The Man who Hated Football

'Peasants!'

He loved Man, but not men – Mr Cleanslate, the recluse sequestered in the dust-laden greyness of his house with his *Newsweek*, *Bulletin* and *Time*, in which he read with contempt of prime ministers and presidents and scorned those ambassadors, businessmen and movie stars who luxuriated arrogantly in the crystal of elegance and basked unabashed in the shimmer of fame.

'Sheep!'

He loved Man, but not men – the retired schoolmaster sitting on a Saturday afternoon under the cobwebs of his verandah, scowling with char-black odium at the current of legs that streamed towards Princes Park a block away to waste precious hours in the delirium and frenzy of a football match.

'Animals!'

He loved Man, but not men – the widower peering out through curtainless windows, before which he gritted his teeth with stifling distemper as young fellows and girls idled on the nature strip or splayed themselves out under the elms or clung or petted or giggled in distracted amusement.

He loved Man, but not men – and yet, and yet, Mr Cleanslate, he loved me.

Gnarled tubers were those fingers that probed through my hair, wrinkled hide the hand against my cheek, and bursting blasts the breath that pelted my face.

'Listen, just listen,' he said, touching my arm. 'Shut your eyes, let yourself go, and listen.'

Mother, pitying, concerned, had sent me in with soup, stewed fruit and cake for our neighbour. My trouble he rewarded with music.

Ever obedient, I listened; listened to the sound that cascaded along the murky shafts of mote-laden light; listened to the resonance that dispelled the muteness of the shadowed corners; listened to the reverberations that danced about the grubby globe that hung orphaned from the ceiling.

Himself leaning back, chin on chest, he sat, his thin lips flaccid, his eyes lidded caskets recessed in the scalloped hollows above his cheeks.

'Shh, don't breathe,' he said. 'Open your ears, and hear, hear with your soul the splendour created by Man.'

I listened though I could not help but breathe, and heard with what I understood to be my soul the splendour that had been created by Man. First Mozart, then Schubert, then Bach, and Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms. Each day another name, each day another feast offered in exchange for Mother's meagre morsels.

'Learn music,' he said, turning over the record, his emery eyes the while probing mine. 'Learn. And keep on learning. The mind of a child is a fertile plain. Feed it. Nourish it. Don't let it fall fallow like the minds of those unthinking creatures outside.'

He reached out. My cheeks felt both the warmth and the quiver of his hand.

'Men are a rabble, a mob, ignorant as beasts. But Man, *Man* has the capacity to be a god.'

Long after I left him, the words reverberated.

To be a god . . .

To be a god . . .

Together with Beethoven, Mozart, Bach. With Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms . . .

Fired, influenced, I prevailed upon my parents to have me taught music.

I continued to deliver meals. Mr Cleanslate seemed to await my visits.

The morning had been dew-laden, the afternoon splendid, the evening cool once more. Scarcely had I set down the tray upon his table before he thrust a weathered book into my hand.

'Here, read this,' he said, with the tip of his index finger rapping at the chosen page. 'The universe is contained in every word, in every line eternity, infinity, perfection.'

He straightened and raised his face in impenetrable reverie. His lips, thin and ridged and drily liverish twitched in readiness for oration. His fingers manipulated air.

> 'To be or not to be - that is the question:-
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?'

I marvelled. Not a mistake, nor hesitation, nor fumbling. Mr Cleanslate, the teacher turned actor, held me. More than the words whose meaning eluded my comprehension, the rhythm of the phrases and the flowing-ebbing tide of the old man's tremulous voice burrowed a shivering core down my spine and stirred nests of goose-pimples to bristling. I scarcely breathed.

> 'Who would fardels bear,' -

he continued, his voice pitched to graver intimacy,

> 'To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
> Than fly to others that we know not of?'

The recitation ended, his body contracted back to meagreness and the glow of ecstasy purpled into spleen. I sensed the advent of a storm.

His fingers curled about my neck.

'Ha! . . . Look out there, into the street, at that . . . that rabble that thinks itself literate when all it reads are the sports pages of the papers and thinks it can write when it scribbles filth on lavatory walls. Who reads Shakespeare today, tell me. Or Dante, Dostoievski or Tolstoy, ha? And who today can even write like them?'

The breath lapping my face smelled of cinnamon, the cinnamon with which Mother had spiced his fruit.

'Forty years!' he exclaimed, his hand become a claw gripping my shoulder. 'Forty years was I a teacher, and what did I have of it? Class after class, year after year of blockheads, chaff; children of their parents turning their backs on knowledge, beauty, truth in pursuit of pettiness and prattle, blind – my God, how blind – to the power that stirs in Man.'

His eyes, anchored to the depths of chiselled sockets, pierced. His vibrating voice burred more harshly.

'Sometimes, there is a star, a boy, a girl with a gift – a gift for speech, poetry, art. But where are they now? Tell me. You, *you* tell me.

I would have shrugged my shoulders but the clasp of his hand strangled movement.

'Out there!' he cried out though his bambooed body could scarcely contain his thunder. 'There! Burnt out, nobodies, shells of what they might have been. Doctors, yes, and architects, plumbers, nurses, mechanics, lawyers. *My* children! All of them at one time my children. But how humdrum have their lives become, how commonplace, hollowed out, genius a foreign word. If this . . . if this be the fruit of my work, then may the world be extinguished before it crumbles from insipidity.'

He turned more squarely to me. With a crook'd finger, he propped up my chin.

'And you, my young friend. You. Will you be more than they?'

My gaze fell as once more the words stirred inner depths and resounded as echo.

Will you be more than they? . . .
Will you be more then they? . . .
Yes. Yes. I *will* be more than they.

At school, after school, my friends called to me.

'Wanna' kick of the ball?' Ricky Boxall tempted.

'A game of cricket?,' Stuey Rivett coaxed.

'Hey, let's play marbles,' Robbie Ferguson pressed.

'No thanks'; 'Some other time'; 'Can't now,' I answered them all.

I stood outside their paths for I had begun to circle other orbits.

First Shakespeare, Dostoievski, and Tolstoy. Then Chekhov, Maupassant, Flaubert, all thrust into my hands by Mr Cleanslate who kindled, then pumped the bellows upon the flickering flames that glowed with the ardour to be some day more than 'they'. Into the nights I read, during recesses, lunch breaks, even in class while Bertie Quayle, hissing 'Cissy', prodded me in the back and shortsighted Mrs Myrtleford taught the principles of quadratic equations, square roots, and sines, cosines and tangents. Mother fretted that I was growing pale, plied me with vitamins and tonics, and advised air, sunlight, exercise and friends. I heard the words but for the actual counsel my ears were filled with wax. I clung to the indoors, with books, books, books before me, and when I foundered beneath the weight of literary genius, I turned to the piano or immersed myself in a sea of rondos, largos and andantes kept at high tide by Mr Cleanslate who showered upon me his Beethovens, Mozarts and Bachs with the fervour of missionary zeal.

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I continued to bring him his portions.

As always, he led me into his dingy lounge-room where journals, books and records lay in chaotic heaps on the frayed settee, the coffee table and floor.

Paganini dispelled the gloom.

'You are a precious lad,' Mr Cleanslate said, grazing my cheek with the crumpled hide of his hand. His face was pixie-like at that moment, the chin honed to pointing, the ears high, thin and protruding, the faintest hint of hairy fluff at the temples. 'If only Anthony . . . Hah!'

That little explosion clung to him as with swift jerky movements he mince-stepped to the book-case from which he removed a large white-jacketed volume, its cover illustrated with paintings, sketches and tapestries.

'Take it, this is for you,' he said. 'A gift. A store of genius. Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Goya.'

The pages crackled with virgin crispness. On the fly-leaf was an inscription: 'To Anthony. To your growth. May you reach the blessed heights. From your father.'

'Hah!' he huffed again. 'A son. A nobody. A drop in the multitude. A speck of dust. A grain of sand. But you, will you dare to be different?'

He rapped at the volume.

'Look! Study!'

Before me, colour followed colour, as, his hands pitching and descending in paroxysms of motion, Mr Cleanslate frisked through the pages.

'The Mona Lisa! The Sistine Chapel! The Prodigal Son! The David! The Maja! – *That* is art! Not the trash in our galleries. Those willy-nilly shapes, splashes of colour, distorted faces and landscapes without depth – all flatness, emptiness, the effluent of wishy-washy minds and wretched talent.'

He moved towards the window and pointed outside.

'What do *they* know of art, those rag-pickers out there, those philistines who, would they but know it, would they but care, could be free, could be great?' He beckoned to me. 'To be great is to create, to dive deep for the pearls within one's soul, to cultivate them and bring to the surface the treasures present in every man and transform what is raw into the colour, harmony and grandeur of music, of literature, of art. Had I but known this at your age . . . or had I been able to persuade

Anthony . . .' His hand upon my shoulder slackened. 'How easily a man fails himself; how easily a son fails his father. For myself, forty years a teacher, where's the gain? And a son a bank clerk, where's the future?'

He searched my face.

'But you . . . You, so young still with the pearls waiting to be salvaged from the depths. Scorn the tastes of the masses! For that is the way to ignorance and enslavement. The way to greatness is through freedom. Will you dare be free? Will you, will you dare be great?'

Will you dare be great? . . .

Will you dare be great? . . .

The words rang, and my fantasy, fired, promised to dare.

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The seas of genius in which I swam swelled into oceans. Names luminous in their greatness tumbled through my brain. Gorky, Turgenev, Balzac; Dvorak, Vivaldi, Brahms; Vermeer, Titian, Hals. And in their midst was I as my piano yielded to the zealous assault of my fingers and the library at school failed to sate my appetite.

In those oceans I swam alone, drifting from companions I had swum with before. The distances from them which I attained exceeded their vision, the depths I reached were to them unknown. And there was pride in that and satisfaction and superiority and, in the full glare of that adolescent sun, I glowed to myself as I harnessed gorgeous treasures to the surface from the very deepest of those fabulous depths.

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But how quell the swelling loneliness and the taunts?

'Wanna throw a ball?' Ricky called.

'I'm reading.'

'How's about noughts and crosses?' asked Stuey.
'No.'
'Comin' to the footy Saturdy?' said Robbie.
'Don't care for footy.'
'What about Bertie's party?' asked Mickey.
'I'm not invited.'
And the taunts:
'Snob.'
'Highbrow.'
'Mr Stuck-up.'
'Peacock.'
'Fop.'

The names adhered to me, names that barbed and pricked and pinioned me to whatever barrier I set between my classmates and myself in the resolve some day to be more than they, to rise above their mediocre commonality and exult, lustrous magnet to their awe; while, away from school, ensconced behind a book in the haven of my home, I fell to Mother's plaints and admonitions as, fretting, she dragged me to Dr Barnett complaining that I was becoming unnaturally thin, pale and moody and that I was weakening my eyes.

Could she but have known the pride she would one day reap from her son!

'It's his age,' Dr Barnett said, the portrait of benevolence, delivering his diagnosis with bold authority. 'He has nothing that a little sun and fresh air cannot remedy.'

How I hated him for that! But for Mother his words became a commandment to be consummately observed.

My homework completed, she drove me into the street.

'You can read all you like when you go to bed,' she said. 'The light is God's gift to growing bones.'

'I've got nothing to do out there, no-one to play with.'

'What about your friends – Robert and Michael, and Richard and Tommy and Stuart?'

'They're dull.'

'And you, hiding your face behind those books, are a brilliant star, I suppose.'

'Mother!' – I wanted to shout – 'I am! I shall be! One day you shall see!'

But her sarcasm cut deep and the sting in the wound silenced any attempt at such a declaration or promise. My future, to me so luminous, stifled into secrecy.

'Now go outside,' she pressed. 'Enjoy yourself. Be like the other boys.'

'And what about Mr Cleanslate?,' I asked, clutching at another reason for remaining indoors, clinging to another hope.

'I'll see that he doesn't starve,' she answered, her palm pressing against my back, advancing me through the front door. 'From now on, leave that to me.'

'And indeed, it was Mother who now carried the portions to Mr Cleanslate, remaining there just long enough to transfer the food to his plates and rinse her own and ask, in her bustling practised way, after his well-being and his needs.

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Once more, then, the streets and parks claimed me as I yielded to Dr. Bennett's and Mother's prescription of sun and exercise and fresh air. I did not forget the miracles and magic woven by the 'Greats' but treasure and eternity now mingled with the earthbound and the temporal as, falling in with the sport of regained friends, I chased again those oval balls of bouncing leather and puffed once more in races after school and joined as before in their chatter of football, parties, rock 'n' roll and girls.

In our games, they led, I followed. Into the streets, the parks and nature strips. On playing fields and footpaths. Outside their houses, outside mine, and in the lanes where we ran and kicked and leapt and in stealth pursued our footballs over fences and gingerly retrieved them from rooftops or recklessly salvaged them from trees. No garden, yard or flowerbed was sacred. Wherever our feet could stand, there was our domain. And neither the reprimands of the Thompsons nor

the curses of the Macdonalds nor the warnings of the Kenneallys bothered us one bit. If to fly were within our power, we would have claimed even the stars.

The quiet of the suburb being ours to violate, we penetrated into its every interstice which led us one day, too, to the nature strip before my house.

There, Tommy kicked the ball. Ricky and Stuey soared. I scouted at their feet and snatched the ball. Weaving, I ran, bounced the ball, kicked. Now Mickey marked it and, with a resounding whoop, sent it back. It fell into Ricky's hands. Kicking high, he brought down rain, and Robbie, dashing in, scooped it up, twisted, turned and dummied and skewed the ball over a rolling shoulder. Back and forth, the ball oscillated while we in turn chased after it until with a leg-breaking kick, Mickey sent the ball careering on to Mr Cleanslate's verandah where it bounced, leapt, thudded at the window and came to rest beneath its sill.

The nearest to his house, I scaled the gate and scampered up the path. Robbie laughed, Tommy squatted, Stuey executed a cartwheel, Mickey did chin-ups, Ricky leaned against a tree. The sweat warm on my face, I picked up the ball, turned and began to run back when, in my haste, unseeing, I collided with Mr Cleanslate standing before the door.

Warmth became cold. Words of explanation formed frenziedly in my brain but, released into the open, dissipated into incoherent mumbling. I tried to pass him, but thin and wizened as he was, he seemed to occupy the entire breadth of the verandah. He stood immobile before me, a book in his hand, his pointed face contracted, his brow furrowed, his eyebrows drawn together, his pixie ears more prominent than ever. He frowned, his teeth clearly set on edge, but in the depths of his expression, there lingered something less tangible, elusive, yet something close to pain.

Face groping at face, he riveted me with his gaze, glanced with hatred swift and undisputable at the football in my hands, then once more fixed his eyes upon me. The whole episode may have lasted a mere instant, the briefest flicker of

an eyelid, but in that instant, there passed before me the image of the teacher transported by the magic of Mozart and Michelangelo, of the teacher turned actor reciting Hamlet in a voice that sent goosepimples through my flesh, of the recluse pointing a lean tubered finger at a world outside replete with host upon host of humdrum lives, the dross-laden lives of men who, would they but know it, could be free, could be great and rise to be as gods.

And in that instant, he reached out, cupped the chin of my shame-bowed face, nodded slowly and sadly as if at something lost, and said in a voice muted with regret,

'*Et tu, Brute, et tu?*'