

A POND by Llewelyn Powys

A MILE from my cottage there is a small pond. It lies in the centre of a triangular lawn where two valleys meet. Except for the old shepherd, nobody knows of it. Although it has the beautiful shape of a dew pond, it is not one. It is only a common pond supplied by the surface water of the wide downland gorges, and yet it has always seemed to me to be enchanted. I have often thought, as I have passed by it, that one day, under a special dispensation, I should receive from this little pool of water, from this small, green stoup of lustral water, a whisper as to the secret of life. It will be revealed to me, I have thought, as surely and as naturally as the presence of dew makes itself felt on folded twilight flowers found suddenly damp to the touch after the dry butterfly periods of a summer's day.

Always hoping for this hour of grace, I have loitered by the pond's edge at every season. I have observed with accuracy the changes that come over its surface. All through the winter months its waters are clear, but in the springtime the pond-buttercups grow up and afford a vegetable screen for the dabbling unrest of the newts, those little ancestors with orange bellies and gilded eyes who are privileged to experience the forgotten rhythm of saurian life. In summer the pond becomes green-mantled, the ranunculus disappears, and its place is taken by duckweed, with tiny, floating, sequin-round leaves. It is then that the tadpoles turn into frogs, and it is possible to catch one of these diminutive, yellow-green basilisks and set it upon the back of one's hand to watch its globular throat blow in and out, until with a headlong leap it has escaped into the long grass.

A few seconds' scrutiny of a frog, in all its perfection, corrects us of that gross apathy with which we too often approach the miracle of our fugitive existence. Use and wont make all life a commonplace thing. Our ordinary minds demand an ordinary world and feel at ease only when they have explained and taken for granted the mysteries among which we have been given so short a licence to breathe. Imagine the state of wonder that would possess our spirits had we been suddenly transported to the earth from some planet undisturbed by the urge of life. We should exclaim as much over a little hip-frog as over a thumb-high whelp of a hippo- griff surprised under a dock leaf. We should then no longer be blind to the planet's mystery latent in wood and stone. A seagull's feather picked up would shock us into the excitement we now should feel at fording the pinion of an errant cherubim. We should stand still as a stock to contemplate so slender a quill of air-filled horn which, with its filaments of adhering thistledown, can fan the heavy bodies of animals buoyant through the air. At every step we took we should be startled afresh.

We should sit at the sea's margin only to learn that the summer waves, dancing like lambs against the congregated beaches, were peopled with legless animals silver-plated, and with the gift of flashing motion. The astonishment we should feel at seeing a cheap ant would keep us on our knees before the galleried citadels of the pismires till nightfall. Can it be possible that insects, scarcely as large as grass seeds, are diligently obedient to laws of a civil polity? And a butterfly seen for the first time – what spectacle so delicate? A

painted-lady on a scabious, under the bewitchment of a love more dainty-sweet than the concupiscence of toadstool fairies!

The West Chaldon shepherd told me once that he had seen the ghost of a cow walk into the pond and vanish. 'There were no stock on down at the time, and a' vanished from my eyes as quick as fox in fern.' I was not surprised by this rumour. The pond was a charmed pond. I had always known it. It is a mirror that reflects God's moving shadow.

It was on a soft evening last September that there came to me the breath of the knowledge I sought. Beneath the sky the downs raised their patient shoulders with noble simplicity. Recumbent cattle could not have imparted to the mood of that hour a deeper peace. The last rays of the sun touched to brightest silver the fluff of the thistles withered and brown. All was silent, all was expectant. The messenger for whom I had waited was at last revealed.

It was a hare. I saw her from far away and did not so much as venture to move a finger. She approached with uncertain steps – now advancing, now retreating, now frolicsome, now grave. The secret nature of the hills seemed during those suspended moments to be open to her sensitive spirit. A tender light was on the swaying grass ends through which the russet creature, with elf-high ears, gambolled. Nearer and nearer she came.

Was she actually intending to drink? Was it possible that I should see her lower her soft brown chin to the water within ten yards of me? Surely if I were permitted to witness so delicate an operation, then at last I should receive the revelation I sought. The stillness of the evening was so profound that the fur of a field mouse's jacket brushing against the stems of its grassy jungle would have been audible, while against the sky, infinitely remote, the moon hung in an utter calm.

This hour in the downland valley was, I knew well, but of an inconsequent second's duration in the moon's age-long espionage of the earth's physical being. She had seen the magical and molten ash of the earth's orb stirred with the trouble of life. She had seen passionate men, resolute and adroit, raise themselves out of the dust. She had heard them cry out to the gods whose thoroughfares are uncatalogued star spaces. She had seen them go stumbling through lucky grass, their hearts distraught with love. She herself was part of the profound mystery of the humming firmament, the outer rim of which, for a few scattered moments, has been envisaged by the dreaming minds of men. The truth resides in matter's proud processions as they are revealed to our uncertain senses. In what can be seen, in what can be heard, in what can be touched, tasted, and felt, there is no treason. Only these messengers can be trusted. Here are the golden threads which alone can lead us without betrayal to those true states of beatific vision, ephemeral and sublime, wherein through the medium of our vulgar faculties we may see immortal movement, bright and clear, upon our planet. I was suddenly awakened from my rapture. I had heard a sound, a sound sensitive and fresh as soft rain upon a leaf. It was the hare drinking.