The Witches of Chiswick

Robert Rankin

Published by Gollancz

Extract

1

It was the day after the day after tomorrow and it was raining.

Upon this particular day, the rain was bilious green, which signified a fair to middling toxicity and so was only hazardous to health if you actually went out in it.

Will Starling would have to go out in it. He was presently employed and wished to remain so.

'Winsome Wendy Wainscot, Channel Twenty's wonderful weather woman, says it will clear by Wednesday,' ventured Will's mum, a moon-faced loon with a vermilion hairpiece and hips that were a hymn to the hamburger. 'I could call you in sick, Will, and you could apply yourself to doing a few odd jobs about the home.'

'No, thanks,' said Will.

'But some of the jobs are *really* odd. They would appeal to you.'

'No, thanks,' said Will, once again.

Will's portly father, a man who never said no to a native and took his coffee as it came, raised a quizzical eyebrow to his lady wife's banter. 'The lad has work to go to, woman,' said he, forking a sausage from the mountainous pile upon his breakfasting plate, popping it into his mouth and munching upon it. 'He is now the winner of the cakes in this household, and for this much thanks, my sweet Lord of the Laminates.'

The area in which these words were exchanged was the breakfasting area of the Starling household, the household itself being housed in a housing unit in a housing tower in the housing district of the Utility Conurbation of Brentford,

which was itself to be found to the west of The Great London High Rise. The housing tower was three hundred and three storeys high. The Starling household occupied a corner of the two hundred and twenty-second floor. The windows of the breakfasting area, triple-glazed in polarised polythene, faced east, which was always a blessing on Tuesdays.

(Today, this particular day, this day after the day after tomorrow, was, however, Monday.)

Regarding the breakfasting area itself, what might be said? Well, the furnishings, at least, were not entirely without interest. Will sat at the breakfasting table, upon a chair of his own design and construction, a narrow chair of wood, of antique wood, of two-by-one.

Much, of course, has been written of the wonders of two-by-one, hailed, as it was, by twentieth-century DIY enthusiasts the world over as 'The Timber of the Gods', 'The Carpenter's Friend', 'The Wood That Won The West', and many other such appellations.

You didn't see a lot of it about on this day beyond tomorrow, what with there being so few trees left to cut down and hew. Two-by-one was hard to find, although, in truth there were very few now who actually went searching.

Will's father, William Starling senior, occupied a more orthodox sit-upon: it was Post Christian Orthodox, of the IKEA persuasion. Will's father was a part-time lay preacher to the Church of IKEA (IKEA having brought out the Christian franchise some fifty years before).

Will's mother did not share her husband's faith; she remained true to the church she had grown up with. She was a Sister of Sainsbury's. Her seating was a family heirloom: a white plastic garden sofa, dating from the age of private gardens, and a collector's item in itself, should the age of the collector, or indeed the private garden, ever return. The sofa's sidearms had been cut away to afford admittance to her broad posterior. Will's mum was a very substantial woman.

But for these items of seatery, the breakfasting area was, as all other breakfasting areas in the housing tower were, *bright* and *orange*. Just the way that the future had been promised to be, in a time before it was.

'You'll need to put on your chem-proofs, Will,' said Will's mum, swallowing a fried eggette (a synthetic egg, packed with goodness and minerals) and scooping up another with her spoon. 'And your weather dome. Coffee, husband?' She proffered the plastic pot.

'As it comes,' replied her spouse, urging another sausage into his mouth, 'that's the way I like it.' He smiled winningly towards his son. 'Take heed of what your mother says,' said he, as he chewed. 'Upon this occasion she isn't talking twaddle.'

'I certainly will,' said the son of Starling. 'I never, ever take risks.' This, however, was a lie. Will *did* take risks. Will thrived upon risks. Sadly for Will, the opportunities to take risks rarely arose, but when they did, he was always ready and willing.

Will's father reached across the breakfasting area and placed a mighty hand upon the forearm of his son. 'You are a good lad, Will,' he said. 'You make your mother and me proud of you. We care about you, you know that, don't you?'

'I've never had cause to doubt it,' Will eased his arm from beneath the pressure of his pater's portly palm, 'except upon one or two occasions, such as the time that you tried to sell me to Count Otto Black's Circus Fantastique because you needed money to buy Mum a new wig.'

'A God-feeling woman can never have too many wigs,' said Will's mum, downing another fried eggette.

'It's God-*fearing*,' said her husband, helping himself to yet another sausage. 'But your mother's right, Will. Do you recall the time that your Aunt May was caught wigless at the wedding of a tribal chieftain? That reflected very poorly on the family.'

'Yes, but trying to sell me to a freak show . . .'

'A Carnival of Curiosities,' said Will's mum, downing

yet another eggette. 'An Odyssey of Oddities. A Burlesque of the Bizarre. A—'

'Get out while you're winning,' said Will's dad. 'Your mother and I felt that it was the right thing to do, Will. So you could, you know, be amongst your own people, as it were.'

'But you're my own people, you're my family.'

'You know what I mean,' said Will's dad, chasing baked beanettes with his fork. 'I don't have to say the word, do I?'

'*Slim?*' said Will. 'Is that the word?'

Will's mum traced a sacred S (for Sainsbury's, not for slim) across the vastness of her breasts. Newly proffered coffee spilled over Will's dad's waistcoat.

'Now look what you've done.' Will's dad struggled to his feet, plucking at his steaming front.

'I'm slim,' said Will. 'It's not a disease. It's not something to be ashamed of.'

Sadly, however, this was *not* the case. In these days after the days after tomorrow, being slim no longer held sway when it came to looking good. These were now the days of the weighty. That mankind should grow, not only in mental but in physical stature too, was probably an inevitability (although not one that had ever been accurately predicted). But then, the science of prediction had never been noted for its accuracy – not even when the course of future events seemed obvious.

For instance: in the year of Elvis Presley's death, nineteen seventy-seven, there were, at most, several dozen Elvis impersonators in the world. By the year two thousand and two, however, there were more than thirty-five thousand. Given this expanding growth rate, it was acurately predicted that by the year two thousand and twelve, one in four people on the planet would be an Elvis impersonator.

This, of course, proved not to be the case.

The figure was actually a mere one in six.

But those days were now long in the past, and in these days, after the days after tomorrow, things were not as might have been expected. They appeared to have escaped

all attempts at prediction. That the future lay in fatness had certainly slipped right past Nostradamus.

By the days after tomorrow, the average weight of the Western human was fifteen stone. By the days after the days after tomorrow, the scales were being tipped and strained at the twenty-stone mark, and rising.

But Will was a slim 'un. And although his parents were proud of him, in the way that parents always are, the social stigma of slimness was always there.

And Will was *very* slim.

The features were fine enough – noble, almost: a good strong nose and bright blue eyes and a mop of blondy hair. But his neck was of a longness, and his fingers too. And there was also an awkwardness about him. And there was an other-worldliness about him too, although this was nothing to do with his slimness. It was more to do with the fact that Will dwelt for most of his waking hours in a world of his own making: a world of romance and adventure, a world where he could *really* take some risks.

For the world that Will inhabited was not very kind to Will. Folk pointed at him in the streets, laughed as they pointed, called him 'skeleton boy' and 'you slim bastard!' They gave him a very hard time. Will ate as much as he could manage, but it didn't help.

It was no fun being different.

But different Will was, in more ways than one.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' said Will. 'I'm sorry, Mum, too.'

The coffee was cooling on Will's dad. Will's mum mopped at his waistcoast with a proprietary-brand dishcloth. 'It's all right,' she said, without conviction. 'It doesn't matter, Will. You are what you is, as Frank Zappa once said, and so long as you're happy, we're happy for you.'

'I *am* happy, Mum. I love you and Dad and I love my job too.'

'Tell me about this job of yours.' Will's dad shooed away his wife's fussing fingers. 'Is it at IKEA? Does it involve any two-by-one?'

'No,' said Will, 'It isn't and it doesn't. Have you ever heard of the Tate Gallery?'

'Is that a trick question?' Will's mum lowered her prodigious bulk once more onto her modified lounger and returned to her consumption of fried eggettes. There were still eight left on her plate and she meant to finish them before she began on her baconettes. 'I mean, will there be a forfeit if we get it wrong? Like there is at the supermarket?'

'It's not a trick question, Mum. The Tate Gallery is an ancient building in London Central. It houses paintings from the past. You remember art, surely?'

Will's mum made a face of considerable perplexity. 'Was he a presenter on daytime TV?'

'Of course your mother remembers art,' said Will's dad, resuming the demolition of his sausage mountain. 'It's when pictures were produced by hand, using coloured pigments applied with a bundle of animal hair secured at the end of a stick.'

'There's no need to be obscene,' said Will's mum. 'Honestly, putting ungodly ideas like that into the boy's head.'

'It's true,' said Will. 'The bundles of animal hair were called brushes.'

'The boy is a regular hysteric,' said Will's mum.

'Historian,' said Will's dad. 'And you have actually seen these pictures, Will?'

'Not up close.' Will, sipped at his coffee, which came as it came, but which was not altogether to his liking. 'They are housed in the vaults deep beneath the original gallery. They are far too precious and fragile to be put on display any more. They are presently being re-photographed, so that accurate reproductions can be made and displayed in the gallery. You'll be able to see the official reopening of the Tate on the home screen soon. And all the reproductions of the paintings too.'

'Why?' asked Will's mum. 'What are these *paintings* for? What do they do?'

'They don't do anything. They are art. They are

beautiful works of human achievement. You simply look at them and appreciate them for what they are.'

Will's mum spooned in further eggettes. 'Do they sing?' she asked.

'No. They don't even move about.'

Will's mum shrugged her ample shoulders. 'Well, if you're happy and employed, I suppose that's all that matters.'

'I *am* happy,' said Will. 'There's something about the past that has always fascinated me. Something about the Victorian era.'

'The *what*?' asked Will's mum.

'Be silent, woman,' said Will's dad, sending another sausage stomachwards.

'The years of Queen Victoria,' said Will. 'She ruled this country, and much of the world besides, for sixty years. She died in 1901.'

'King Charles ruled for seventy-five years,' said Will's mum. 'And so did Queen Camilla.'

'I don't think you could really call that ruling,' said Will's dad, 'although I'm impressed that you should know even that. I recall as a child learning about the last of the Royal Household of England. They didn't actually rule that long – they didn't actually rule at all. They were both assassinated at their coronation. It was a virtual reality programme that did all the subsequent ruling – until it crashed in the late twenty-first century.'

'Same thing,' said Will's mum. 'The present World leader is a programme: President Adidas the 42nd. "Corporate wisdom for a better world".'

'Hmm,' went Will. 'Well, that may be as may be, but there was a time when the world was run by human beings. And in the days of Queen Victoria, there were many wonderful things. Wonderful art and wonderful architecture. And books that were written by people.'

'I once had a book,' said Will's mum, finally beginning work on her baconettes. 'I liked the pictures in that.'

'That was *not* a book,' her husband told her. 'That was a manual, for the home screen's remote control.'

'*I've* seen books,' said Will. 'And I've read them too. I've been to the British Library.'

'The boy is just full of surprises.' Will's dad held out his cup for further coffee. 'But you can call up books on the home screen.'

'Not like these Victorian books. I've read *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The works of Oscar Wilde. And amazing books by H. G. Wells, Jules Verne and Edgar Allen Poe. I go every lunchtime. I have a special pass because I work at the Tate. I can't touch the actual books, but they're all on digital.'

'I'm amazed,' said Will's dad. 'But surely you should be on your way to work now?'

'Indeed, yes.' Will finished his coffee and rose from his special chair. 'Off to work. Off to the art and the literature of the past.'

'He's a weirdo,' said Will's mum.

'He's not,' said Will's dad. 'He's simply Will.'

Will togged up in sufficient protective outerwear to ensure the prolongation of his existence and bade his farewells to his mother and father. He would have taken the lift to the ground floor, had it been working. But it wasn't working. It was broken yet again, and so Will was forced to trudge down the many, many stairs, no easy feat in a chem-proof suit that was many, many sizes too large, before braving the acid rain and plodding through it to the tram station.

Once inside he passed through decontamination – a hose-down, followed by a big blow-dry – then he raised his weather dome to admit an iris scan of his eyeballs, which confirmed his identity and present credit status, and allowed him access to the covered platform.

The never-ending shuttle train of trams, thirty-two miles of linked carriages, followed a circular route through London Central, The Great High Rise and surrounding conurbation areas. It moved with painful slowness and was

dreary to behold. Will awaited the arrival of a carriage that did not look altogether full, pressed a large entry button and, as the door slid aside, stepped aboard the moving carriage.

Large folk sat upon large seats, heavily and sombrely. None raised their eyes towards young Will, nor offered him a 'good morning'. Their heads were down, their masssive shoulders slumped; all were going off to work and few were going gladly. The morning tram had never been a transport of delight.

The in-car entertainment was, upon this particular day, of the corporate morale-boosting persuasion: plump, jolly holograms, fresh-faced guys and gals, cavorted up and down the carriage, extolling the virtues of a job well done for an employer who more than just cared. At intervals they flickered and slurred, ran into reverse, or stopped altogether. The system was long overdue for an overhaul – as was most everything else.

Will settled himself into a seat and ignored the colourful chaos. He took off his rubberised mittens, fished into the pocket of his grossly oversized chem-proof and brought out his personal palm-top.

This item was something of a treasure to Will, and would be another collectible should that bygone age of collecting ever return. In this particular time there should have been marvels of technology to be had, like plasma gel eye-screens, hardwired to cranial implants, which, when worn behind the eyelids, would offer three-dimensional virtual reality with all-around-sensasound and things of that futuristic nature generally. And there were, to a degree, but they just didn't work very well. Technology had got itself just so far before it ground to a halt and started falling to pieces. Will's palm-top was almost fifty years old, built in a time when folk really knew how to build palm-tops. It was indeed his treasure.

But what Will really wanted, of course, was a book, a real book, a book of his very own. But as books no longer existed, what with there no longer being any rainforests to

denude for their manufacture, he had settled for second best. Will had been downloading the contents of the British Library into his ancient palm-top. He did not consider this to be a crime, although crime indeed it was. He considered it to be an educational supplement. Certainly he had been taught things at learning classes, when a child, all those things that the state considered it necessary for him – or any other child of the citizenry – to know. But Will craved knowledge, more knowledge, more knowledge of the past.

Somewhere in him, somewhere deep, was A Need to Know, about what the past really was, about the folk who had inhabited it, about things that they had done, the adventures they'd had. What they'd known, what they'd seen, what they'd achieved. There was excitement in the past, and romance, and adventure.

Exactly why these yearnings were inside him, Will didn't know. Nor did he understand why he was so driven by them. But he did understand that it mattered (for some reason that he did not fully understand, so to speak).

But he *would* understand. He felt certain that he would.

Will had recently downloaded a number of restricted files from the British Library's mainframe, part of the British Library's collection of Victorian erotica, and installed them into his palm-top. Will was currently reading Aubrey Beardsley's novel, *Under the Hill.**

Although Will did not understand much of what Beardsley had written, the words and phraseology being of such antiquity, he was aware that he was onto something rather special. Will had researched Mr Beardsley, the 1890s being Will's favourite period: the gay nineties, they'd been called, a time of exuberance, of decadence, a time of enormous creativity.

Will almost missed his station, London Central Three. He had been engrossed in the chapter where Venus masturbates the Unicorn, and had got a bit of a stiffy on.

* One of the most wonderful works of Victorian erotica ever written. Buy a copy.

(Well, it is an extremely good chapter.)

Will switched off the palm-top, slipped it back into his chem-proof, redonned his mittens, rose, tapped the door button and departed from the eternally moving tram. He took the belowground to the Tate Terminal, passed through the retinal scan, checked in his weather wear and made his way via lifts and walkways to his place of employment.

The workroom was circular, about half an old mile in diameter and many new metres in height, with row upon row of huge, somewhat outdated and unreliable computer workstations, mounted upon IKEA terminal tops, and manned and womanned by many, many folk, all of whom exceeded Will in both years and girth.

'Morning, stick-boy,' said Jarvis Santos, a fine hunk of flesh in a triple-breasted morning suit. Jarvis was Will's superior.

'Good morning, Mr Santos,' said Will, seating himself in the big chair before his big workstation. 'Rotten old weather, eh?'

'The weather is hardly your concern. You're here to do a job. Do you think your frail little fingers can deal with it?'

'Undoubtedly,' said Will, smiling broadly.

'And get that grin off your scrawny face. Your tasking for the day is on the screen; see to it.'

'Yes, sir,' said Will.

Jarvis Santos shook his head, rippling considerable jowls. He turned and waddled away, leaving Will smiling broadly at his terminal screen. Will read the words upon it: *The works of Richard Dadd*, and there followed a brief history of this Victorian artist.

Will read these words, and then he whistled. This really couldn't be much better: Richard Dadd was one of Will's all-time favourites; a genuine Victorian genius (although, it had to be said, a complete stone-bonker too). Like many rich Victorians, Dadd had taken the Grand Tour. He had travelled through distant lands, visited and painted Egypt,

moved through Africa and India and at the end of it all, had returned to England, quite mad. His father, worrying for the mental health of his son had taken Richard under his wing and was escorting him to hospital when a singular tragedy occurred. They had booked into a hotel in Cobham, in Surrey, for the night. Richard and his father had gone out for an evening walk. But Richard returned alone and hastily made away from the hotel. He had murdered his father in the woods and, according to legend, feasted on his brain.

Dadd had murdered his dad. He made it as far as France before he'd been arrested. At his trial it became apparent to all that he was hopelessly insane. He was committed to St Mary of Bethlehem's asylum, where he spent twenty years before being transferred to Broadmoor for the final twenty-two years of his life. It was at Broadmoor that he painted his acclaimed masterwork, *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke.*[*]

Although the picture is only fifty-four centimetres by thirty-nine, it took Dadd nine years to paint, and it remains incomplete. It is a remarkably complex piece of work which has been interpreted in many ways. Some scholars believe it to be allegorical, a satire on the times. Others consider it to be metaphysical, embodying some great and undiscovered truth.

Its composition is this. In the foreground stands the fairy feller of the title. He holds aloft an axe and is awaiting the precise moment to swing it and cleave a large nut, which will then be fashioned into a new coach for Queen Mab. Behind the feller, the fairies look on in expectation: many fairies, beaux and ladies, strange dwarves and satyr-like creatures. And nursery-book characters too: tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.

There is no perspective to the painting; the numerous figures, set amidst swaying grasses and voluptuous daisies, peer from the canvas as if vying for attention.

It is a very, very strange painting.

[*] You really should see this painting; it's in the Tate Gallery.

Will knew his job well enough by now. He had to visually check the digital photoscan of the painting, to ensure that the colours and textures were all in focus. It was tedious work, or certainly would have been to anyone other than Will, but Will revelled in the hugely magnified images upon the screen, viewing every brushstroke, and brushstrokes there were aplenty upon *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke.* Dadd had obsessively repainted the faces of the characters again and again and again in his insane desperation to 'get them right'. Some stood out from the canvas by almost half a centimetre.

For the Tate to print accurate reproductions for public display, all had to be exact and correct. Will would have to check not only every centimetre, but every millimetre also. He had many automatic checking systems to aid him, of course, but as these regularly broke down, the human touch was still required.

And Will, it had to be said, possessed the human touch.

'Oh bliss,' said Will Starling. 'This is going to be very enjoyable.'

A big flippery-floppery sound caused Will some momentary distraction. Gladys Nanken lowered her prodigious bulk into the terminal chair next to Will. 'Morning, lovely boy,' she said, breathlessly and breathily.

'Ah.' Will turned his gaze on Gladys. It was one of those rabbit-caught-in-car-headlights kind of gazes.

'And how's my little boy, this morning?' Gladys asked.

'Intent upon a day of dedicated labour,' said Will. 'Up against a deadline. Fearing any distraction that might result in a loss of concentration and lead inevitably to an employment termination situation. As it were.'

'You're all words,' said Gladys, winking lewdly at Will. 'And such pretty words too. I wonder what they all mean.'

'They mean that I must work hard or get sacked,' said Will, applying himself to the keyboard. (It was a *big* keyboard, with *big* keypads, designed for fingers that were far *bigger* than Will's slender digits.)