

The Line of Works

David Wheldon

‘He was seventeen years my elder,’ she said, the woman on the hilltop, her face turned away from me, her words difficult to make out. She was conning the horizon, right hand flat above her eyes. ‘And he’s been dead these ten years.’

She suddenly faced me, lowering her mobile brows. ‘We only had three years together: he was my first love. Not many years’ love in a life, is it? His memory serves for something, though.’ She put her lips together, protruding them thoughtfully, her expression one of sadness, but transforming with unexpected rapidity into one of keen enquiry. ‘Well, why should anyone give their confidences to a stranger? Why did you climb this hill? No matter. There’s a tale of a chain of signals: at night, fire-beacons. Here, where we stand, is a link in the chain, it is said. It’s hearsay, but I have all the time in the world to speculate. It is named *The Line of Works*. Do you know about its entrainment? Given that it’s hearsay: but you see what you see. There’s no denying the evidence of sight.’

‘No,’ I said. I looked at her; she was a small, slender woman of perhaps fifty-five. She stood against the gate in the wall: behind her rose the squat, octagonal drystone semaphore tower with narrow windows in its thick walls. ‘I didn’t know such a warning system existed.’

‘A warning system? You think? You may be right. The most likely purpose of the Line of Works, perhaps.’ She made a little grimace, indicative of thought. ‘I know little enough about it,’ she said. ‘Only my link in the chain. I have taken the chain itself as given.’ She followed the line of my gaze across the landscape below us. ‘I’ll show you round my primitive station. It won’t take long.’ She was suddenly struck by a thought which glanced along a tangent of her mind. ‘He was a philosopher, you know,’ she said, her voice very serious, her dark eyes keenly watchful.

‘Which philosopher’s views did he espouse?’

‘His own, of course. Who else’s?’ She laughed, and held the fingers of her right hand over her mouth. ‘What philosophy can one truly grasp other than one’s own? Who can lead your life but you yourself? There are no books here. There’s not much. I live off the land, as he, which means gathering, snaring, catching, throttling. The fish in the river down below are quite prolific. I use woven willow-baskets, as did he. Seasonal. Eels. I spear them. You crouch at the water’s edge, low in the denseness of the reeds. And then you have it. You bat it out of the water, and knap its head with a stone while it lies in the grass. It’s a skill. I like them smoked over oak. Elvers, in season. And there are doves which roost in holes in the stonework of the tower: I take their eggs and make stews of their unfledged squabs. There are crabs.’ She tilted her head and held her small, neat hands in front of her body. ‘And vegetables. Samphire provides salt. I found a parsnip and kept the seed, year after year. I don’t like parsnips much. But you have to eat to live: I’m prosaic in that.’ She shook her long, iron-grey hair. I wondered if she were mad. Had I not been through strange ordeals myself I truly would have thought so. But the mind accommodates itself to its needs and confines. Perhaps that’s what madness is: an accommodation to a magisterial world unseen.

‘Excuse me while I take a sighting.’ She laid her hands to either side of her eyes and scanned the horizon. ‘Let my pointing finger guide your eye, stranger,’ she said, unfolding her long arm. Her forefinger was steady. ‘Do you not see? Yon hill; our predecessor in the Line of Works, oh, fifteen miles away?’

‘I see it,’ I said. ‘A bald summit; wooded at its flanks, dropping to the levels beneath. A shape pleasing to the eye.’

‘That is she,’ she said. ‘Your eyes are sharp for the mystical visited by sight to correspond with the mystical behind your eyes: you are keen: some people are: he was: when I was a girl I would have followed him as the Teacher.’ She rolled her lower lip over her upper. ‘And the weather’s clear this morning. Her semaphore is uncommonly brilliant. She outshines surrounding nature.’

‘What is its name?’

‘Her name. They have names of women.’

I smiled.

‘Don’t smile at me,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t mean much. Only unthought expressions come to mean, or so I believe. I can’t help what I find. I can’t help my predicament. They are accomplished women. Now. My squint: my sighting.’ She put all her concentration into her gaze between the flats of her hands. ‘Nope. Nothing stirs. She’s flat. All is as it was this time yesterday. I can give you my attention now. You were asking her name.’

‘Yes; what is her name?’

‘Why is her name important to you? Her name isn’t important to me. I can’t summon her. She isn’t going to move. Every day she is always there. Her shape is always comely. And I am always here: if not for quite as long. She, she may speak to me: I have no need to speak to her until that time. The initiative is hers. So, no; her name is not known to me; there’s no reason why it should be. Hills are hills. The seven-league boots are ready to take a pace or two and inform me. I take a sighting every ten minutes by day, and every half hour by night.’

‘How do you sleep?’ I asked.

‘Let me show you round. There’s ten minutes before my next sighting. Sleep: I’ve trained myself to sleep for half-hour periods, interrupted by my sightings. The sightings are easier at night: I just have to sit up in bed and push aside the sacking from the semioscope — a little angled channel in the wall — and look out. I make a notch with a knife on a hazel tally-stick: this shows me the next morning that I have taken the sightings right. It’s a lot for one person, and I am always busy. You have to do what you can.’

We were walking towards the semaphore tower; the tethered goats strained towards her for the feel of her fingers with their tactile lips.

‘It’s easier with two. You can work shifts, then. But it’s a meithersome task for one, and there’s no reward, not that one ever looks for reward.’ She paused, her face suddenly anxious: she laid a slight, nervous hand on my forearm. ‘No. No reward. The thought would trouble. Even the thought of the last valediction troubles: *well done, thou good and faithful servant*. One might think, on hearing those mighty words, that one’s mind was at last deserting the duty of its care. Here.’

She opened the door of the tower, gave a tiny curtsy, and held out a slender arm. ‘The place of my confine. Come in. And welcome.’

We stood in the relative darkness.

‘The ground floor,’ she said. ‘It’s as common as a barton. Beaten earth floor; walls mud-plastered, lime-washed. Fireplace for cooking. No utensils; they’ve gone long ago, except for an enamelled cast-iron stew-pan. I found it in a ditch and scrubbed it with sand.’

‘How do you light the fire?’

‘In winter you keep the fire going throughout: day and night. I have a fire-steel and a flint. It’s troublesome fetching and carrying wood and water. Though water is not far: there is a spring half-way down the hill. I like to hear the water. There’s a comfortable rhythm of life from one day to the next. Days follow one another like the signal hills; yes, certainly, but it seems that days are automatic.’ She considered this carefully, her head on one side. ‘Or perhaps not. He had views on this, the philosopher, my man. He always asked the question: are days passed on by sentiences? He believed it so, and I agree with him, but I ask fewer questions of that nature; I’m a little more practical, I think, than he, and who hands on days is of little everyday concern to me, as long as they continue to arrive: and if they don’t there is not much I can do about it. Just as there’s a spirit of a place, there’s the spirit of an hour: a *genia hori*. People take so much for granted. Things go funny in the midline,’ she said, her face sagacious. ‘Events are meant to happen: who has the measuring eye to mean them, I don’t know. And who hands on generations: are there saliences there, taking in their pale almost unseen hands the thread of life all the way from the beginning? And who holds the vast, arcing traverses of the nether planets? Who turns the galaxies? I don’t know.’ She grimaced. ‘I calcine bones at the fire, grind them, and mix the ash with animal grease to whiten the semaphore arm as needs dictate. It must be kept visible, as you will understand. And as I whiten it I think to myself: *my citizenship is given from on high*.’ She stood stock-still. ‘But as to the nature of the giver I make

no conjecture. Best not even to consider the notion of a giver. That seems the most judicious.’
She folded her arms over her thin breast and smiled at me questioningly.

[This is a preview. The full text contains 8,000 words.]

For Ann Fry
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