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THE QUEST FOR CRABTREE
Charles Peake
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We are met here tonight not primarily to investigate the private lives of the man, Joseph Crabtree, but to honour a great poet, a 'blithe spirit', whose art was 'profuse', if not 'unpremeditated'. Yet to say this confronts us with the grave lacuna in our studies. Of course we know of the *Ode to Claret* and of the *Ars Salutandi*. Five poems have been presented to this Foundation by earlier Orators and one still has hopes of seeing the *florilegium* or wreath of commemorative verses, culled by our librarian himself, from the obituary columns of the provincial press, where Crabtree, having in his youth set the Romantic Movement on its feet, turned in his age to restore the spirit of the classical world, in epitaphs worthy of the Greek Anthology, and incidentally relieved the chronic poverty brought on by years of neglect.

But is that neglect yet ended? Where is the long-awaited Collected Edition? And where the Crabtree Variorum? Where is an annotated edition for the use of schools? We all know how much Crabtree gave to Wordsworth, and to Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and perhaps to Keats, and without question to Tom Moore, Mrs. Hermans and Martin Tupper. But who, if you will forgive the confused metaphor, has ploughed through the so-called editions of these authors to sift the wheat from the chaff?

This, gentlemen, is the quest that lies before us — to recover from the hands of their putative fathers those offspring which Crabtree, out of his boundless fertility, so freely bestowed, in acknowledgement of services rendered or favours anticipated. There is, I daresay, not one member of this Foundation who does not rejoice in the possession of an inner light which would enable him to recognise the Crabtree jewels sparkling in their inferior settings. But if we are to have an edition, we must think of those who walk in darkness, of those not lit up from within. How are they to be compelled to acknowledge their blindness when, being blind, they cry out for tangible evidence? What we need is a match.

It was to the search for such a small source of light that I turned my mind.

First, was it likely, generous as he was, that Crabtree would have sold his birthright for some small pecuniary or other advantage, without leaving his signature for posterity to discover? Even the Baconians claim that Francis Bacon, though content to hide behind the mask of Shakespeare, left his mark in sundry codes and cryptograms. Had not Crabtree a motive every bit as strong as Bacon's?

I began to hear voices — the voices of earlier Orators. I heard Professor Brown placing a poem firmly in the canon by virtue of a mutilated anagram of the words *I Joseph Crabtree*. I heard Professor Tancock identifying the poet beneath the initials J.C., appended to the verses in *Erotica Diversa*. But having heard these voices, I might just as well not have listened to them. Plainly the possibilities of introducing even mutilated anagrams of the name *Joseph Crabtree* were so severely limited that, apart from the occasional *jeu d'esprit*, even the strongest-backed Pegasus would collapse under the burden.

But in my bafflement, I seemed to hear again a passage in the second Crabtree Oration, when Professor Brown read out Dr. Johnson's slighting reference to the young Crabtree's first poetic productions: 'To be sure, he is a tree that cannot produce good fruit, he only bears crabs'. That cruel barb wounded the tender heart of the poet, but, in his usual spirit of gay defiance, he thereafter persisted, without medical or horticultural reference, in calling the fruits of his genius 'Crabs'. Was it possible that in this blunt monosyllable lay the key to the Crabtree canon?

At once, I recalled how, some years ago, when idly turning over the pages of a collected Shelley, my eye was caught by a curious set of capitals running down the page. They occurred in the famous concluding chorus of *Hellas*, when, after over a thousand lines of comparative mediocrity, the poem springs to life:

The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return.

And there, shining upwards from the page was the acrostic CRAB, formed by the initial letters of the last lines of four successive stanzas:

Calypso, for his native shore;
Riddles of death Thebes never knew;
All earth can take or heaven can give;
But votive tears and symbol flowers.

At the time, I had paid too little heed to this. After all, Crabtree's authorship of the chorus to *Hellas* was apparent in the brilliant obscurity of the lines, and was too well known to this Foundation to require confirmation.

But now, under the pressure of my Oration, I was seeing things in a different light. Could that simple acrostic be the end of a thread that would lead us through the labyrinth of Romantic poetry in our quest for Crabtree? I turned, not to Wordsworth — that territory, if not explored, has been initially mapped out — but to Coleridge, whose association with Crabtree has been known since Professor Jones revealed the true authorship of the poem, *Fire, Famine and Slaughter*. Nor was it necessary to turn over pages hopefully and await revelation. For Professor Jones had been helped to his identification by the singularly inept and apologetic preface which Coleridge had prefixed to the poem, in the hope of deceiving his readers.

But there was another poem, also with a preface, and a preface of unmatched absurdity, the most implausible account of the composition of a poem that has ever been offered to the public, an account, not only ludicrous, but exhibiting such ignorance of the poem to which it is prefixed that even the most ardent Coleridgeans have been embarrassed by it. Let me read from Humphry House's opening remarks on the poem in his Clark Lectures on Coleridge:

If Coleridge had never published his Preface, who would have thought of *Kubla Khan* as a fragment? Who would have guessed at a dream? ... Who would have thought it nothing but a 'psychological curiosity'? Who, later, would have dared to talk of its 'patchwork brilliance'?

Who indeed? Could the man who had written the poem have spoken of it with such sublime ignorance of its nature? Could the genius who created what Mr. House calls its 'essential integrity' have sub-titled the poem 'A Fragment' when every first-year undergraduate is prepared to demonstrate its completeness?

The witness of the critics is conclusive. As long ago as 1893, John Mackinnon Robertson declared that the poem was 'abnormal to [Coleridge's] whole previous technique, which ran to rhetoric and involution ... whereas the uniqueness of the new work consists in the extreme concrete simplicity given to visions far aloof from experience.'

Such phrases — 'concrete simplicity', 'visions far aloof from experience' — remind us irresistibly of Crabtree's characteristic manner. Even that most learned of Coleridgean scholars, Livingston Lowes, remarks in *The Road to Xanadu* on 'the gulf between Coleridge's "new and great performance" and his "previous technique"'. All these distinguished critics betray their uneasiness, all seem to hesitate on the brink of a downright assertion. 'This poem is not Coleridge's, whoever wrote it.' All lack the courage. On their behalf it might be said that they did not know of Crabtree, but it is questionable whether in such matters ignorance is a legitimate defence.

What lay before them was the most cock-and-bull story about writing a poem in all the annals of literature. I need hardly remind this audience of the details — of the claim that the poem was written in 1797 in a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton to which Coleridge had retired from Nether Stowey because, as he informs us elsewhere, of an attack of dysentery. To remedy this complaint, he took laudanum and, in the ensuing state of semi-consciousness, composed, he says, the poem. Today we can check that story: today we have many poems, published on all sides, which have confessedly and manifestly been composed while their authors were under the influence of drugs and, sometimes, perhaps, of dysentery also, and the one certain thing that can be said of each and every one of them is that it bears not the faintest resemblance to *Kubla Khan*. A gleam of truth breaks in when Coleridge says, not that he composed, but that he had 'the most vivid confidence' of having composed some verses 'without', he says, 'without any sensation or consciousness of effort'. But when he arose from his trance to commit these verses to paper, he was interrupted 'by a person on business from Porlock' after which, he found himself unable to write more, unable to complete a poem about the completeness of which even critics agree.

Of course there was 'no sensation or consciousness of effort', of course he could write no more after his visitor's departure because we know who had walked to that lonely farmhouse, from Porlock, in the early summer of

1798; Coleridge, as E.H. Coleridge pointed out, had even got the date wrong. We know, too, on what business that person had come.

In his 1965 Oration, Tay provided the evidence of Crabtree's presence in England, late in 1797, armed with a formidable clyster or enema. The witness who so vividly recalls the effects of Crabtree's medical ministrations ('it removed all thought of study for some days, keeping me well occupied') is hardly likely to have made a mistake about that memorable passage in his life.

But London in 1797-8 was not a safe place for Crabtree: his involvement in the Birmingham riots of 1791, his prolonged absence in France during the years of Revolution had exposed him to accusations of Jacobinical sympathies, and, weary of travel, and in order to escape both his political enemies and those who had had the benefit of his medical attentions, he seems to have felt a natural urge to rest awhile upon his native health. But, as you may recall, in Chipping Sodbury he bore the nickname 'Cuckoo Joe', and, although it has been charitably conjectured that the name was a reference to his performance in the chapel choir, one has to bear in mind that the cuckoo is also distinguished for its propensity for finding itself in other birds' nests. That the embattled farmers of the West Country adopted as their slogan 'No Bed for Crabtree' is merely an oral tradition, but there is no doubt that the traveller discovered that for every Annette Vallon in Orléans, there were five or six in Chipping Sodbury, where the rural peace of the cornfields had been less subjected to untimely interruptions than had the war-torn fields of France. The resentment of the burghers is reflected in the fact that no stone in the churchyard commemorates Chipping Sodbury's greatest son, though we take comfort in the knowledge that he is very much there in spirit, and by proxy.

What more natural than that in this hour of trial, rejected from his chosen place of refuge and suffering from his constitutional lightness of pocket, Crabtree should think of his friend, William Wordsworth — Wordsworth, who owed him more than money could ever repay, then residing with his sister Dorothy at Alfoxden House, in North Somerset. The way was short, the roads easy. Can one imagine Wordsworth's emotions on seeing before him yet again that unruffled countenance? Yet there were complications. William and his sister had financial problems and it can hardly be thought that the arrival of Crabtree eased those problems. Moreover, during the previous year, they had been spied on by the Home Office, and observed by ignorant yokels who suspected them of being French agents because they went for long walks and took notes on the scenery. Crabtree's presence was an additional political embarrassment. And where was Crabtree to be housed? Could Wordsworth, knowing what he knew of Crabtree's charm, invite his friend to share the same roof as his sister? Wordsworth must have foreseen unparalleled legal complications if Crabtree were to become not only the father of Wordsworth's child, but also of his sister's.

It was necessary that Crabtree be kept at a reasonable distance, and Wordsworth found a room for him at Porlock — not at the famous 'Ship Inn', used by Coleridge and Southey, but at a more private and select hostelry, alas long since destroyed by excise-men, conveniently situated close to Porlock Bay, and romantically named 'The Happy Valley', proprietor Mr. Alfred Cann — a hostelry famed for the wide range of choice wines in its cellars, 'those caves of ice', and for the comeliness and hospitality of its maidservants.

Wordsworth's knowledge of French made him an invaluable intermediary between Mr. Cann and the French shippers, who found their way into Porlock Bay after closing hours. Consequently Mr. Cann was very ready to accommodate Crabtree, Wordsworth having described him as a gentleman with extensive experience in the French wine trade. There in 'The Happy Valley' Crabtree was installed with all that his lofty soul valued or required; there, as he later put it, he fed on 'honey-dew' and drank 'the milk of Paradise'.

But too soon the day of reckoning came, and it was a reckoning beyond Wordsworth's resources: it was not merely a question of 'wine consumed on the premises' but also of the landlord's daughter, who having obtained the cellar key for the poet, felt entitled to share with him the joys and seclusion of the cellars, and whom, in playful allusion to the inn's name, the poet christened his 'Abyssinian maid'. Hidden now in the stables, he heard the voice of Mr. Cann, or as he was known to his customers, Alf, 'in ceaseless turmoil', 'prophesying war'.

It was at this moment that Wordsworth once again displayed his Northern shrewdness. Here at Porlock was Crabtree with his poetic genius and his clyster; there, not at Nether Stowey, but at the lonely farmhouse to which his illness had forced him to retreat, was Coleridge with his frustrated poetic ambitions and his dysentery. Might it not be that a meeting of the two would prove mutually beneficial? What followed is history. The very next day, Crabtree, guided by his friend, for he had not fully recovered from his exertions in the cellar, sought out Coleridge, and although he proved unable to persuade Coleridge that his enema of oil of turpentine and molasses would put a more radical end to his distress than the grains of opium he was administering to himself, he did

prevail upon the half-drugged sufferer to accept, in exchange for a small sum, the fruits of his poetical labours while in the stable, although Coleridge proved so incapable of appreciating the value of the work he held in his hands that he delayed publishing it until 1816, and then did so with the absurd sub-title and preface which I have already described. Crabtree, determined to risk no more the enchantments and tumult of 'The Happy Valley', made his way to Bristol, where he renewed acquaintance with his old friend, Amos Cottle, checked the proofs of the *Lyrical Ballads and Poems*, and briefly disappears from view.

But the poem! Could even Crabtree have been so careless of posterity as to hand that noble performance to another without leaving any trace of his authorship. The eye that searches for another acrostic searches in vain. Might there then be an anagram? Indeed there is, and I hope you will agree, gentlemen, with the poet's own verdict that it was 'a miracle of rare device'.

For if an anagram of Joseph Crabtree presents almost insuperable difficulties for any prolonged performance, an anagram of Crab is so absurdly easy that it might be mistaken for an accident. If such an anagram were in itself to rank as sufficient evidence of Crabtree's hand, then every poem which contained such words as 'brachycephalic' or 'abracadabra', every rhyme about a 'prolific rabbit' or a 'public bar' could lay claim to a place in the canon. Clearly if the anagrammatic Crab-signature was to be used, then it was necessary to spotlight it, to remove the suspicion of accident.

In *Kubla Khan* there is no need to search. There is a sign-post, and it bears a place-name, and, in all truth, it points nowhere. It is a place-name on which every commentator has dwelt, and dwelt in vain. I refer, of course, to the famous conclusion where the poet recalls his Abyssinian maid, 'Singing of Mount Abora!' Mount Abora! Every critic, every editor has confessed his bafflement. Even Livingstone Lowes cries out in despair: 'What was Mount Abora, unknown to any map, I think, since time began?'

He recognises, as everyone recognises, that the place referred to is Mount Amara, the famous Abyssinian hill described and named in *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, the blissful garden named by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, named, too, by Dr. Johnson in *Rasselas*: Mount Amara, the site of the legendary Happy Valley of Abyssinia, celebrated by a thousand writers. It is this fame which so distresses the critics. For how could Coleridge, who claimed to have just been reading *Purchas*, who knew his Milton through and through (and had recently filched some lines from that poet), who was unquestionably familiar with *Rasselas* — how could Coleridge, whatever his limitations, have committed a blunder of which every schoolboy would have been ashamed? Lowes does his best by bringing in the names of two rivers which remotely, very remotely, resemble Abora, but admits his argument is far-fetched, and exclaims desperately, 'Why should hints from the names of two *rivers* have contributed a *mountain* to a dream?'

Fortunately there is no need for such over-ingenious guess work. Crabtree no more than Coleridge could have confused *Abora* with *Amara*, the Happy Valley. But he plainly perceived that such an apparent blunder would create a literary crux of the first magnitude, one which could not escape attention, and in which, sooner or later, someone would perceive his signature. It would thus serve as a signpost to the simple anagram of Crab which it conceals, and at the same time escape the drug-sodden perceptions of his client. The last four letters of *Abora* and the initial C of the next word provide the anagram; but why the superfluous o? This is the final stroke of 'rare device'. For the sense of the line required, even demanded Amara, and the metre demanded a three-syllabled word. Yet Crab contains only a single vowel. Another must be added, and there was only one that could be added without destroying the anagram — the vowel o, the cipher, the zero — a solution employed by every cryptographer. And how beautifully the signature is made to link two units of syntax and sense, as Crabtree sadly recalled his lost happiness in the cellars of 'The Happy Valley'!

It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song
To such a deep delight 'twould win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome, those caves of ice.

I do not propose tonight to pursue my quest much farther, and I leave *The Ancient Mariner* to younger hands. Yet let me warn them to temper their enthusiasm, nor jump too hastily to conclusions. Not every work entitled *Bric-*

a-brac or *Carbolic* is from the master. Certainty can only be felt when the signature is clearly highlighted from its surroundings, as it is in the chorus to *Hellas*, as it is in *Kubla Khan*, as it is in a poem *The Age of Bronze*, long mistakenly attributed to Lord Byron. There the anagrammatic signature is underlined by being repeated twice in a single line, each time in a word that it would be difficult to find elsewhere in the whole body of English poetry.

His *vivida vis animi* is evident in the revolutionary spirit of the whole poem, but more especially in the vivid digestive metaphor in which the crucial line occurs, where Crabtree presents the distress of the Kings of Europe faced by a revolutionary populace in terms of a disturbance in the royal bowels, a typically bold, anatomical figure, which bears the stamp not only of our poet's genius, but also of the field of medieval studies in which he specialised. The line reads: 'Have Carbonaro cooks not carbonated each course enough?'

Even without the double signature, the voice is the voice of Joseph, of a man whose masculine fires continued to burn when the feeble sparks of Wordsworth and Coleridge had been extinguished by the cold blasts of timidity and conformism.

It is proper that Shelley (who of all the writers of the age was nearest and dearest to Crabtree) should have uttered the final truth about that divine genius. The two men were both lovers of liberty and prophets of permissiveness, and it was natural that in 1820, when Shelley wrote a verse-epistle to his friend Maria Gisborne, recommending her to those people in London most likely to offer her satisfactory entertainment, he should have spoken of his guide and mentor. If you turn to modern editions, you will find the old foolishness: 'You will see Coleridge'. But why would Shelley send Maria Gisborne to Coleridge, a drug-taker, a political renegade whom Shelley had ridiculed only the year before in *Peter Bell the Third*, and a man unlikely to offer the young woman either entertainment or satisfaction. But turn to the original edition of 1824, where instead of the name 'Coleridge', there stands only the letter C, followed by a dash, and see for yourselves how, by all the laws of sense, metre and gratitude, the only name which should fill that blank is the name of the great man whose hooded gaze broods over us tonight. It was Crabtree, not Coleridge, to whom Shelley was indebted, Crabtree, not Coleridge, whom Shelley recognised among his contemporaries as an eagle among owls, Crabtree, not Coleridge, who had been compelled by politics, persecution and perjury to sit obscure, concealing his face beneath a hood of disguise and his name in acrostics and anagrams, Crabtree, not Coleridge, who could therefore be compared to a meteor hidden behind clouds, and Crabtree's, not Coleridge's, face that haunted Shelley's imagination and inspired him to some of the finest lines he ever composed by himself:

You will see Crabtree — he who sits obscure,
In the exceeding lustre and the pure
Intense irradiation of a mind
Which, with its own internal lightnings blind
Flags wearily through darkness and despair,
A cloud — encircled meteor of the air,
A hooded eagle among blinking owls.