

Of Nature, Poets & Malt

It was a long climb up to the pass and the day was hot.

"Come on, Gerry!" called Henry. "Not much further, and it's really worth the climb!"

"I hope so," mumbled Gerry, who was feeling somewhat exhausted and wondered if he had put on too much weight over recent months.

They trudged on and after about five minutes they did at last reach the summit of the pass. There before them stretched out far below was the valley and over on their left they could just make out a silver shimmering which they knew was the sea. Before them across the valley was the whole range of sierras in all their grandeur.

"Now!" said Henry. "Look at that view! Isn't it worth the climb?"

"It's certainly a very fine view," admitted Gerry, getting his breath back.

"A very fine view?" said Henry. "Is that all you can say? Just look at it! Nature's so wonderful; it takes your breath away."

"I've hardly got my breath back," laughed Gerry, "so I certainly don't want it taken away. It's a very fine view today. But can you imagine it up here in a raging gale with the rain beating down?"

"I can! I can!" cried Henry excitedly. "The wind howling around and lightning playing on the mountains opposite. Wonderful! Fantastic! Nature in all her splendor and power!"

"You're an incorrigible romantic," said Gerry. "You'd have been at home with Byron and Shelley and that crowd."

"I would, I would!" agreed Henry. "Nature's wonderful. Don't you feel the appeal of nature? Doesn't it tug at your very soul?"

"Not sure a soul can be tugged," muttered Gerry. "Nature's, well, just nature."

"You've got no imagination," said Henry. "Just look at the view before you. It would be glorious at any time of the year, in any weather. Can you imagine it in winter - all the sierras covered in snow?"

"With the odd avalanche to add to the fun, I suppose," replied Gerry. "Not nice if you're caught in one."

"Well," replied Henry. "You've got to respect nature, of course. She is beautiful and magnificent, but also deep and mysterious ..."

"A femme fatale," interrupted Gerry.

"All right," said Henry, "a femme fatale, if you like. You need to respect her; if you don't, you get into trouble."

"Tosh!" rejoined Gerry. "Stop the silly personification! Nature's a force and you can suffer at the hands of nature even if you do respect it."

Henry was not quite sure what to say and as he hesitated, Gerry continued: "Remember when we were in the Cascade Range in Washington State last year? That family we met on Mount St Helen's?"

"Yes," said Henry, rather uneasily. "Yes, not the sort of thing one can easily forget, I guess."

"No," said Gerry. "They just would not talk about the eruption of 1980 - refused point blank; and they weren't exactly polite about your platitudes on nature being splendid and wonderful."

"That's putting it mildly," admitted Henry. "They were downright angry. I guess I should've been a bit more tactful."

"And *that* is also putting it mildly," rejoined Gerry. "Difficult to see how you could have been less tactful, if you'd tried. Nature may be awesome, but it may also be terribly destructive – and that's what they had lived through. It still traumatized them years afterwards."

Henry just grunted. Gerry continued: "It's all very well saying nature is appealing on a day like this with that view in front of us; but admit it, Henry, nature can also be downright appalling."

But before Henry could admit or deny anything, Carol and Stephanie came over the ridge on their right and called out to them.

"What?" said Gerry in surprise. "How did you two get there? You don't look at all exhausted!"

Henry laughed. "The road over the pass comes near here; there's a view-point and car park a couple of hundred yards or so on the other side of that ridge."

"You mean," said Gerry "we could have come most of the way by car instead of trudging up that path this morning?"

Carol laughed. "You needed the exercise, Gerry; you've been getting too flabby around the middle. I'm sure you're all the better for it."

"Um," grunted Gerry, "and what about you two. Wouldn't you have liked the exercise as well?"

"Probably," said Stephanie, "but we didn't think you two would manage all day on just water and energy bars, so we've been putting a picnic together and we didn't fancy carrying it all the way up."

"Picnic?" said Gerry. "Oh well, fair enough."

"Yes," said Carol laughing as she and Stephanie took off their backpacks, "there's some stuff here but the rest is back in the car. Perhaps you boys would like to go and fetch it."

The thought of a picnic had given Gerry sudden energy as he and Henry hurried off to the car.

They soon returned and as Carol and Stephanie were sorting out the picnic, Stephanie said: "I guess you two were admiring the view before we arrived. Spectacular, isn't it?"

"Yes, I was admiring it till old misery guts here," said Henry nodding towards Gerry, "started saying that nature wasn't appealing, it was appalling."

"All I said," said Gerry, "was that nature is not always benevolent; it can be malevolent also."

"Like," said Carol coming to her husband's defense, "Tennyson wrote when he said that nature was 'red in tooth and claw with ravine'."

"You see, Henry," said Gerry, "Tennyson was a bit more realistic than your Byron and Shelley."

"Umph," said Henry, "the Idylls of the King realistic? I don't think so!"

"Sure," said Carol, "the stories are all myths; but his descriptions of nature are accurately drawn from his own observations over many years."

"Oh come on," said Stephanie, "stop all this nonsense about nature being benevolent or malevolent. It has no will, so how can it one or the other? Nature is nature."

"Nature is nature," repeated Gerry, "Is that why you always eat organic stuff, Stephanie?"

"Certainly," said Stephanie. "We're products of nature, so what nature produces is good for us."

"But if it's artificial, it's not?" asked Gerry.

"Not so good," said Stephanie. "It's been interfered with – been adulterated. Too often it's downright harmful."

"But if it's natural, it's good?" asked Gerry.

"Certainly," replied Stephanie.

"Cocaine is an entirely natural substance, so I guess it's good for you?" asked Gerry, mockingly.

During this exchange Henry had kept quiet; he was only too well aware of his wife's obsession with all things organic. But Carol could see that Henry was looking uncomfortable.

"Stop it you two!" she said. "Stephanie, you said 'Nature is nature' – so leave it at that, with warts and all. And you, Gerry, stop teasing Stephanie. I think we'll all agree that field mushrooms are fine fried for breakfast, but frying death cap mushrooms is not to be recommended."

They laughed.

"So," continued Carol, "let's stop this nonsense and enjoy the picnic. That empty plastic box there can be the forfeit box. Anytime anyone says the word 'nature' or 'natural' they put a pound coin into the box."

"Good idea," said Henry. "Let's get stuck in. Glad to see you girls put in a few beers."

"Ah yes," mused Gerry. "Malt does more than Milton can to justify God's ways to man."

"Eh?" queried Henry.

"Housman," answered Gerry. "It's in the Shropshire Lad. I think we can both agree with Housman on that one."

"I think so too," laughed Henry, tucking into his picnic.

I am glad to say that the malt worked its magic (though sensible Carol refrained, as she would be driving). They all enjoyed the sun, the view and the picnic; and when at last they had packed up to drive back to their holiday cabins, the forfeit box was still empty.