

One

“I will call you Master. Shaped as I, every man is my master.”

This is what Tinker Howth told Geoffrey of Hampton were Dagdá's first words to him. And these were the words with which the clerk, Geoffrey of Hampton, began his report to the County Sheriff.

Having the ear of the County Sheriff in those times gave even a clerk in a distant market town sufficient clout to make life difficult for one such as Tinker Howth. All travel then was discouraged by the authorities, with minstrels and itinerant players likely to be arbitrarily detained by parish constables. Nor was it unknown in out of the way towns for a lone traveller to be summarily hung as a vagabond.

Being in clerk Geoffrey of Hampton's favour, therefore, meant that Tinker Howth's passage around the shire was eased, if not assured.

Although there were only 5 million inhabitants within the whole of mainland Britain, more people then occupied, lived in and worked in, the countryside than now, when the country's population has increased to more than tenfold. And back then not only were there far more people out and about in the countryside, but they did so at a far slower pace, and as a consequence they saw more.

Country folk roamed the woods in search of blackberries or cherries, or they were out gathering kindling or harvesting hazel nuts, collecting acorns for their sows or for themselves. Shepherds explored moorland gullies on the track of strays, and women went stooping over the high moors picking bilberries. Even those few travelling through the parish walked, or they sat their horse at a walking pace; and so, their being higher, they saw even more.

So must Tinker Howth have been seen meeting with Dagdá, and so must that snippet, there being fewer people and remarkable events to tell of, have found its way back to Geoffrey of Hampton, who then sought to find favour by reporting such an unusual meeting to the County Sheriff.

For all their officious desire to know every little thing that was happening within their shire, unbeknownst to clerk Geoffrey of Hampton and the County Sheriff, Tinker Howth was also relaying Dagdá's words to the bishop in the adjoining diocese. (In the Bishop's records there is a slight variation in what Tinker Howth said were Dagdá's first words to him: “I will call you Master. All men who stand straight are my master.”) And while the Bishop always lavished praise on Tinker Howth for his devotion to the Christian (new Protestant) cause, he also ensured that Tinker Howth, as incentive to return with more titbits, never left his palace without some pecuniary reward. From Geoffrey of Hampton all that Tinker Howth got were threats and the conditional promise of unhindered passage.

So why the Bishop's and the Sheriff's interest?

Those were days of dangerous secrets and overlapping intrigues; and hints to both Bishop and Sheriff, hints that had most probably been no more than a too often mention of the leper colony, must have led both Sheriff and Bishop to suspect that something more than its being a simple place of refuge was taking place in, or near, the leper colony.

And to begin with neither the Bishop nor the Sheriff's distant clerk made mention to Tinker Howth of their interest in Emrys, the church builder. Or, more accurately, the church rebuilder. At that point in its history the tiny church in the remote leper colony had already been rebuilt several times. As, in the centuries following Emrys, the church would again fall into disrepair and again have to be rebuilt several times.

And I had best assert here, as Tinker Howth was at pains to make clear to the Bishop and to clerk Geoffrey of Hampton, that, although the colony was his place of refuge, Dagdá was not a leper.

The leper colony was in a combe on a steep north-facing coast, which meant that the colony received no direct sunlight for four months of every year. That sloping coast was coated in woodland, mostly of thin-stemmed oaks evenly spaced, their twisted growth simultaneously straining up towards the light and cowering before the gales that came whipping off the sea. In deep clefts and rounded combes were scatterings of beech and ash also reaching for the light; and, with here and there, a clambering ivy and a tall holly gathering dark. The occasional birch whitely glimmered and, up on the moor's edge, were low rattling thorn.

The tubular trunks of the ash were almost yellow, had here and there black discs of fungus dotting their coarse surface. While the twisted green trunks and boughs of the oak were lichen-crusting grey and orange. On the sloping floor of the wood were the delicate crown-spread of ferns, the brown trembling heads of quaker grass and the flat leaves of stinking iris. But mostly, where tree roots had grown around rocks, moss had spread over all so that, without scratching away at the moss, it couldn't be told which was rock and which root. Single stems of grass grew up through some of the moss.

Sheltered by the moor from the prevailing south-westerlies, the colony's woodland hollow, although dark, held its own kind of beauty, a stillness that betokened tranquillity. Small wonder then that over the centuries the combe's infrequent inhabitants had chosen to build, and rebuild, and rebuild, a tiny grey church there. Nor can it be a surprise, the combe being on the almost inaccessible edge of the parish, as well as on the very border between the two counties, that by Dagdá's time it had already served as both a place of banishment and of sanctuary.

As a leper colony it was probably one of the last in England. The latest theory has it that it was a change in the mean land temperature that halted the infectious spread of the disease, that the policy of quarantine had been of psychological merit only.

But, even with leprosy over and done with, the combe went on to be used as a dumping ground for the shire's, and at times the nation's, undesirables. For instance only a hundred years after the events to be related here prisoners-of-war were sequestered there. And those prisoners-of-war took up charcoal burning again.

Back then the gap between town life and Tinker Howth and Dagdá, let alone between the pair of them and the city, let alone between them and court life, in both material and mindset terms was almost as if they had lived during different times. Because back then, although the Spanish Armada had long been blown to pieces and there was a king newly on the throne, in this remote part of the shire, habits of mind being as comfortable as addiction, fears were still of Spanish assassins creeping ashore. While the minds of local officials were still occupied with a visceral dread of Walsingham, his spies and his torturers. And not without some evidential cause: the populace here had in living memory risen up against their monarch, had had to be subdued by force of arms. And, although both officials and populace might not know of it for some years (lest it be emulated?), in the capital there had only recently been uncovered a Catholic plot to blow the king up along with his entire parliament.

Members of the local establishment then, an establishment barely established, unsure of itself, remembered — but barely mentioned, less talk itself of those events was deemed

treachery — the uprisings hereabouts when empty bellies had demanded both Latin mass and bread. That both should have been at the seat of people's thoughts, the base of their resentments, must needs have made those who chose to govern them watchful.

In short then, this friendship between Tinker Howth and Dagdá took place within a time of religious flux. Much as now. And just as violent. With the poor then also, as always, as usual, being defined and discussed as a problem. Spymaster Francis Walsingham may have gone, but still Philip of Spain plotted against the English crown, the Inquisition was still knee-deep in gore and agony, and — as already said — plots, assassins and uprisings were feared.

Consequently the County Sheriff, being a man of his station and little imagination, and having heard a whisper of odd happenings around about the leper colony, suspected that more than the usual revenue-dodgers were coming ashore under cover of the lepers, that it might even be armed insurrectionists or hired assassins. 'Arguers' landing there would also be a cause of concern to the crown. And, being loyal to this crown this County Sheriff hoped to win favour by being instrumental in preventing a Papist plot and/or another Spanish invasion.

The Bishop on the other hand, although a functionary within it, was yet to be convinced that England had its own established church. And, suspecting something along the same lines as the Sheriff, he simply sought, through information garnered secretly from sources such as Tinker Howth, to measure the strength of any usurping power and, if the greater, join it; if the lesser, condemn it.

And both were justified in their suspicions. All was not as it seemed in and about the leper colony. Tinker Howth too knew that Dagdá had a secret to tell. A secret that Dagdá eventually wanted told — to Tinker Howth, the only man he knew and trusted outside the colony. But, when first asked, he had not the confidence nor the words to tell it. That secret, however, was not to be what either the Bishop or the County Sheriff, or even Tinker Howth, had been given to suspect.

Lest I confuse matters further in this attempt to depict a time of deceit and subterfuge, let me repeat here that, although he had been brought to live and die among lepers, Dagdá was no leper. Nor is he a metaphor, an allegory. He is — insofar as this tale is concerned — just one more of life's oft'bruised bastards. Which is not to say that all the lumps, bumps, nodules and pustules, on whatever part of him was exposed — Dagdá's flesh had as many nobbles and lumpy growths as an old oak — would not at a casual glance have him presumed to be a leper. Closer examination, however, would readily reveal that all his extremities were intact. But, given where he lived, closer was what most of his contemporaries avoided.

Dagdá has himself already mentioned his shape. Leastwise I had him open this tale with mention of his shape. Which demands that another cautionary note need be added here — because had I rendered that short speech as spoken by Dagdá it would have been a mess of slurring sibilants, have read as snake gibberish verging on the incomprehensible.

Dagdá's speech impediments apart, on his side Howth had two front teeth missing, and both conversed not only in strong local accents but in dialects close to being separate languages all their own. At that time, even within both counties, local words for common objects and practises would have been unknown to others in the same county. Beyond the colony much of the spoken vocabulary was peculiar to that coastal region and to that parish on the border between those two counties.

Howth's tinker travels meant that he had learnt many alternative words and alternative meanings for the same words. Dagdá's vocabulary on the other hand had been acquired in even greater isolation than was usual for those times. Delivered to the colony in swaddling he

had picked up all his first words from people who had lips eroded from their teeth. His education had then been continued by adults so withdrawn that they had often spoken to the chattering toddler only in dismissive grunts.

So, for the remainder of this tale, although I may occasionally recreate the characters' syntactical speech patterns I will make no attempt to depict anyone's accent or dialect. As I resent being patronised over any of my own acres of ignorance and unaccented mispronunciations, nor do I want to seem to be patronising these innocents of the past, whose English was still a comparatively new language idiosyncratically spelt and punctuated.

The European renaissance may have reached mainland England, have found its way into the English playhouse and academe, but it had had as yet little effect on the lives of a tinker and a poor wretch cast among lepers.

Underlying all the above reservations regarding verbatim quotations is the consideration that Dagdá's mouth was, like the rest of him, misshapen. One of Geoffrey of Hampton's few fanciful entries was "...told our man is alike a gargoye come to life."

Let us start here by describing the lumps and bumps atop Dagdá's head. No, let us begin with the immediately obvious, the very size of his head. Twice the girth of another man's head, the very weight of his skull bowed him forward, was part cause of his twisted stance.

What any newcomer would also have been instantly aware of would have been Dagdá's begrimed skin. The black speckling occupying his almost every pore was the result of his having been raised in a smoke-filled, soot-encrusted house, further compounded by his principal child-into-adult occupation, the making of charcoal. Dagdá, one of the few able-bodied in the colony — which, in itself, is to stretch the definition of what it is to be able-bodied, but all is comparative — Dagdá was the one who, in emptying them, had to clamber down into the charcoal pits.

Some hair did grow in tufts on isolated parts of Dagdá's uneven scalp. Single strands occasionally straggled free of the grime; and those few loose hairs that were not dark with grease, and/or dyed with soot and charcoal dust, were a wispy brown.

Dagdá also had a few patches of whiskers on his jaw. That is if a jawline could be discerned, the face appearing to continue in irregular folds into his throat and chest.

Dagdá's nose was perhaps the most 'normal' aspect of his entire physiognomy. Slightly snub, it was by no means porcine. What one noticed first about Dagdá's face, however, was the livid pink patch between his nose and chin. Or where one might have supposed his chin to have been.

Jaw and teeth not being aligned, neither were the lips, which caused Dagdá to continuously salivate and dribble, which dribbling he frequently wiped away — causing the backs of both hands to be as pink as the patch around his mouth. The awkwardness of his eyes also meant, tear ducts filling, that Dagdá's nose often had either a drip forming at its tip or a slow trickle emerging from one or other of his nostrils. These also required wiping away.

Dagdá's misaligned mouth and skewed palate inevitably meant, as already mentioned, that he had difficulty shaping words and completing sentences. His speech had to be in short bursts, with pauses to suck down saliva and gulp breath. This often led to Tinker Howth, when later quizzing Dagdá on behalf of the Bishop and the Sheriff, to ask him to repeat what he had just said.

Ignored, even teased, by painfilled adults throughout his colony childhood, Dagdá didn't know how to be obsequious, only sceptical and suspicious. So, when being asked by Howth again and again to repeat what he had just said, this at times had him roaring out his frustration. Or, using his short thick arms, and with increasingly furious gestures, he would

attempt to draw upon the green woodland air what he had been repeatedly trying to tell Howth.

What also made any conversation difficult with Dagdá were his eyes.

Dagdá's right eye looked up and his left eye looked down. This, more than his distended belly, his unequal shoulders, bent legs and enlarged genitalia, led to his peculiar gait. Sometimes his nubby head would be lowered almost to his chest to enable him to see — out of his right eye — where he was going. At other times his chin would be raised, his whole body at a stretch leaning backwards, to let him see out of his left eye whither the path led.

Of course which eye came to the fore also depended on the terrain. If the path descended then his looking-down left eye guided his step. On a path leading up then his right eye sought footholds, rootsteps, branches to grasp to lift him through a gap.

Born at a twist like this Dagdá's brain had developed to enable him to process the separate input from both eyes at once. Whereas in most infants, their two eyes pointing forward, the stereo input of the near same image will teach the brain to perceive distance and depth, Dagdá's brain, like that of a chameleon's, had adapted itself to simultaneously process two distinctly different sets of images.

Thus, for instance, when walking along a woodland path, Dagdá's looking-down left eye would note glints of broken stone and trodden earth, bright celandines and trip-making trailing brambles. At the path's edge this left eye would espy thin-stemmed blue violets with their tiny yellow tongues. Maybe even a sharp double-cleft deerprint. While his looking-up right eye would simultaneously be taking note of the criss-cross-hatching of branch ends, the elbows and knees of oak boughs, possibly the knuckle bones of ash twigs, or long brown beech buds about to break into leaf, a warty birch growth, the swift dark wing of a wind-driven crow, white bar flutter of a chaffinch....

This independent eye action of Dagdá's (when still and watchful Dagdá would, like a bird, twist his head one way and another to see what was about him) made Tinker Howth uncomfortable. Particularly when, their heads on the same level, Dagdá kept shifting his large face down and back to fix Howth first with one eye, then with the other.

Although a thoroughly practical man, Howth was as prey to the superstitious whisperings of his time as any other man; and Tinker Howth had come to suspect that the green-flecked left eye, the one that looked to him the length of the pink and black face, was Dagdá's evil eye. And, with Howth being slightly shorter than Dagdá, unless avoided, this would be the eye that looked down on him.

Disconcerting for Howth in another way too, when Dagdá stretched his head back, was for him to be looking at the flashes of pink lines as the folds in Dagdá's throat opened, exposing the deeper parts of the crease where the charcoal and soot particles had not found a place in the pores. Those pink throat lines made Dagdá seem all the more vulnerable to Howth, added to Howth's pity, to his fellow feeling for the man.

So, to avoid this mix of superstitious fear and pity, and arriving usually first at their rendezvous, Howth tried always to find a spot — within the woods or in a moorland dip — where he could position himself on the higher ground. Dagdá then, large head lowered and tilted forward, could fix him only with his 'benign' right eye, render the two of them — in Howth's eye — more approximately equals.