

Coming Up Tramps

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2014)

More than half a century ago (how strange it seems to me now to be able to write such a thing!), my teacher made the class learn by heart some lines by W H Davies that stay with me still and run through my mind whenever I walk past or through a field. She gave us the weekend to learn the lines and then tested us on them on Monday morning. Woe betide us if we were not able to recite them like automata. For a time poetry and fear were associated in my mind; but in the long run I gained more by the method than I lost by it.

There is no disguising the fact, however, that the method was somewhat at variance in spirit with the poem that we learnt:

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?—

No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows...

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass...

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

I suppose also that the thought and feeling of this poem might seem banal and hackneyed, and yet its resonance can only have increased in the hundred years since it was written, since then the fields have receded and men are busier than ever, notwithstanding their numerous labour-saving devices. The poem expresses something akin to Pascal's *aperçu* that Man's miseries derive from his inability to sit alone in a room. In a school in a poor area of a small town in Brazil which I once visited, the teachers had tried to break the addiction of the pupils to their electronic distractions by putting pictures of the local avifauna on the walls, so that they might see that the real world was more marvellous than the virtual, which so imprisoned their minds.

We were made also to read Davies' *The Autobiography of a Super Tramp*, for in those days it was still thought important (bizarre idea!) that children should learn to write good prose: not that they would all do so, of course, but that those capable of learning would do so. The dog-

in-the-manger, no-child-left-behind variety of egalitarianism had not yet come so completely to dominate pedagogical theory as it has now.

Is W H Davies forgotten? I daresay that, such being the impermanence of literary celebrity, you could walk down a busy street in any English-speaking city without passing anyone who had ever heard of him. But Davies was once well-known enough, as much for his life story, a remarkable one, as for his work as a poet, which was nevertheless popular. D H Lawrence derided him as a poet, or at least damned him with faint praise, saying that he had but a single sweet tone: but perhaps because I am inclined to cynicism I am easily moved by emotion simply-expressed, that is to say the one note that Lawrence said that Davies sang. (Or is it the ease with which I am moved that inclines me to cynicism?) At any rate, lines such as the following move me:

*Come, let us find a cottage, love,
That's green for half a mile around;
To laugh at every grumbling bee,
Whose sweetest blossom's not yet found...*

*'Tis strange how men find time to hate,
When life is all too short for love...*

Yes indeed: as I age I find myself ever more reluctant to quarrel both because life is too short for it and most quarrels grow out of bad faith on both sides, including my own.

Or again:

*No doubt it is a selfish thing
To fly from human suffering;
No doubt he is a selfish man,
Who shuns poor creatures, sad and wan.*

*But 'tis a wretched life to face
Hunger in almost every place;
Cursed with a hand that's empty, when
The heart is full to help all men.*

Hunger has declined since Davies' day, of course, to be replaced by overeating which brings a form of suffering of its own, albeit self-inflicted (but not the less suffering for that), and

there is still suffering enough in the world to give point to these verses. Indeed, they have become more pointed than ever, in so far as virtue has become less a matter of behaving well, which is always difficult to do, as of expressing the right sentiments towards those who suffer, which is always easy to do. This means that Sir Toby Belch's question, 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?', is more pertinent than ever. Only yesterday, an American friend of mine told me that he once said to a neighbour 'It's a beautiful day,' to which the neighbour replied tartly, not to say sourly, 'It's not a beautiful day in Fallujah,' as if no good weather were to be enjoyed until it were good weather everywhere, without distinction. The implication of the reply was that my friend was unfeeling and insensitive, unlike his interlocutor, who so felt the sufferings of the world that he could not enjoy anything until they were assuaged: gross hypocrisy and dishonesty, it needs hardly be said, for he had almost certainly enjoyed his breakfast that morning, as he would also enjoy his lunch.

I am no scholar of W H Davies – no doubt such scholars exist, for in a world of oedematous tertiary education there are scholars of everything – and so it came as a surprise to me to find a book by him quite by chance that was published forty years after his death in 1940. It was titled *Young Emma*, and the history of its publication is a strange one.

For the first fifty years of his life, Davies had lived as a bachelor. He was born in a pub in South Wales, and his father died when he was three. He was brought up by his father's parents, publicans of the *Church Inn* (a strange name in South Wales, where church and pub then mixed like oil and water), and became a delinquent youth. He then ran away to America, where he lived for several years as a tramp. The pivotal point in his life occurred when, in the company of another tramp, he jumped maladroitly from a train in Ontario and his foot was crushed, whereafter his leg had to be amputated below the knee. Ever after, he sported a wooden leg.

His *Autobiography* and his books of poems brought him renown if not fame and fortune, and he mixed for a time in high society. But he grew tired of that life, and retired to the countryside with a new-found wife.

Young Emma is the story of how he found his wife. He wrote it in 1924 and sent it to the eminent publisher, Jonathan Cape, who asked George Bernard Shaw's advice about it. Shaw had been a champion of Davies, but advised against publishing it, not because it was a bad book, but because he feared that it would do the author's reputation no good. Davies, who had sent the manuscript and two typescripts to the publisher, asked on refusal by the publisher for the return of the manuscript, and that he destroy the two typescripts 'as soon as he liked.' This

suggested ambivalence about such destruction; and in fact they survived. They surfaced again in 1940, the year of Davies' death, when a woman then working for Cape, who was later to become an eminent historian, C V Wedgwood, was asked to advise on whether it should be published. She said it could not be published while Mrs Davies (the Emma of the title, whose real name was Helen Payne) was still alive. The poet, William Plomer, gave the same advice in 1972.

Mrs Davies died in 1979, after 39 years of widowhood, and the book was published the following year. It is the story of how he came to marry Helen Payne.

When he was fifty, Davies decided that he did not want any more to live alone, so he set about finding a wife in what seems to modern sensibilities a cold-blooded and deliberate fashion:

In searching for a wife, I found it no easy matter to get one to my liking. One woman, whom I thought would make a good wife, refused me on account of blood-relationship. Another, who had a great admiration for my work, and liked me personally, could not make up her mind to trust her life with mine...

There was an actress and a rich woman whom he could have married, but they would not suit him:

I wanted a woman who was worth working for, and would be dependent in my own loving kindness.

Davies continues by describing his appearance, strangely omitting any mention of his wooden leg. He was no apotemnophiliac in search of an acrotomophiliac, that is to say a man with a sexual fixation on being an amputee in search a woman with sexual attraction to amputees; he wanted merely a companion, without intellectual or literary pretensions, for the rest of his life.

To this end, he picked up women in the street and tried them out, as it were. In post-World War I London, this posed no great problem. After three attempts he found Helen Payne, a farmer's daughter come up to London. He met her as she waited at a bus stop and in what seems an astonishingly casual way they decided to live together. She was already pregnant, though she did not tell Davies so; she had a miscarriage from which she might easily have died. He also thought it was she from whom he caught the gonorrhoea and syphilis from which he suffered shortly afterwards, though he later revised his opinion and came to the conclusion that it must have been from one of his earlier encounters. Despite her own earlier encounters, of which there must have been at least one, Helen was an innocent abroad who knew nothing

whatever about venereal disease and did not understand what Davies was talking about when he mentioned it to her.

A casual encounter; the woman already pregnant; false accusations of infection with venereal disease: not a triad conducive to a happy marriage, you might have supposed. But in fact Mr and Mrs Davies were very happy; the marriage was a good one. I don't think, if you had known the initial conditions, you would have predicted it, rather the reverse.

Yet there were positive indications as well, of a rather unromantic kind. Davies needed companionship and probably would have been regarded as no great catch himself; his wife was facing a most uncertain future when she was waiting at the bus-stop and was in need of security. Mutual interest was at least as important as passion to the success of their marriage. But love arrived: in 1935, at the age of 64, Davies addressed a book of love poems to his wife, with titles such as *Let us lie closer, as lover's should*, *Our love this day is ten years' old*, *When I was old and she was young*. These are unaffected words that remind me of an Indian friend of mine who tells the story of his betrothal under the arranged (not forced, *nota bene*) marriage system that led to a very happy marriage, among the best that I know.

It was time he married, in the opinion of his parents, and they selected six potential brides all over India for him, and he went on a long journey to see them all. The first four did not please him; the fifth, a thousand miles away from his home, pleased him quite a lot; nevertheless, he continued on to the sixth just in case. But in the end he chose the fifth, she consented, and now, nearly forty years later, they are still happily married.

If there is a lesson in the story of W H Davies and *Young Emma* it is the unpredictability of life, which is what makes life so difficult, so worth the living.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [*here*](#).