

The Good Object

8 Stories by Eric Darton

1. To the Reader

These are all true accounts, handed me over a lifetime, from various sources.

Most came directly from the lips of my parents. Occasionally there is a tale related by an uncle or aunt – such as the fable of the Lion’s Roar, which was told me by my Uncle Mike and to which I now give credence, though I didn’t as a child.

In some cases I have forgotten elements of greater or lesser importance, as in another story from my uncle Mike about Why Planes Fly. But then, this is why you cannot tell it all in one book, or even twenty.

Certain stories, such as the *Preacher and the Bear*, given me by Aunt Martha, I have deliberately left out. This one was simply too frightening for a general readership and I have not reported certain other tales for equally valid reasons.

The episode of “Dites lui merde” comes through my mother, though it concerns her father, my grandpère, Marius. My mother also contributed the illustrations of banana trees. Marius though, planted in my ear directly the many idealistic songs in Yiddish, Russian, German and French.

The Miraculous Human Cork and *Little by Little, or the Bridge Painter* were related by my father about his father and brother respectively.

I have misplaced the source for *The Big Rock Candy Mountains*, but I’m certain it is true, because I know its territory like the back of my hand.

As for the whole of it, I’ll bet there are other collections of History just as true. But these tales were gathered especially with you in mind, so I hope you will receive them with all the joyful spirit in which they were first offered to me.

— ED

Jardin des Plantes, March or November 2086

2. Succès Fou

(For Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara)

And here, let us be clear about what we really mean, that the day we took the presidential palace, we knew nothing except how to be incorruptible. We disabled the air conditioner – for how could we allow ourselves to exchange atmospheres while the people sweltered? We escorted the monetarists to the tarmac, turbines revving . We thanked them for their concern, their munificent offers, which we respectfully declined in perpetuity. We jeeped into the provinces to see the vaccination commando with our own eyes, to lay the cinderblock cornerstone of the thousandth school, offer prayers of thanks for the fifteenth village child born alive. We hit the airwaves, arguing the cessation of excisions, *pour la santé*, and in three years even Mama at ninety is convinced and lays down her razor blade.

But there were, it pains me to say, a few, a handful, who found the new policies naïve and disagreeable, who were reluctant after such a struggle to live without privilege, who resented the delays in electrifying their hometowns, who found degrading – and inexplicable – this lack of air conditioning, the injunction against promiscuous motorcades and who saw fit – these rogues – to burst through the door without benefit of scheduling a plenary and favor me with their ballistic displeasure, and it was at this moment – seeing first their faces, then their guns – before ditch, before vultures, before the popular uprising forced them to dig me a proper grave with a mausoleum on top and build my namesake dam (which the monetarists praised) and bridges, and stop work once a year for the festival of the revolution when the women march and the men go to market and prepare meals – that I remembered:

A dusky sky and impossibly tall buildings of white brick and sand-colored masonry set along wide boulevards. And from each roof-terrace spills a garden, lush as the presidential gardens we fought through, fountains of vegetation overawing the street, and suddenly in this great park all is night and clouds such as I never saw in all my life rush over my bicycle in the lamplight and I look down and find I have grown fourteen million legs and I steer with fourteen million vaccinated arms, and we – seven million strong *with not one excision among us* – are traveling together. How do I know we are all here? But in the dark I sense it. To believe such things is crazy, *non?*

3. Slumber Party

Sunday, February 11

Northerton continues quite delirious. His wound suppurates alarmingly, though during the night it traveled from his collarbone to his temple. We keep our spirits up by singing the Valse Martienne, except for Northerton who is restive and fancies himself a Sepoy.

We have little food and less water – the latter procured from the preternatural condensation that forms around Northerton when he dances – but thankfully, among our party are several bears, jovial, resolute and altogether trustworthy who will not let us starve, they are such fine fishermen. They take great delight in Fife-Hewitt's backward skating – they laugh till they are fairly blue as poor Northerton's toes. Tunstall uses every occasion as the pretext for a psalm reading and has great hope of presently making Christians of them.

Friday, February 16

A fine day at the start, the harsh weather lifting with our spirits until we were brought low by the discovery that the bears have vanished without a trace. Tunstall has taken rinds in a small ditherbag to tempt them and has left the camp with dispatch. Before he departed I pressed upon him my pocket sundial which doubles as a box-cutter – I hope he meets with nothing amiss.

Northerton yelps incessantly, which is trying in our cramped quarters. His wound is healed, but his body is increasingly covered with tattoos and several of his teeth appear to be inlaid with champlevé scenes of The Passion. When he is not howling, he cries out to a certain Johnson to let go of his ears. The only Johnson I know is a corporal at Fort Grosvenor, a stout fellow, who I am certain cannot be responsible for Northerton's distress. Nonetheless, his agitation is extreme.

I cannot think from where he draws the inspiration, but young Tilton sought my permission to hold a sack race at dawn. Kwame swears there will be a deluge but I could not refuse him. Tilton is the finest subaltern one could want.

Saturday, February 17

The early hours brought joy to our beleaguered party. Tunstall returned with the bears – the original company supplemented by several others, among them one I had not seen before, dressed in the most unusual costume: a feathered cape, bowler and putes, and waving a fly switch – which, since it is the dead of winter – I judge to be ceremonial. Thus adorned, he appears to hold great authority among the bears and led them in loud huzzahs at the finish line of Tilton's race.

All participated in the contest to the best of their abilities, despite various infirmities and the downpour, save for Northerton, who, though recovered in body, persists in his delusions, insisting to all that he is a cast-iron darkie mechanical bank. As a result, he demands that we pitch coins to him from a great distance which, with remarkable agility, he catches in his mouth and swallows. This game has bankrupted us and we have taken to tossing him buttons, but he appears to be ignorant of the subterfuge.

Northerton's tattoos have grown hypnotically intricate and seem to change even as they are scrutinized. Kwame swears he is a devil and will not drink his condensations. Tunstall has repeatedly cited scripture in Northerton's defense, but the savage's heart remains obdurate. We can only pray for the quick restoration of Northerton's reason, for I fear Kwame's superstitious utterances may sow unease among the less steadfast of our party.

Sunday, February 18

As dark a Sabbath as I can recall. A young she-bear has eaten Tilton. I do not doubt it was an accident, but there are rumblings among his messmates despite Tunstall's fine sermon on Christian forgiveness. The bears, who are sensitive in the extreme, have withdrawn to the outskirts of the camp where they are carding wool and crocheting stockings and mufflers with their nimble claws. The added warmth these articles promise may, in time, compensate somewhat for our tragic loss.

Northerton is in great distress owing to the ingestion of so much metal. Kwame has risen to the occasion by ceasing his imprecations and plying him with lubricants obtained from the sheep shearing.

For his part, Fife-Hewitt has perfected a jeté with a triple spin which roused the entire camp to spontaneous ovation – though he risked his neck to show it.

It is behavior such as this that gives me faith that we will be delivered and redoubles my already boundless joy in the courageous and fraternal spirit that sustains us. It grows colder by the hour and Tunstall reports that even the bears are shivering at their labor. Yet despite our present afflictions, I can imagine no finer, nor more honorable a band of souls with whom to share whatever fate it may soon please God to provide us.

4. Voussoir

I awake to find my visual field transformed into an evanescent hexagonal mosaic. I don't remember if this is a memory or if I constructed this remembrance. I know that every memory is supported by columns and that the heaviest rest on piers. Some memories are domes, others are vaults with and without intersecting vaults and, or, lunettes.

I know that memory is all about transferring thrust into dead weight so the pillars can support it. And I know that arches, ribs and bays are good at this. As are buttresses. And that you need – I need also – to build a scaffold so that each stone in the arch can roll against the next without falling through.

I know that if you've done your job right, you can take away the scaffold and the keystone will lock the arch in place and the web of stones will hold up everything as it needs to be. And I also have observed that for some reason, though it is no more important than any other stone, that the keystone will be the one we carve an image into.

Perhaps, and this is only a conjecture, it is the memory that leads us both toward and away from remembrance.

5. The Therm

There was once a foolish merchant who—no, that is not how to begin. The way to begin is: The first time I saw the city, it was through a break in the trees on the opposite side of the river. Its walls reared up in tremendous grandeur, and though hardly in ruins, I knew at a glance that the city lay deserted, that it had once teemed with people, all bent on living well according to their various notions, and on getting rich when they were young, so they might never work thereafter, and spend their days instead in the spa, or by the thermal springs, either curing their trifling maladies, or preventing any such from taking hold. I could imagine, from where I stood, how they held their glasses beneath the spigots of healing water then sipped, and in the instant dropped their vessels with a crash into the trough below, so overcome were they with well-being. Yet this breakage was no disaster, for everywhere vendors sold glasses for a modest sum which could be fitted back again into a little wicker basket worn about the neck like a talisman, and which, bouncing against the breastbone as one walked, did greatly stimulate and tonify the heart.

Upon the simplest glasses incised marks at regular intervals showed how much water filled the vessel, and after taking a draught, what measure remained, while the most luxurious had lines and numbers painted in black and gold, and, reflected in the bottom, a radiant image of the drinker at the pinnacle of his health and vital powers. Those who possessed the less ornamented glasses usually drank in sips, attempting—though the water flowed abundantly from the taps—to measure out each imbibing in conformance with the intervals cut in the glass, while the rich-glassed citizens often sought to drain their vessels at a single gulp for the pleasure of more quickly recognizing themselves in miniature shimmering below.

Now how do I know these things? I only know that I know that I know. For as I gazed across the river I saw many great buildings all clustered together, yet in a pleasing picture overall: the edges and openings were all of ashlar, and the rest laid in courses of ruddy brick that, set against the pale green of the willows and the deeper hues of the plane trees and pines, and lighted by the dawn, or indeed the sunset, gave rich play to the shadows, the bold arches and vaultings; and though the whole was too massed together to discern the proportions of particular structures and I, being no

architect, could in any case only hazard after their logic, yet the place looked all of a piece, and one could scarcely imagine what had caused its people to abandon it.

Even in that instant the angle of the sun shifted so that the largest archivolt now appeared as an awning above a portal, and thinking to cross over, I looked up and down the bank for a boatman, yet saw none. But not far along the path, lay a boat moored and across it a long pole, and nearby a little box for offerings, and by such signs I gathered it was the boatman's day off and I would have to shift for myself.

To my surprise, the journey over was an easy one, and the boat rode stable, so I never feared to capsize. The pole found a firm bottom and did not threaten to stick fast as it can in some treacherous lagoons, and though the river flowed vigorously, I encountered no violent currents, and so was able to steer without difficulty to a ready docking, and there 'lighted whereupon—and here I am sure I will try your belief in the veracity of my telling—the boat turned about of its own accord and poled back the way it had come. And when I yelled "hi!" and clapped my hands, it stopped and turned a jot as though to signify that it would willingly return for me at any time I desired it.

The quays I found entirely devoid of life, but passing under some vaulting, seeing everywhere writ *Water! Health! Life!*—which though it was in dialect and mighty stylized, I recognized the meaning of—I soon found myself in an arcaded square, the four sides of it identically façaded, a fountain at the center, and at every corner a tap, so that water was provided from five sources. Most pleasant of all was to see that not only did the springs run plentifully, but that at every station stood lines of people: travelers, townsfolk, pilgrims, all with cups in hand and some of them leaning upon staves which they cast away immediately upon having drunk, so fast and furious that several boys employed themselves in scurrying about gathering and removing the discarded staves to who knows where, lest they become a hazard underfoot, and girls swept up the broken glass into numerous bins, and never have you seen such charming and proper children anywhere on the face of the earth.

I glanced about and saw that no one jostled and all waited patiently, yet not long, to imbibe, then thought I would fain get me a tumbler that I might drink too. Again, the sun shifted so that I saw clearly the stalls where I might purchase one, and eyeing the merchandise, settled on a glass of middling worth, whose bottom would not show my face, but turn the color of health when I had drunk, and so to the nearest spring. This

happened to be the central fountain 'round which a line wound in a spiral, so that when I arrived at the source I was dizzy from circumnavigating it. I at once dipped my glass and finding it warmed my hand not a little, drank the water down at one draught.

Like all the others before me, as though seized by a paroxysm, I instantly let go my glass and saw it shatter into a thousand pieces in the trough by the basin. I did not see the little girl sweep it up for I fell backward into the arms of the man behind me, who caught my weight 'ere I touched the cobbles and set me back upon my feet.

"It is the warmest spring," he said in a sympathetic tone, as if by way of explanation, and indeed it was. Nor can I tell you more, but that the way to find the city is to search for a break among the trees by a riverbank, and that you should not be surprised if you lose hold of your glass the first time you drink before you can see into the bottom.

Afterwards, you will be able to grasp it long enough to recognize the colors of salubrity, or perhaps your own radiant face greeting you from within.

6. Of Good and Bad Places

In the Country of the Blest, which is a real place and no afterlife, but here and now and lying to the west of Spain, everybody goes about his or her business without minding anyone else, yet all works out well, with great amity on all sides.

Food they have in abundance, for everything made is edible, and nutritious, and, if you eat of it, returns to its original form almost before you can blink your eye. Milk, honey, wine and all manner of liquor spring up from the ground in streams, so no one ever need thirst, and remains always in a convivial mood.

The problem of jealousy in coupling they have solved in a most ingenious way. Everywhere, the walls are hung with placards depicting beautiful men and women of all types, life-sized and examinable from all angles, so that all that is necessary is for the beholder to wish for the presence of the beheld and lo, she or he will be incorporated in the flesh, and willingly perform whatever acts you wish. Thus are manifold pleasures readily available to all with no disputes or sorrow.

In matters of property, much the same appertains. A luxurious motor car, for example, will build itself up from a poster wish – and one may also imagine into existence an agreeable companion. One may ride any and everywhere, and when your journey is done, leave the conveyance at any curbside where it will leap into the nearest poster frame.

Now all of these things I have seen with my own eyes and can attest to. But it is told that further to the west lies a Country of the Damned, where none of these marvels are possible. Men and women fall sick with undiagnosable maladies and in the course of things either get well or die without rhyme or reason, though supposed medicines and palliatives abound. The wines they drink do not make them content, but cause them to double up and oftimes to vomit. Nor, unlike the Island of the Blest, is this place to be found on any map, so if one, by unhappy accident, is blown off course and lands there, escape is all but impossible.

But the worst of it – and this I heard from an old man who managed after many years to gain his freedom at great risk of being drowned or eaten by sea-beasts – is that in the Country of the Damned, the populace, rather than speaking to one another, reads broadsheets filled with tidings, and images that no matter how one tries, will not come

to life. And the tidings they read, though seeming true, can in no wise be reconciled with the circumstances of their lives, and so by degrees, they fall into a kind of madness, wherein their desires are aroused to no good purpose and those that linger to the age of four score or so rarely die of old age, but are consumed from within by the energies they can neither employ to good purpose, nor gain the mastery of.

And also, the old man said this: In the Country of the Damned they will perform any act to obtain a piece of gold. And in the doing of these acts they revel. For however insalubrious or evil, they make of their meager lots a splendid heap of joy.

7. Soon Come

In the year 0, all men will be brothers. In the year 0, sandals will fly by themselves. In the year 0, intellects will become unlinked from bodies and we'll see ourselves as we really are – we'll see our true relationship to things. In the year 0, we'll ride bicycles and have practically no chins. In the year 0, the few dogs that remain will have been retrained as short order cooks to replace the grumbling, drunken ones who have taken off to their homelands to live in caves and grumble in languages unrelated to any other known languages and half-incomprehensible even to themselves. In the year 0, there will finally be some rhyme and reason to this madness. In the year 0, students will take to the streets and, seeing the true relation of themselves to things, pack it up and head for the beach. On the way, they will battle with roadblocks and burn policemen who are now made entirely out of vulcanized leather, riding horses made almost entirely of vulcanized horse byproducts. In the year 0, peasants will celebrate the transparency of cheese.

In the year 0, you'll be able to say: "two over easy, whiskey down – takes bacon, crisp," and a dog will understand you. In the year 0, the earth's axis will be revealed to be a simple metal rod – no more, no less – with our orb transfix'd upon it. In the year 0, we'll see our true relationship to things – stand before one another as we really are. In the year 0, it will be safe to smell again. In the year 0, if the dog burns the home fries, there will be another dog to replace him, no questions asked. In the year 0, our children will accompany us to art galleries and say: "Meeow."

In the year 0, the earth's transfixing axis will be found to be a section of an infinitely curving rod, and the earth a bead of sweat along an infinite brow. At the end of the year 0, the earth will be revealed as cowrie-shaped and not a sphere at all. At the close of the year 1, you'll recognize yourself in the mirror in my belly and I'll see the nails driven into your chest, and you'll hear the buzzing behind the mirror, and soon we'll see our true relationship to things.

8. Late

I was late and by the time I got to the market square everyone had been herded off to the trains and the trains were leaving – I could tell by the fading whistles and the ochre sky. I felt a pang of something – I’m not sure what – and unburdened myself to the guard. He looked down from under his great helmet and took my jaw in his rough hand. The oddest feeling, wanting to turn and run and also to stay with his holding touch forever.

“Little one,” he said, “it’s not such a bad thing to be late. I am here because I missed my call-up many years ago. No one from my regiment was heard from again. Besides, there is always another call-up. Some day you will be right on time.”

I could say nothing until his hand released me, I could do nothing but feel my tongue fill my mouth, feel how deep in my skull it was planted. What would I say when it came time to speak?