

## Mr. Stirk and Mr. Fitzwilliam Gormley Kay

At the *Au Revoir Ball*, thrown jointly by the Cruxleys and the Danesworth-Loebs, waltzers rotated like the gears of a clock and skirts made a sound like push brooms across the floor. It was the last event of the season. At a round table just off the ball room, I sat with my mother and father, my older brother Lawrence, his new wife Tabitha, and finally her obese cousin, Fitzwilliam Gormley Kay, who did nothing all evening but drink champagne until his face grew mottled and his eyes betrayed the melancholy that characterized the evening.

Mr. Gormley Kay had some six months earlier lost his position at the Brice and Bristle sugar company in St. Kitts. He was thirty seven, a bachelor, and had accepted with some reluctance my mother's invitation to recuperate at our summer estate in Bournemouth. He brought with him a trunk of unwashed clothing, a stack of Greek texts with the the pages uncut, and two large wooden display cases of pinned beetles that he referred to, without a jot of irony, as "my treasures."

"Are you warm?" I asked him.

"I'm sorry, Ewan?"

"I asked if you were warm. I could have a window opened."

"On my account? I forbid it. No doubt you've noticed how easily I perspire. Don't let it trouble you."

"Did that make the tropics difficult, the perspiration?"

He lifted his empty glass and looked about for the server.

“Unfathomably so.”

He was reticent about his life in the Caribbean. Only once before, after my mother applied severe pressure, had he spoken of the heat and the cruelty of the locals, the meagerness of the cuisine, the prolonged and attenuated boredom that threatened to swallow him whole. This was not told in a priggish way, but with an almost child-like amazement that life could be so stark.

But I wanted to know more. Perhaps it was due to the stultifying dulness our Bournemouth summers, or perhaps to my own inborn curiosity, but to my eyes Fitzwilliam was a peculiarly romantic figure, so puffed up and sad. Unfortunately, he hardly ever left his bedroom. Whenever I stopped at his door, I heard nought but the rhythm of his breathing. How interesting, that a person would choose to progress so motionlessly through time.

But now, just when he seemed on the verge of speaking, we were interrupted by Mr. Quentin Stirk, who held his Meerschaum pipe as if to present it for appreciation.

“Sitting out the mazurka, Master Ewan?” He asked me.

“So it seems,” said I.

“At your age? When the blood pulses so strenuously?” He winked at my mother.

“We can’t have that, can we, Mrs. Thropshire?”

Every summer we hired Mr. Stirk as a tutor in maths. “For it is mathematics,” my mother liked to say, “that from the solid block of youth chisels out the man.” For most of the year, Mr. Stirk was a schoolteacher who lived in a two-story cottage on Branksome Deane Road with an aged mother and aunt, but for the two months under our

employ he became something else entirely. For it wasn't our money he treasured so much as the invitation to a few society events, where he might show off his frayed purple smoking jacket, his silk d'Orsay, the pocket squares purchased at the Soho Bazaar, and—this summer's newest addition—the white Meerschaum.

“This one can't be bothered to dance,” my mother said, meaning me. “He can't be bothered to do anything save what he's a mind to do.”

“Oh, tut tut, Mrs. Thropshire! He's clay to be molded! He might think otherwise, but that's why we don't ask his opinion.”

This high-handedness was a bit of a put-on. During our lessons, which occurred three times per week, he quizzed me on my figures for a quarter of an hour then moved on to sundry subjects, meandering hither and yon but always ending up at the same place: the coarseness of his regular students. On these he would soliloquize at length, gazing out across the expanse of our back garden and often addressing the student directly. “Where you get your self-confidence, Porter, is quite beyond me. You who thought an ellipsoid a type of fruit.”

“Well,” my mother said now, fanning herself, “it is a close night, at any rate. Humid.”

Mr. Stirk set the pipe on the table. “That has to do with the temperature of the ocean,” he said. “It helps, Mrs. Thropshire, to think of the air as a gradient between the emptiness of the upper heavens of the liquid density of the sea.”

We learned long ago that the proper way to enjoy a Stirkian discourse was to retreat into the fastness of one's interiority. The tutor thus addressed himself to a pan-

theon of statues. Except for one. For I soon realized that Mr. Gormley Kay regarded Mr. Stirk with a kind of curiosity and open interest that his drunkenness laid bare.

“A local, Mrs. Thropshire, can *feel* humidity coming from one or even two days off,” Mr. Stirk concluded. “You’ll never see a local mis-attired!”

At which point he bowed and took his leave, forgetting altogether the fat-bottomed pipe. My father took it up, turned it to examine the bell of scrimshawed ivory, and set it down in front of my cousin-in-law.

“An object,” he said, and belched faintly.

But it wasn’t until later, while my father negotiated with the waiter over the price of another bottle, that I saw Mr. Gormley Kay inch his hand toward the pipe and touch the mouthpiece where it was still damp.

The next morning I asked Ms. Margaret Kent Widdlesome for her thoughts on love.

“Well, it’s nice, isn’t it?” She said, then paused to think. “I suppose it’s about the nicest thing there is. Why do you ask?”

She pulled taught the strings of her corset. I am considered a bit of a tutor myself, and we had just concluded our lesson.

“I have two friends,” I said. “They are utterly different. And because they are so different, it brings me an odd kind of pleasure to imagine them loving one another.”

Miss Widdlesome flapped out her stocking and inspected it for dirt. "There needs to be *some* likeness, though, doesn't there?" She looked at me. "I have to say, you're very quiet. During."

"Did it bother you?"

"I wouldn't say *bother*, no. But will it be like that always? I rather thought the man would...chat a bit?"

"Chat how?"

"Pitch woo." She licked her thumb and rubbed at the stocking's heel. "Compliments and the like."

"You've a very graceful figure."

"Thank you. That's just the type of thing I'd like to hear."

"You will," I said, my mind already lost in machinations. "Some day a man will say that to you, and even more in the same vein."

The first attempt was nearly ruined in the same way that most things are nearly ruined: by my mother. When I invited Mr. Stirk over for lunch, and by great luck Mr. Gormley Kay emerged from his room to join us, she effected an immediate division. For my cousin-in-law, she could not provide enough, offering him the platter of pasties before he had even started on his eggs and demanding that Beatrice mix the man a "thin gimlet" before he could refuse. For the tutor, on the other hand, she waved at the stove top, where he was to take a plate and fix it himself.

"Mr. Stirk," I asked when we were seated. "Have you any interest in beetles?"

“In what?”

“In beetles. Fitzwilliam is a collector.”

Mr. Stirk seemed to notice for the first time the rotund man sitting across from him.

“Of *beetles*?”

Mr. Gormley Kay bowed his head. “An amateur. Not even an amateur, just...an appreciator, I suppose.”

My mother fixed Mr. Stirk with a look. “Mr. Gormley Kay is a gentleman scientist and a polymath. His work takes him around the globe.”

Mr. Stirk’s mustache pulsed as he chewed. “Have you been to Minorca, Mr. Gormley Kay?”

“I have not.”

“Went there for a vacation myself. Grand. Burned my thighs to cinders, but very grand.” He nodded at my mother. “Bring sun cream and a hat, is my point. And a book for the boredom. Though of course the beauty of Spain is a stimulant in and of itself.”

“I can’t imagine,” said my mother, “that *Spain* should have anything to offer that one such as Fitzwilliam could not imagine for himself.”

My cousin-in-law had by this point finished his food and set down his fork.

“It does sound quite lovely,” he said. “Minorca, Minorca, Minorca. It is burned into my memory. Now, if you’ll pardon my rudeness.”

“What are their names?” Asked Miss Lillian Dash.

“Let’s call them Elizabeth and Sam,” said I. “Elizabeth is...retiring. And Sam is a bit of a bore. Not intolerable, quite, just a bit taxing. Loquacious, is the word.”

Miss Dash sat in a large brass tub. She leaned forward so I could sponge her back.

“Not that it matters,” she said, “but just to aid my imagination, what is his class?”

“Shop owning,” I said.

“And Elizabeth?”

“I suppose she’s like you.”

“I thought you said there was no one like me.”

“Come now. You know what I mean.”

“I suppose I do.” She gathered an island of bubbles before her and blew off its top. “I think it sounds romantic.”

“Doesn’t it just?” said I, scrubbing. “Doesn’t it sound like an absolute dream?”

Another opportunity arrived a week later, when my sister-in-law caught mites off one of the dogs. When she scratched her hair at breakfast, her hand came away spotted with blood.

I told Mr. Stirk as soon as he arrived for our lesson. “Can they be contracted?” I asked.

“Fleas?” He said. “A flea can jump a meter or more. Fleas are marvelous.”

“And do you know anyone who can do an inspection? Dr. Burroughs was here, but he only did Theresa.”

“An inspection? Why, I give inspections for mites and midges nearly every day. You should see the boys I teach. More mite than man.”

“Shouldn’t you give *us* a look over, then?” Said I. “Most everyone is out, but perhaps just for myself and Mr. Gormley Kay?”

Mr. Stirk nodded. “It is not a matter of *should*, young Master Thropshire. It is a matter of *must*. Now fetch him round. Quickly, quickly. Lord knows where they could be hopping to next.”

At Mr. Gormley Kay’s door, I heard the usual silence. Before knocking, I crouched to peer through the keyhole. The large man was sitting at his desk in his underclothes. He had one leg crossed over the other and was doing absolutely nothing at all. I knocked before I went in.

“We’re to be inspected,” I said. “No need to dress, it’s just us chaps. Come along.”

Out in the back garden, Mr. Stirk had wrapped a tea towel around his head.

“A prophylactic.”

His fingers walked across my scalp, pulling hair out of the way. It felt nice, like an itch scratched.

“All’s well,” Mr. Stirk said, but before he could move on I stripped off my shirt and held up my arms.

“If you don’t mind,” said I.

Mr. Stirk leaned forward and poked about in my underarms. He nodded to confirm the job was done. Finally, with a shrug of apology, I rolled down my trousers so that the top of my forest emerged.



“Very thorough,” Mr. Stirk said, with the mildest hitch of apprehension, before kneeling on the grass.

“Entirely clear, young Master Thropshire, entirely clear.” Then he sidled over to where Mr. Gormley Kay stood in his underclothes as upright and dignified as the last of the Roman centurions. Mr. Stirk went up on his tiptoes and monkeyed about in the larger man’s hair. I trained him well, for without a pause he asked that Fitzwilliam unbutton his collar and roll down his top to expose his underarms, then to roll it further to just below the waist. Mr. Stirk, having embraced with enthusiasm his bizarre new job, bent over and applied both hands to the pubic bush.

Throughout, Mr. Gormley Kay kept his eyes shut. His forbearance seemed the product of a long life of discomfort, and in that moment I could finally picture him in some white and sun-baked office, licking his parched lips with a dry tongue and gazing at the glare of the Caribbean sea until he was quite blind.

Mr. Stirk stood and wiped his hands on his pant legs. “A clean bill of health!” His face was ruddy as a sportsman’s, his voice thick with pride.

Fitzwilliam excused himself, but surprised us both by emerging again some forty minutes later, washed and shaved and dressed in an exquisite and hitherto unseen shirt of light Egyptian cotton the color of a bluebonnet. He took a seat not far from us to observe the clouds while we finished our lesson. Mr. Stirk, for his part, became a whole new man, demanding answers from me and swearing when I dithered. He spoke of Euclid with eloquence and passion and such enthusiastic gestures that he had to stand up to make room for them.

I spent that night in the garden shed of Sussex Manor with Mrs. Wilberforce Crichton. For our comfort she had lined a wheelbarrow with blankets and sheets.

“And since when have you played matchmaker?” She asked me.

“It’s something new,” I said. “And so far, I’m not terribly ineffective.”

“It sounds like you’re making progress with Elizabeth and Sam. But now you must let nature take its course.”

“But that’s the difficulty,” I said. I twisted a bit to relieve the arm on which she rested her head. “Nature would carry them apart, I’m sure of it.”

“Then that’s as it should be. The river wends where it wishes.”

“And has your river wended where you wished it would?” I asked.

Mrs. Wilberforce Crichton took this poorly. She pinched and twisted my nipple to make me cry out.

“What a nasty thing to say, Ewan Thropshire! What a cruel, dog-like thing to say. For shame.” She sat up in such a way that her elbow dug against my side. The only light was a candle on the shed floor; she loomed over me a shadowy mass.

“I’ll say this to you, and then I’ll spit. You are pretty and so you have been affirmed in ways you ought not have been. I command you—I *command* it, Ewan Thropshire—that you doubt every decision you make, from now until your death.”

With that, she spat on my chest, pushed off and began the long process of re-assembling her costume. When this was done, she said, “You can stay the night, of

course. In the morning, call at the kitchen door. I'll see that breakfast is given to you, but then it's on your way."

The following weekend was the last of the summer. We had a tradition of taking a picnic basket out to the New Forest, and I invited Mr. Stirk along.

"It will mean an extra sandwich," my mother said. "And olives. The man acts as if olives were carried all the way from Greece for his pleasure alone."

He sat next to the driver on top of the carriage and played the role of guide, knocking on the roof with his cane whenever we passed sites of local importance: the tree from which he occasionally picked plums, the trail along which his aunt gathered hibiscus, a field whose fallowness lay tribute to the sloth of the family that owned it. Mr. Gormley Kay meanwhile leaned his face against the window, the coolness of which, he explained, was a balm for his unavoidable nausea.

After lunch, I suggested the men accompany me to the swimming hole, a deep eddy off the Lymington River. After some minutes of paddling about, my father removed himself and my brother followed some time after. Only the three of us remained, bonded in a kind of tenuous intimacy that was the result of the previous week's inspection. We floated there together, our bodies pink and hazy beneath the water. Mr. Gormley Kay rolled onto his back, and floated in a most impressive way, his chest, stomach, thighs and toes all visible, all shining and goose-pimpled by the occasional breeze. Every now and then his penis broke the surface like the mouth of a guppy.

"How buoyant he is!" I said to Mr. Stirk.

The maths tutor attempted it himself but from the neck down remained submerged.

“Too dense,” he said miserably. “Too dense by far.”

“There’s no trick to it,” said Mr. Gormley Kay. “One has to trust that one’s head will not go under. Lean back and submit to fate.”

For nigh on an hour we floated, the only sound the gentle movement of the trees, the river’s ticklish trickle, and the occasional splash and splutter of Mr. Stirk’s efforts. The water filled my ears with a little clap, then drained out.

“There,” Mr. Gormley Kay said. “Now you’ve got it.” And it was true, Mr. Stirk’s knees and sharp ribs could now be seen above the water, as well as the wet mass of brown hair like algae gathered in the valley of his chest. His eyes were closed tight, his breathing labored and short.

We returned home later than we had planned, and I offered Mr. Stirk the use of my room. For myself, I made a bed of the sofa beneath the drawing room’s tapestry of St. George. My attempts to fall asleep were stymied, however, by my mother and sister-in-law, who remained at the far side of the room. Their whispering carried over the stir and crackle of the fire.

“I don’t know if I can ever thank you enough,” said Theresa.

“Oh, nonsense. It’s a pleasure.”

“Sweet of you to say. When we were children, he was so terribly withdrawn. And no facility at all in his studies, nor in any other aptitude. I used to worry so, and I would tell myself, just wait, just wait. Everyone finds their proper place.”

“That is the hope.”

“And now, I feel such...such *guilt*.”

“You feel responsibility for him.”

“I do.”

“It is because you are charitable. I can give no higher compliment, nor do I give it lightly. You have a charitable soul.”

There was a period of silence. After which my mother said: “But one must be charitable to oneself as well. And one can only do so much.”

The next morning I awoke to the sound of furniture moving across the floor in my cousin-in-law’s room. I went in without knocking and shut the door behind me.

“Hullo, Master Ewan,” said Mr. Stirk. He had pulled an armchair to the desk, where Fitzwilliam had opened both of his large wooden cases. Mr. Stirk was still in the bedclothes I’d lent him, and with Fitzwilliam in his long nightie and sleeping cap, the two of them looked comical indeed.

“Come have a gander,” Mr. Stirk said.

The insects appeared more fragile than I’d anticipated, more like ornate replicas fashioned from wire, tissue and glue. A few of them glistened like spilled oil. Mr. Gormley Kay tapped the glass above a small fellow spotted with green and gold.

“*Omophroninae carabidae*,” he said. “Native to Hispaniola.”

“You’ve been to Hispaniola, then?” Mr. Stirk asked.

“No, no. For most of these I sent away. There’s a sort of organization, you could call it. We exchange research, samples. Money is at times involved, but only when necessary, and never enough to sully the water.”

“A type of society, then? A explorer’s society?”

“If you like.”

Mr. Stirk turned to me. “I should like that, shouldn’t I? Every week a letter from Siam? From Katmandu?” He leaned over the beetles. “I wonder what I’d write back. Who’s this fellow?”

“*Allomyrina dichomata*. But the Japanese call him,” Mr. Gormley Kay pronounced the foreign word with solemnity: “*kabuto-mushi*.”

“He’s a little lord, isn’t he? King of the buggies?”

“Absolutely correct. It’s the proboscis.”

“Means *nose*,” Mr. Stirk said to me. Then he whispered to Fitzwilliam. “Expensive?”

“Well. There’s a limit, of course. But yes, he’s right there at the limit, there’s no doubt about that.”

Mr. Stirk stepped back to take in the whole arrangement.

“My stars,” he said and clucked his tongue. “My sun and stars. But they are gorgeous, aren’t they? Show some of the Lord’s generosity. A bit of the personal touch.”

Mr. Gormley Kay looked at the teacher. “What a nice way of putting it, Mr. Stirk.”

I believed then that the moment had come to its crisis, that it was to happen now or not at all. So I pounced on the bed.

“I’ve an idea,” I said.

The two men looked at me.

“We’ll pretend that we are beetles. Here on the bed. We’ll lock horns, or whatever they do. Fight it out for dominance.”

“I don’t think...” Mr. Stirk said, frowning.

“It’s a contest,” said I. “A contest of strength.”

Mr. Stirk took a few steps towards the door. “I’ve never been quite the one for strength.”

I raised myself to a kneeling position, the better to speak with authority.

“Now Mr. Stirk,” I said, “I had the distinct impression that we were beginning to enjoy each other’s company, were we not?”

“Well, of course, but...”

“And you are aware that we are not in some dingy little cottage with walls like paper and you aunt listening in? We have *privacy* here, Mr. Stirk. Nobody will know, nobody will speak of it. We are, in a sense, outside of society.”

By which point Mr. Stirk was at the door.

“Do you remember your Aeneid?” I asked.

“Of course I do.”

“Then you’ll recall that when the crew chances upon an island uninhabited by people or beasts or birds, when they are away, for the first time, from peering eyes of

any kind. What is the first thing they do? They strip off their clothes and wrestle on the beach.”

“It’s,” Mr. Stirk stammered, “It’s just that it’s quite early in the morning.”

“My friend,” I said in a more intimate voice. “This sort of thing, it happens all the time.”

When Mr. Stirk said nothing, I turned to Mr. Gormley Kay. His expression had changed from one of apprehension to a more settled sense of doom. It was the very same look I had espied through the keyhole.

“What say you, Fitzwilliam? Would you be interested in a bit of sport?”

Slowly, very slowly, Mr. Gormley Kay removed his hand from the case and placed it atop the other on his lap. He closed his eyes, breathed in through his nostrils, and spoke in a tone of such nobility and resignation as I have never heard since.

“I would be amenable to such a game.”

Mr. Stirk glanced back and forth between the two of us.

“I have my pride,” he said in a wavering voice. Then, more firmly, “I think we’re all quite tired.”

Having said so, he bowed his head and took his leave.

I was embarrassed, and though I knew Fitzwilliam wanted nothing more than to be left alone, I felt ghastly for having wrung from him such a confession. So there I stayed, on my knees among the sheets. It was a long and curious period of silence, during which I had the time to move from embarrassment to guilt and from guilt to a kind



of frustration with my cousin-in-law. After all, why was it that I had to do all the pushing for him, he who was more than twice my age? And what was this damned stillness?

“Say something,” I said, when I could take no more. “Say something, once and for all.”

So he did, and not in the expected register of despair or resignation, but rather with a kind of curiosity, as if he were exploring his own life as he recounted it.

“I don’t know how familiar you are with sugar work,” he began, “but it alternates a long planting season with a refining period of the most unfathomable labor. It involves a milling process of such vigor and speed that a man must be hired to stand ready to lop off a miller’s arm should it get caught in the thresher. The flames of the boiler room are more faithfully stoked than the fires of hell, and far more hot. And it is well known throughout the trade that during this period of excruciating work, the refiners and especially the clayers simply cannot resist the appeal of thievery. This is due less to their race than to the long hours that, when combined with such constant heat, wear down a man’s moral instinct. And so we had to search their pockets.

“I hated this more than anything in the world. Here you have this poor man, his lot hardly improved since the days of chattel servitude, tired and underfed, mutilated if he be a miller, scorched if he be a boiler. And here am I, pink and shining from the office heat, redolent with that astringent odor we give off in equatorial places. I can’t look him in the eye, nor he me. Our souls two foreign things, like distant stars.

“But then one day, I went into a fellow’s pocket and felt a terrible pinch. I swore and removed my hand, there to find dangling from my finger a small, blue mud crab. I

shook him off and shrieked again, for I have always detested pain. Oh, the laughter that set off! And when I stumbled and landed on my bottom? Such joy and surprise had never before been heard in that grim place. And how happy I was to be the cause of it. I rather played it up, shaking my finger and sucking on it like a boy.

“I must have been the talk of the black salons, for it wasn’t the very next day that the workers greeted me with great smiles and pantomimes of my now famous reaction. And what should I find that evening but crabs secreted away on half the men I searched. Of course, I knew what was coming as soon as I saw the bulge, but in I went, then a snap and a cry and sometimes even a comic jig to fuel their merriment. How could I do otherwise? After all, these men had endured the snipping and pinching in their trouser pockets all throughout their horrid day. Can you fathom it? Anyway, this went on for the duration of that refining period, so that my fingers were quite nipped and pecked to bits. I still have the scars to prove it.”

He raised his two hands from his lap, and indeed the tips of his fingers were dotted with small white spots like flakes of ash. These he regarded for a moment.

“I supposed I’ll be quite disfigured for the rest of my life. Not that I mind. It was a terrible trial, of course, especially for such a coward as myself. But never before had I felt so useful.”

He considered this for a moment, made as if to speak again, then stopped himself.

That was all I would hear; he left that afternoon. He blamed the suddenness of his departure on his digestion, which, he claimed, required the type of fare that could be found only in London.

“These days have been the happiest of my life,” he said to my mother, words so immediately and obviously false that she did not know how to respond.

He told me that he’d left something for me in his room, and he was hardly in his carriage before I ran to see what it was. There on the desk stood one of the two wooden display cases, closed and fastened, with a note on top written in Mr. Gormley Kay’s exquisite hand:

“For Mr. Quentin Stirk, with my sincerest apologies.”

Below which was his signature and a form for enrollment in Saint Aloysius’ Brotherhood of Coleopterists.

“So you see,” I told Ms. Catherine Brannigan the next day, “in a sense their love triumphed, didn’t it?”

“Did it, though?” Catherine asked. A month earlier, she had accepted the proposal of Mr. Percival Haverest Shamwell, and had been in a sour temper ever since. “Because they might write letters to one another about roaches? Not much of a triumph, by my reckoning.”

I thought about this. “I suppose some types of love can never be expressed in the physical sense. Some types of love are above all that.”

“But the physical sense is the only sense worth sensing,” Ms. Brannigan said, and ran her fingers across my stomach. We were lying on the beach at East Cliff, which was empty at this late hour, and would be emptier still for the next seven months. I had never seen the beach in winter and wondered at what it might be like. All blue and windswept, no doubt, with its bone-white logs and dry nets of bladder kelp. Some cursed fisherman pushing out to sea, his dog watching anxiously from the dunes. A breeze came up, and I pulled Catherine close. It was the end of the beach, the end of the season, and the end of Catherine. I nuzzled down into the fine warmth of her hair.

“Why, Ewan Thropshire,” said she, teasing, “do you love me that much?”

“Dear Catherine,” said I, “I love you more than all the world.”

