the story, but whether she remembered the event was a matter about which she would change her mind in the course of the next forty-nine years. Was memory something which was carried about in one's brain, or did the brain, so to say, retain the capacity to repeat stories to itself, supplying images and incidents which fluctuated and altered with the perspective of time? Their friend Coleridge would write about images on the surface of a stream passing away when a stone was scattered, and then re-forming – though not in his mind.

Mr Bent had lifted the linen sheet in which he had wrapped his patient. When Dr Darwin, partly with an involuntary pleasantry, partly in deadly earnest, spoke, he did so for both the Wedgwoods.

—Remember to c-c-cut off the right leg, I entreat, he said.

Darwin wedged the gag into his patient's mouth. There reaches a point where the surgeon's task is inseparable from the torturer's, which is why the faint-hearted should never enter the medical profession. Her husband squeezed Sally's hand so tightly that she thought he would crunch her bones. The saw began its work. The first thing to happen was a fountain of blood, spattering all the towelling which had been laid in circles round the chair as well as the clothes of those who stood by. With each motion of the saw, with its dreadful butcher's-shop scrapings, Wedgwood flinched and shook his upper body.

—If you were able, sir, to remain stiller, said Mr Bent.

The scrunching changed to a slithering, as when the chump chops



A. N. Wilson

have been placed on the butcher's board, and he has turned to slice steaks. All the colour from Josiah Wedgwood's normally rosy face had vanished. He inhaled deeply through his nose, and then out through his mouth, several times, but no further whimper, no cry came from him.

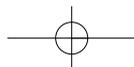
—It is done, sir. And now I must dress the wound.

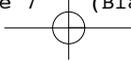
—It were clumsier than the way our Caleb ud darn a sock, not that ah'd let 'im loose wi' me needles!

So Heffie had declared, when she had helped to dress the wounds in after days. And, however clumsy the needlework, during all this, the stitching and the swabbing, Wedgwood was unable to remain silent. The first stabbing of the darning needle made him yelp. Darwin held out a small phial of laudanum to the patient's lips. When he had swallowed some more of the narcotic drops, Wedgwood let out the little yowl which a dog might emit while he thrashed, and then he slumped. This was the moment, as Mr Bent would later confess, when a patient often dies, either through loss of blood or through sheer pain.

Sukey, a thin little fairy with wavy mouse-blond hair and a long face un-childlike in its attentive stare, its pallor, its obliquity, looked at the participants in the drama: Mr Bent, swabbing and dabbing; her mother being comforted by the gargantuan, stammering figure of Dr Darwin; and the remarkable person who sat in the chair minus his right leg, her father, Josiah Wedgwood, Master Potter.

One day, far in the future, when her father was dead, Sukey would marry the son of Dr Darwin. Her child, the grandchild of Josiah Wedgwood and Erasmus Darwin, would be Charles Darwin, whose theories about the Origin of Species by Natural Selection would revolutionize the world. From the loins of Josiah Wedgwood and Erasmus Darwin would spring a great intellectual dynasty. From thence came Tom Wedgwood, Josiah's son, who was the pioneer of





The Potter's Hand

photography; Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose music captured the English soul; Veronica Wedgwood, whose histories of the Civil Wars evoked the English past; Gwen Raverat the engraver; and dozens of others. But at present, as the little girl Sukey watched them patch up the stump of her father's leg, it was 1768. Across the seas, the Massachusetts Assembly was dissolved for refusing to assist in the collection of taxes. Louis XV had just completed the building of Le Petit Trianon at Versailles for his mistress Madame de Pompadour. The author of *Tristram Shandy* had just died in London. His body would be snatched from its grave and appear a few days later on a slab in the Cambridge dissecting room of Charles Collignon. One of the students standing by was a parishioner of Sterne's and passed out at viewing the corpse of 'Parson Yorick'. Such are the strange quirks which occur in real life, but which we dare not introduce into fiction. It was not Josiah Wedgwood who would die at this date. He had other works to do. It was Richard Wedgwood, the baby whose cries could be heard while his father's leg was removed, who died five days after the amputation.

