

THE TINKER'S HUT

BY LLOYD MORRIS

NEARLY two thousand feet up it stands on the bald top of a wind-stricken hill in the Welsh Marches. On three sides its crannied walls bulge blindly out beneath a roof scabbled over with an ancient thatch; on the fourth, a filmy-blue window peers sinisterly, on to nine giant boulders scarred with the rasure of ancient glaciers; and hard by the crazy door a few distorted sycamores sentinel a boggy pool over-slimed at the margin with virent weed.

Here was the pitiful habitation of a vagabond tinker. From it he sallied with his woman, impelled by hunger to ventures on the world of men: crying through the country-side, pots and kettles to mend; and peddling a scanty ware. Here, at intervals, they returned, wayworn, and with a beggarly handsel that for a brief period from wandering should keep bare life within them.

What manner of man, as noon drew on to night, bowed sullenly beneath his pack and trudged dumbly through churlish weather up this desolate mountain-side; what trull plodded mutely after and followed through the mouldering door—come to rest at last, as the sun went down, in the harsh shelter of four blotched walls that was home?

A decrepit stool and narrow bench were furnishing that offered no comfort, only deject show and a rigorous amelioration, from the cold damp floor, whereon they could sit and eat an exact and scanty meal of hoarded victuals; and then break into foul recriminations; hold brutish silence, or snicker at one another in the fugitive blaze of a twig fire; with no rag of friendly curtain at the bleared window to screen the cruel hills—stretched range beyond range to a last far-off profile jaggling

into the horizon like a broken edge of sword blade and dripping with the blood-red glory of a threatening west; no creaking shutter to veil the great and fearful shadows bowing monstrously before the naked window, and gathering and shifting unto the glooming of night among the sinister sentinels of the pool; to shut out the "corpse candles" wavering over the slimy weed, and hold back the ghostly fingers of rain from tapping at the leaky casement. On a framework of wood, with four slabs of flat stone replacing a missing leg, they must lie with a wrappage of sackcloth for their bedding: taking uneasy rest while the snarling wind swooped down to wrestle with the groaning sycamores; waking to hear it stealthily circling their defenceless hut, and feel the walls quiver to the resistless push of its giant fingers settling slyly to their grip, then with a burst of insensate fury shaking the frail habitation and rushing away over the mountain tops shouting, Doom! Doom! Doom!

To this remote and squalid dwelling I came by hazard upon an autumn afternoon. A ruffian wind shrilled bleakly in my ears; an hawk hung high over the solitude; and from a trifle of bracken, a viper regarded me with malignant concern: the menace of the place was express, its show of human occupation pitiable—suddenly I realised it significant of nature's blind hostility to man, and, also, of the value and achievements of human fellowship and co-operation.

By virtue of his intellect man has separated from the brute; and by gregarious effort he has established, and maintains, himself in town and city, as shelter from the stress of crude forces and as being the seemly environment dictated by his moral development; but here in this tinker-woman blowing with coarsened cheeks her scanty fire, and her man out in the bitter dawning to repair the wind-torn thatch, was humanity reduced from the complex values of civilization to its lowest term—an animal; segregated from its kind and the aid of their collective triumph over matter, and set down in the elemental condition of individual confrontation to raw nature.

But it was not merely that my intellect had been stirred, by this wretched dwelling and its harsh surrounding, to a consideration of sociological values and nature's pitiless and mechanical cruelty; something in me more ancient, more fundamental, and more elusive had been touched and was profoundly disquieted.

From the lee of a boulder I uprose against the west. A

declining wind fluted in my ears, and a solitary curlew piped plaintively in the gathering dusk; straggling clouds of the spent tempest trooped in shifting arabesques along the distant horizon, beaten at their tops into a surf of light, their bases trailing the hills with veils of crepe: something here in time and place was unhappily familiar in its sinister significance, and the sad fancies of a dead youth it had evoked.

When the chimes stole sadly out over field and hamlet on quiet sabbath evenings; when dolorous stroke of the passing-bell knelled on my heart; when my breast swelled with rapture at tales of noble books and deeds of high emprise; when in chill twilights I kneeled to unwilling prayer at my mother's knee; then, also, had come this mournful sensation my reason now labored to incarnate in word or phrase—startlingly came the vivific perception that my disquietude was a spiritual terror, and this Tinker's Hut but a symbol that had evoked a primal fear of an ultimate horror in this our spectacular universe.

The wind, the wave, the sterile soil, the merciless lash of elements were for primitive man unfriendly yet common tangibilities that afflicted his body, and against which, for life and subsistence he must wage sullen and unceasing strife; but it was not the material wind nor the material water that horrified him; behind these physical manifestations his laboring mind conceived invisible powers; and what the wind mutters and the night bodes forth, that which is deep beneath the wave and far under the soil: these were the terrors of his untutored soul.

We, too, the descendants of this primal intelligence, battle with nature for our living, in frozen waste and fever-stricken tropic; we, too, conceive first causes, and labor beyond phenomena after what the wind mutters and the night bodes forth, that which is deep beneath the wave and far under the soil. We put questions to infinity; become candle-wasters, pry into the muck of matter after the ultimate, and in a slimy smear, tiny beyond our unassisted sight, spy the meaning of this aloof universe: we joust with theories; convene ourselves into societies, there in formal terms to proclaim conclusions that, undoubtedly, we declare lead us to the verge of genetic life; but out of the mass of facts the toiling rational mind gains no soothing for its fret at the pain of creation pressing out its inscrutable issues: reports us prisoners on a spherical horror of writhing life hurled timelessly through voids that strike comprehension to craziness,

and in all the survey, from the ponderous aspect to the microscopical circumstances of its most insidious form, discovers behind phenomena no comfortable doctrine for the blenched reason, only the blind mechanism of an empirical Cosmos.

And this is the ultimate horror: the crowded horror of primitive man's Demonism, and the blank horror of decadent Nihilism; the terror that the phenomenal world masks something, and the terror that it masks nothing.

Of the former are the superstitious fancies that assail the pioneer in the great waste spaces of earth; a child's vague fears and the awful meaning and evil pressage that it will see in some wholly commonplace and familiar object. These manifestations are perhaps reverberations of ancestry that the child may outgrow, and which die away when the pioneer leaves the wild and becomes a dweller in cities.

The latter sort is more subtle, visiting the intelligence grown over-acute and sickly with centuries of reflection. Each waits stealthily on those who gaze solitarily into the untamed face of nature: whether in remote desolation, or through a microscope lens in a city laboratory. She hypnotises them by sheer immensity and infinite littleness; they become overwhelmed by the mere idea of the existence of existence, and in the last resort only social intercourse and the doing of some simple human duties, or the transcendent control of the Divine Idea can minister to the tottering mind and hold back the hand from self-slaughter.

In the material world it is only to himself that man is of any importance; to the Cosmos he is nothing. The earth opens and cataracts of fire devour him; the heavens split and cataclysms of water overwhelm him; together with the beast of the field, bird fish and vermin, this self-titled lord of the world is ignobly swept by a brutal and indifferent Cosmos to atomic destruction. And the sun continues to go down to his setting, and the moon to mount up on high; the blue waters flash and earth blossoms fairly over the human dead; for dumb creation knows not nor cares that its lord who so arrogantly fronted the heavens is done wholesaley to death. Only mortal man mourns for mortal man, and stares affrighted at the resistless forces by which he is surrounded.

Yet so far from our rude beginnings are we travelled in progress to the establishment of a tolerable life in this rigorous

world as to be exigent of its adornings; and, oft times in our fenced cities, forgetful that man is still the dependent and imperilled witness of nature's operations; and therefore his aim should be ever more straightly to constrain natural forces to human needs. But we abate our powers in an ill-organised social life, and the wastes of war and armed peace; and, caring overmuch for the flower and perfume of intellect, are remiss to foster its vital avail. We acclaim the pretentious, and run about after the vulgar; careless that such as the chemist who forces a new secret from nature, the doctor who discovers a more efficient method of preventing disease, and the physicist who gains an ascendancy over time and space, are truer heroes of man's ascending effort.

With the experience of nature's implacable dominion strong upon us, overcast by vestiges of fallibility, and beset with fug-lights; lashed by aspirations and jailed by the senses within the prison of the mind, nevertheless we do stand where reason falters and faith and hope take up the tale, and listen to a cry as of a child crying in the night, of that which would be enlarged of its bonds; beseech that mankind be not left derelict and utterly cast away; make anxious supplication for those at travail on the earth, plead that the peril of wind and wave may be withheld from some friend, or lover, or kin adventuring from home on the hazardous sea.

And to our litanies the variant voices of the sea chaunt high and calamitous responsal; and the morning journal recites sad stories of wreckage and sea-stained bodies littered on far-off plangent shores; of men perished in drifting snows, entombed in fatal pits, and pitifully dead at fratricidal hands.

And the clear-eyed boy forth to the sea with a careless wave of the hand, and tears of love undried on his hair; the tender girl, the man old and frail, and the sea-scarred mariner—there they lie, beneath waters that heave with sullen threat or leap together in fatal sport; some anciently engulfed, with the seemly flesh gone from its staring frame; some but lately choked out of life; stared at by dreadful fishes, done with the business of life, and everlastingly deaf to the clamor of wind and wave chanting triumphantly over them—Doom! Doom! Doom!

From far down the mountain-side I looked back: from the illimitable arch of heaven the blackness of night drooped sinisterly over the mountain-top. Beside the fantastic shapes of the giant

bowlders and the gaunt-armed sycamores, the Tinker's Hut, desolate, frail and defenceless, stood naked to the universe; a symbol of man's physical insignificance, peril and impotence before the vast and catastrophic forces of nature. A reason and an exponent of the necessitous value of human co-operation; a plea that it be not diminished in mutual strife; and the talisman of that bright vision reserved, of a light that never was on sea or on land, illuming the portals of the Infinite.