

The Ostrich and the Optimist

“Hello, Tom, you old beggar!” cried Bill as Tom came into the bar. “Ain’t seen you for a while.”

“Of course you haven’t,” answered Tom. “I’ve been away at my daughter’s, seeing my grandchildren.”

“So you has, Tom, so you has,” said Bill as he sipped his ale. “That accounts for it. Why don’t you get yourself a pint and come and join me?”

“That’s just what I had in mind to do,” Tom replied.

He went to get his pint and came over to join Bill.

As Tom began to sup his pint, Bill said: “Your Mary, ain’t it? What’s her husband do? ’spose she’s got an husband; lot of ’em don’t bother nowadays.”

“What’s the matter with you, Bill? You going doolally or what? Mary’s the one in Australia. I’ve not been there; I’ve only been away two weeks.”

“Oh,” muttered Bill, “seemed a lot longer to me.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Tom, “two weeks it was. I went to Martha up in Dunchester; and of course she’s got a husband. Both my daughters have. What’s the matter with you? How many pints have you been supping?”

“’Tis only my second,” said Bill. “I ain’t that befuddled. I remembers now. Her husband Tony’s a teacher or something.”

“He’s a lecturer at the local university,” said Tom, “head of the school of environmental sciences.”

“What?” said Bill. “Environmental sciences? What are they? When I was at school, science was physics, chemistry and biology.”

“Well,” said Tom, “I suppose it’s all three. It’s to do with the *environment* – the air, the water, the land around us and the plants and animals that live in or on them. You have know physics to understand how wind and airstreams behave and how tides, currents and such like behave; and certainly you have know chemistry to understand how earth is made up and how it interacts with air and water; and, of course, you need your biology if you’re going to understand the plants, animals, bacteria and microbes.”

“Stop,” cried Bill, “you’re doing my head in. I needs another pint to help clear it.”

With that Bill got up and was about to make his way over to the bar, when Tom said “If you’re getting another for yourself, Bill, get me another as well.”

“OK, Tom,” said Bill.

When he got back with the two pints, Bill said “That was a lot to take in,” and took a swig. Then he added, laughing, “Next you’ll be telling me he’s one of these, er, - what do you call them – er, eco-warriors, who goes around gluing themselves to roads or railings or whatnot.”

“Well, I don’t know that he’s actually glued himself to anything,” replied Tom. “But he and Martha have been on marches and demonstrations.”

“Bloody waste of time,” said Bill, “if you asks me. Ain’t they got anything better to do? What about looking after their children?”

“Oh,” said Tom, “they take their children. Their eldest, Becky, is very keen, and the others like going on the demonstrations.”

“They sounds a weird lot,” grunted Bill. “How’d you manage to spend two weeks there?”

“It was very interesting,” said Tom. “Anyway I like seeing my grandchildren; and they’re not weird – just young and enthusiastic just as we all were once.”

“Don’t know about that,” muttered Bill.

“Well,” said Tom, laughing, “even you were young once, Bill, though I’m not so sure about enthusiastic.”

“I’m happy as I am,” said Bill. “I keeps myself to myself. Anyway what was interesting about staying with that lot?”

“Tony and Martha showed me a film clip on their smart TV,” said Tom. “It was called ‘Whose job is it to save the planet?’”

“I don’t know,” laughed Bill. “Superman’s, Batman’s or one of the other super heroes.”

“Now you are going doolally, Bill,” said Tom. “They’re not real – just fictional characters. They couldn’t even save your house if it was falling down, let alone the planet.”

“I knows that, Tom,” Bill replied. “I ain’t that stupid. I wasn’t being serious.”

“Well, you ought to be,” said Tom. “It *is* serious. The film clip was made by Fiona Harvey of the Guardian as she reviewed nearly 30 years of COP meetings.”

“Cop meetings?” exclaimed Bill. “She ain’t expecting the world’s coppers to save the planet, is she?”

“Are you winding me up?” asked Tom. “I mean those meetings that take place in November or December each year like COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 and COP27 in Sharm-el-Sheik in Egypt last year.”

“Oh those,” said Bill. “Why didn’t you say so? Ain’t they what that young Swedish girl said was all blah-blah-blah?”

“You mean Greta Thunberg,” replied Tom. “Yes, she did say so and I can sympathize; sadly it is difficult to get all the nations to agree and compromises have to be made, which is disappointing and frustrating. But, as Fiona Harvey says, without the COP meetings things would be even worse.”

“Don’t see how,” grunted Bill. “I suppose that Thunberg girl appears in the video with her blah-blah-blah.”

“No, Bill, she doesn’t,” answered Tom. “But another climate activist does appear more than once – someone called Dominique Palmer.”

“Another foreigner,” muttered Bill, “telling us what we ought to be doing.”

“Dominique is British and grew up in London,” said Tom. “Besides from what I remember from when we were at school, you didn’t like *anyone* telling you what to do; it made no difference whether they were British or foreign.”

“That’s true, Tom,” agreed Bill with a grin. “That’s true.”

“As I was saying,” sighed Tom, “though Dominique is still young – she’ll be 24 this coming November – she’s already made quite an impact as a climate activist, using her many talents as a storyteller, writer and speaker. She’s spoken on world stages about climate change. My grandchildren thinks she’s great.”

“OK, OK,” grunted Bill. “But what’s the point? The climate’s always been changing. I remembers being told at school how coal came from plants rotting in marshes when Britain was tropical. It ain’t tropical now.”

“Oh, Bill,” said Tom, “that was *millions* of years ago, before even dinosaurs were about, when there was *no* Britain and the continents were all different and hadn’t drifted into the places they’re in now. It’s got nothing to with what’s happening now.”

“Oh dear,” said Bill. “That’s difficult to get my head around. I’ll need another pint to help clear it. Shall I get you another one as well?”

“Just a half for me, thank you,” answered Tom.

Bill was gone for a while, but eventually came back with his pint, and a half for Tom.

“Sorry I was awhile,” said Bill, “I needed to be a gentleman before supping another pint. But I was thinking ...”

“About time too,” said Tom with a laugh.

“No, listen Tom,” said Bill. “What about the Ice Age; there were men around in those days, weren’t there? But they didn’t die out; nature sorts things out in the end.”

“There have been at least five ice ages over the past two and half billion years and it’s true there were humans around in the last of these. But the reasons for them are complicated and the changes into and out of those ice ages were gradual, caused by nature and allowing nature to adapt.”

“I told you, Tom,” said Bill, “nature adapts.”

“But Bill,” said Tom, “the present global warming has been much more sudden since the industrial revolution in the second half of the 19th century; and it’s not been caused by nature – it’s been caused by us humans.”

“But,” said Bill, supping his ale, “nature’s stronger than us humans. She’ll put it right.”

“No, chance,” said Tom. “The change has happened too quickly and if we don’t do anything to bring it under control, it will get out of hand and our planet will become uninhabitable.”

“You’re just a pessimist, Tom,” said Bill. “Trust mother nature and be an optimist like me.”

“You’re not an optimist,” said Tom. “You’re an ostrich, Bill, not seeing what’s going on around you.”

“I’m quite happy in my own world,” agreed Bill, smiling. “But I still says you’re a pessimist.”

“I’m not a pessimist, Bill,” said Tom. “I am an *optimist* with faith in the younger generation of people like Greta Thunberg, Dominique Palmer and my grandchildren.”

“Ah!” said Bill, “just a lot of hysterical youngsters getting things out of proportion.”

“Not all youngsters,” said Tom. “Why one of the longest advocates of climate action is the 97 year old David Attenborough. Haven’t you seen his video clip ‘Act now on climate change or it will be too late’ and other similar videos?”

“Uh,” grunted Bill, as his head began to nod, “no I ain’t. No, I ain’t.”

Before Tom could reply, Bill had dozed off, overcome by his intake of ale.