

# Her Bounty To The Dead

by John Crowley

When Phillippa Derwent at last got through the various switchboards and operators, and a young voice said “Hello?” in a remote, uncertain way, it was as though she had tracked some shy beast to its secret lair, and for a moment she wished she hadn’t embarked on this; she hated to be thought a busybody, and knew that sometimes she could act like one.

“This is Phillippa Derwent,” she said, and paused a moment. When there was no response, she said, “Are you John Knowe? Amy Knowe was my ...”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Aunt Phil. I’m sorry. It’s been so long ...”

It had indeed been long—over twenty years—years which, Phillippa knew, would have passed far more slowly for her nephew, aged eleven when she had last seen him, than for herself. A certain amount of constrained catching up was thus the next duty. Her nephew’s life, she had always supposed, had been filled with incident and probably not happy; her own, which seemed to her happy, hadn’t been eventful. Her sister Amy had married a man she hadn’t loved, for her son John’s sake, she said: they had left New England—the last Phillippa had seen of them—and begun a series of removes farther and farther west. Amy’s letters, not pleasant to read, had grown more and more infrequent, now reduced to a Christmas card with a distracted note written on the back. The stepfather had vanished; at any rate, he ceased to be mentioned. When their mother—with whom Phillippa had lived alone for many years—died, Amy hadn’t come to the funeral.

Somewhere down the years Amy had written that John had entered a seminary, and when Phillippa saw mentioned in her local paper that a John Knowe had been appointed to the faculty of a Catholic girls’ school in Westchester, the possibility that this might be her nephew, revolved eastward, grew slowly (for it was hard for her to think of him as other than a

shy, large-eyed, and undergrown boy) to a certainty. For many reasons (mostly not the reasons she chose to give herself) she didn't call him; but when the lawyer's letter came informing her that Cousin Anne's will had at last been straightened out, she took it on herself to inform John of it. Foolish, she told herself, living so near and not reopening relations; if he wouldn't begin, she would.

"She had some property in Vermont," she told him. "Nothing very grand; but she's left some of it to you, or rather you've come into it by default or something ..."

"Not the old farm," he said, his voice far away.

"Oh no. No, Mother and I sold the farm years ago. No, a parcel of land—not too far north of the farm—and I thought perhaps you might like to see it. I was planning a trip up there in any case—the leaves ought to be just at their peak—and I thought ..."

"I don't drive."

"Well, I do." She was growing faintly impatient. "There are apparently some papers to sign at her lawyer's up there. It could all be taken care of."

"Well," he said, "it's very kind of you." There was a pause, and then he said: "I'm sorry about the farm."

★

Slight, darkly bearded, not in clerical dress, he stood on the steps of the college with an abstracted yet attentive air that struck her as familiar. Who was she reminded of? Of him, no doubt; him as a boy. For a while she studied him without getting out of the car or hailing him, feeling unaccountably swept into the past.

"John."

"Aunt Phil." He was as astonished as she was not. She felt embarrassed; she must appear a ghastly crone in comparison to his mental image. Yet he took her hand warmly, and after a moment's hesitation, kissed her cheek, tenderly almost. His large eyes were as she remembered them. For a

moment a hard thickness started in her throat, and she looked at the sky as an excuse to turn away.

“I should warn you,” she said, “I’m a weather jinx. I can go anywhere and a blue sky will turn black.” And in fact, in the west, hard, white clouds were moving over, preceded by wind-twisted pale mare’s tails—stormbringers, her mother always called them.

Parkways north: already along these most civilized of turnpikes the ivy had turned, burdening the still-green trees with garments of many colors. Since the twenties, when her father had bought the farm for their summers, she had made this journey many times, at first on dirt roads through then-rural Connecticut, later traveling under these arching bridges each one different, and now skating along superhighways that reached—it had once seemed impossible to her that they ever would—deeply into Vermont itself. At this season, she and Amy and their parents would have been traveling the other way, not toward but away from the farm, where they lived from May to October; going home, they always said, but to Phillipa at least it had always seemed the reverse: leaving the true home for the other, the workaday place, the exile.

“We sold it in 1953,” she said in answer to his question. “The summer after you left this part of the world. It had become just a burden. Dad was dead, and you children weren’t coming up anymore; Mother and I needed money to buy the house in Rye. We got a sudden offer at the end of the summer—a pretty good one—and sold. We were grateful. I guess.”

“What was a pretty good offer then?”

“Five thousand. And another hundred or so for the furnishings; the buyer took most of those too.”

“Five thousand.” He shook his head.

“We paid two, in the twenties. And much of the acreage was gone by then.”

“Nineteen fifty-three,” he said softly, as though the date were something precious and fragile; and then nothing more, looking out the window, absorbed.

She had rather feared this, his remoteness, a probably inevitable con-

strait. She passed a remark about the weather—the trees were turning up their silvery undersides, as though raising hands in dismay, and the sky was growing increasingly fierce—and then asked about his work. It seemed to be the right question; talking about theology, about the politics of the soul, he became animated and amusing, almost chatty.

Phillippa's religion, or lack of it, was that of the woman in the Stevens poem, sitting on Sunday morning with her coffee and her cockatoo: *Why should she give her bounty to the dead?* And that about April ...

There is not any haunt of prophecy,  
Nor any old chimera of the grave,  
Neither the golden underground, nor isle  
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,  
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm  
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured  
As April's green endures ...

"Yes," he said, putting the tips of his fingers together, "heaven is a difficulty. It seems hardly worth all the effort to end up in a white robe singing praises; like an infinity of choir practice. Of course, there's to be an ineffable, indescribable bliss; but it's damn hard to imagine, isn't it?"

"I suppose really religious people sense it," Phillippa said, feeling odd to be defending heaven.

"I don't know. I think people who really believe it invest the ordinary things they love with the idea of heaven; so that when they say 'This is heavenly,' they really mean it."

Phillippa noticed his shapely hands, mobile now where they had been meekly folded before. They too reminded her of someone; yet how could so changeful a thing as hands, so markable by time, retain a reminder of him as a boy?

"Mother—Amy—always said," he went on, "that she didn't care about heaven if she couldn't have around her all the people and places and times she loved most, in their characters—I mean not abstracted; not in

white robes; not on clouds. I think I believe that. Heaven is where you are—or will be, or have been, there being no time in heaven—most happy.”

Where for her, Phillippa wondered; and knew, without assenting to the possibility: the farm, in high summer, years ago. If that were so ... But it wasn't. If there was one thing Phillippa knew, it was that happiness is something you lose, fast or slow.

“I wouldn't think,” she said, “your church would go along with those ideas.”

He laughed, pleased. “No, well. All that is up in the air, now, you know. I'm something of a heresiarch anyway, really. In fact, I've recently worked up a new heresy, or refurbished an old one. Would you like to hear it?”

“If you can promise we won't be punished for it,” Phillippa said. To the north, a vast, curdled darkness was advancing across their path. “I mean look at that sky.”

“It goes like this,” he said, crossing one sharp-kneed leg over the other. “I've decided that not all men have immortal souls. Immortality is what Adam and Eve forfeited in the garden. From then on it was dust to dust. What Jesus promised to those who believed in him was eternal life—the possibility of not dying eternally. So that the believer, if his faith and hope and charity are strong, *creates* his own immortality through Jesus—the first immortal man since Adam: the new Adam.”

“What about the outer darkness, and the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth?”

“A metaphor for death. I think it's easier to explain those few references to fires and so on as metaphors for death than to explain all the many references to death as metaphors for eternal punishment. Jesus said, He who believes in me *shall not die*; that seems clearly to mean that everybody else will.”

“No hell?”

“No. A great problem solved there. Those who don't care about salvation merely go under the ground, utterly extinguished, having failed to accomplish their immortality.”

“Comforting.”

“Isn’t it. Also clears up the problems of infant damnation and the Good Pagan. More than that, though: it makes the choice harder. The choice for Jesus. When the alternative doesn’t seem so terrible.”

“In fact—I’m sorry—preferable. Eternal life doesn’t appeal to me.”

“Well, there you are. Perhaps it isn’t an unalloyed good. Perhaps it’s quite difficult—as difficult as any kind of life.”

“Dear me.”

“Maybe some have no choice. The God-possessed, the saintly.” He had grown more still, more inward. She wondered if he were still joking. “In fact, I would think the population of heaven would be small.”

Phillippa thought of medieval pictures of the court of heaven, the winged saints in rows intended to suggest great numbers but really absurdly few. But that wasn’t the heaven he envisioned, was it? Where ripe fruit never falls. If it were to be a heaven composed of the things one loved most, it would have to include (as far as Phillippa was concerned) change of season, fall of leaves, days like this one, raddled with dark, flying clouds; the flame of swamp maples, going out; April’s green. And yes, for there to be enough of it to go around, perhaps there would need to be only a few to divide it among; the rest of us, mortal, resigning it to them. She thought, suddenly, of an old convertible turning in at the stone gateposts of the long weedy drive leading up to the farm.

*Who could that be?* her mother said. *No one we know.*

The car, with orange leaves stuck beneath its windshield wipers, nosed into the drive tentatively, uncertainly.

*Just turning around, perhaps, lost,* Phillippa said. They sat together on the porch, for it was quite warm in the sun. It was so utterly still and blue that the leaves fell seemingly for no reason, skating with slow agility to the ground. Their clicking fall among the rest was sometimes audible: it was that still.

The car stopped halfway up the drive and a young man got out. He wore a wide fedora—every man did then—and smoked a long, straight pipe. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his pleated slacks, looking at the

house, though not, it seemed, at them. When at last he began to walk toward them, he did so not purposefully, nor did he hail them; he might have been arriving at a deserted house, or a house of his own. When at last he did greet them, it was with a kind of lazy familiarity. He wasn't a Vermonter, by his voice.

He had been told, he said, in the village, that the ladies were thinking of selling. He was in the market for just such a place; a writer, he needed someplace quiet to work. Were they in fact selling? Might he see the place?

It had been that very week that Phillippa and her mother had come to see that another summer in this house wasn't possible. The people in the village had, apparently, come to the same conclusion; not surprising, really, but a little forward of them to put it up for sale without asking. Well, her look asked her mother, here he was: why not show him around?

*It's kind of a rambling old place,* she said as they went in through the straining screen door. He stood in the parlor, seeming less to see the place than to inhale its fragrance, of woodstoves and old furniture and cidery autumn air. *Wouldn't it be too big for you?*

*Room to spread out,* he said, smiling as though he didn't really care. She showed him the kitchen, deprecatingly; there was no inside plumbing but a pump; no toilets; no stove but this iron monster. It would need a lot of improvement.

*I think I'd leave it as it is,* he said complacently. *It suits me.*

*But the winter,* Mother said. *What would you do then?*

He shrugged happily. *Hibernate, maybe.* He touched the huge old sinks fondly. *Soapstone,* he said. *When I was a kid I thought these sinks were called soapstone because you washed in them.*

It was difficult to move him through the house. Whatever room he entered he seemed to want to stay in forever, looking around dreamily. Phillippa found she couldn't be impatient with him, because he was so obviously taken with what she so much loved. By the end of the tour she found herself rather wanting this stranger to have her house.

And in the end he did have it, over her mother's objections—she wanted to give it to the local real-estate broker, an old friend—and most of

the furniture too, Victorian junk they had collected through twenty summers of auctions.

“Junk,” John Knowe said. “It wouldn’t be that now, would it?”

“No. Antiques. But of course we didn’t know that then.”

“The fat horsehair sofa. Grandpa’s big desk in the den, with the brass paperweight, very heavy, and the letter opener like a sword. The old clock, with weights like pine cones ...”

“You remember that?”

“Yes. Of course. All of it.”

He said it simply, as though it were no feat; and so he would, Phillipa thought: not having seen it since he was eleven, his memories of it all must be very sharp, as though preserved in a clear amber unclouded by grown-up perceptions of use, worth, price, burdensomeness. The farm had not altered for him, grown problematic, in the end insupportable. She felt, unwanted, a pang of loss; for herself more than for him. A few fat raindrops exploded against the windshield, then no more.

Through Massachusetts the storm that they seemed to be driving fast toward, as toward a destination, had grown, changed shape continually; as though hung for a pageant, moving on wires, two and sometimes three ranks of clouds crossed the sky at different speeds, and spotlights of sun picked out now this, now another bit of golden hillside. When they crossed into Vermont, the wind began to press hard on the car, and great flights of leaves blew across the highway like the flights of starlings in the brown fields. Northwest the clouds were not distinct, they were a solid cloak of the deepest gray, fuzzy with unseen rain.

“That’s where we go,” Phillipa said. “But at least here’s Vermont.” She knew it was foolish, but couldn’t help saying, “Whenever I cross the border, I always think of the lines about *Breathes there the man with soul so dead, Who never to himself hath said ...*”

“*This is my own, my native land.*” He said it without irony, as though just discovering it to be true. “The land of heart’s desire.”

She remembered a photograph Amy had sent once. John, perhaps thirteen, stood before a shabby stand of alders and nameless undergrowth.



Through the thin growth a midwestern landscape could be seen, featureless. Caught in the twiggy undergrowth were bits of paper, trash, human residue. Amy had written on the back “John’s ‘woods,’” as though that were what John called them. Exile. Maybe hell was where you had been most unhappy. No: no hell in his heresy.

“We’ll see Ascutney soon,” she said. “Or maybe not, in this weather.”

“Outside the kitchen door,” he said—and it took her a moment to realize he was still thinking of the farm—“there were raspberry bushes.”

“Yes.”

“Very thick; so thick it was hard to open the door. And a little stone porch.”

“Just a flagstone step. It was large to you, maybe.”

“Bees. And the smell of those bushes ...”

*You can pick quarts of them in the summer, she said. The smell of them in the sun is terrific.*

Yes, he said, looking not at the brown November garden but at her. Inside, her mother and the movers walked back and forth, their footsteps hollow. *I’m sorry, really, to be taking it all from you.*

*Don’t be silly.* His eyes, large, liquid, remote, were—were whatever is the opposite of silly. She felt no anger at him, and not envy; she did want him to have her house; only—for a wild moment—wanted desperately not to lose it either. She wanted to share it, share it all; she wanted ... He went on looking at her, fixedly and unashamedly as a cat; and there came a flaw in time, a doubling of this moment, a shadow scene behind this scene, in which he asked her to come now, come to stay, stay now, stay always, yield it all to him and yet have it all ... As instantly as she perceived it, the flaw healed, and *No, no*, she said, blinking, turning back to the kitchen door, shaken, as though, unaware, she had found herself walking out on ice.

She remembered that moment now, a cold wave rising beneath her heart. Mount Ascutney rose up very suddenly, blackish and with storm clouds disturbed by its head as though it wore wild hair. The pale gash of the road seemed to plunge into it.

“You never went back,” John Knowe said.

“No. Never. It would be very changed, I’m sure.”

“Yes. No doubt.”

Wind shoved them suddenly, violently. The road had become shiny as a ballroom floor, the day dark as night. No doubt, no doubt.

John Knowe drew a long, straight pipe from his pocket and put it unlit in his mouth. “It looks like this is it,” he said.

Rain coursed down the windshield as they rose up and shot down a rise with heartsickening speed, blind. She fumbled for the wiper button, peering into the silver nothing. Hail fell clattering, roaring; the wipers stuck. She braked, panicking, and they seemed to rise up smoothly off the road, accelerating, gliding toward the cloudy head of Ascutney—she could see it fast approaching. The brake, pressed down, had no effect in air—that was the thought she had—and a piece of mountain, a tall black rectangle of it, detached itself and flew out of the nothing to meet them, changing size swiftly.

*You can come too*, John Knowe said, and it was already not his voice.  
*You can come now.*

*NO*, and she twisted the wheel violently away from the black rectangle that would have engulfed them

★

and when she was helped from the car, rain washing the sticky blood from her hands and face, in the deep fearful calm of shock she saw not this car half crushed beneath, against the black stalled truck, but an old convertible, with autumn leaves caught beneath its wipers, turning carefully, lost yet found, into a weed-spined drive between stone gateposts; and heard, not the shriek of sirens and the shouts *He’s dead, he’s dead*, but the faint yet audible click of a falling leaf joining the others on the littered ground.