

The Scholar Vagabond

- S. Kanimozhi

(Inspired by Matthew Arnold's poem "The Scholar Gipsy")

The vast stretch of green meadow dressing up the hill with the bruised-blue sky pressed against it shows what peace can feel like. I find myself stretching on the grass, feeling a little dreamy lately. It just seems so refreshing to sit and relax but we have got quest in hand, the shepherd and I. From here, I can see my friend standing, probably admiring the scenic view of this pastoral setting.

"Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill," I scream with a concerned tone. The flock of sheep enclosed in their pen are bawling too much and I fear they may rack their throat. I know my friend and I have a quest to undertake. But it's also time that the shepherd attends to his duties and lets the beasts graze before the cropped herbage shoot another head.

When the sun slowly sets and all the tired men and watchful dogs go about to take rest, few white sheep are usually seen crossing and recrossing the strips of moon-blached meadow. That is the only movement at the dead of evening in this serene hill. When this little world is still, I know deep down in my heart that that will be the time for the shepherd and I to begin our noble quest. "Come on over, shepherd, after you have finished your work. Remember, we are on a wondrous mission," I say enthusiastically.

I decide to sit and wait in this shady nook of the high fields where the farmer leaves his coat, basket and earthen cruse. The farmer works throughout the morning binding the bundles of grain stalks that he has reaped. After labouring in the fields, he used to come back to this cosy place at noon to have his lunch. "You will find me here shepherd. So, finish off your duties and let's go about with our business," I say to my friend with excitement. As I slacken my position, I hear the bleating of folded flocks somewhere from the uplands. I also hear the hushed voices of reapers who are harvesting corn in distant fields. I happily take in all the live murmur of this summer's day.

Only half portion of the field is harvested, and so I can very well see the cut stalks that are yellowing and the round green roots. I will be in this corner till sundown, wasting my time trying to understand this beautiful spectacle unfolding before my very own eyes. The bright red poppy flowers peeing through the thick corn are effortlessly proving to be a miracle. Oh, I can also see pale pink flowers of the convolvulus plant with thin, tender tendrils

spiralling their way through. How can I not talk about the rejuvenating floral fragrance of the air-swept lindens? The plant rustles down its perfumed showers of bloom on me and on the bent grass where I am laid. Not to mention the bowery embrace the linden offers to shelter me from the sweltering August sun.

From up here, my wandering eyes gently rest on the high towers of Oxford University. Beside me in the grass lies a book. It's by Joseph Glanvil. I read it often. It's a book preferred by many people. Let me read it one more time. The book tells the tale of a poor Oxford scholar who is a well-informed person possessing a quick, inventive brain. However, I guess he is side-lined because of his poor financial condition. Probably, the University might have preferred only those belonging to the noble and aristocratic families. Tired of knocking at preferment's door, one fine summer morning, the scholar abandons his friends, quits from Oxford and joins the gipsy-lore. He then roams around the world with a care-free attitude along with his wild brotherhood, the gipsies. "How can someone leave Oxford! He will come to little good," deemed most men. But the scholar came back neither to Oxford nor to his friends.

After several years, two of his buddies from Oxford met the scholar gipsy in the country lanes and inquired his ways of life.

"How have you been mate?" asked Gertrude Bell, a fellow student.

But before the scholar gipsy could reply, Richard Burton who was always in the habit of poking his nose in other's business asked, "I get it. You must be living a plain and hard life. Tell me more about your ambiguous lifestyle man."

"Well, I am with the gipsy-crew now, sort of gallivanting to find my inner purpose," said the scholar gipsy. He exclaimed that the gipsies were experts in the art of controlling the working of men's brains, much to the amusement of the two scholars.

"The nomadic crew can in fact bind men to what thoughts they can think. So, I am all set to pursue this skill by learning the nitty-gritties and secrets of this art."

After a brief pause, the scholar gipsy revealed his intention.

"And when I master it, I will impart the knowledge to the whole world. But, you know, it takes time. You cannot just gain this skill with your intelligence. I believe only a heaven-sent moment can enable me to acquire the skills of my wild brethren." And thus, the scholar gipsy waited for that divine spark to go about fulfilling his wish to master a whole new skill.

He parted ways with his friends and returned no more. But rumours swept the countryside that the lost scholar was seen straying here and there. Rare glimpses of him by the residents suggest that the scholar was seen in a pensive mood. "I found him tongue-tied. He was lost in his own thoughts," reported a person. Another stated, "The scholar was wearing a hat of antique shape. And yes, it was a grey cloak that he wore which very much resembled the attire of the gipsies!"

Not just the residents, even shepherds had met the scholar-gipsy on the Hurst in spring. The uncouth farmers usually go to the alehouses after labouring a full day. "When I entered the lonesome alehouse in the Berkshire moors, I found the man quietly seated there," said James, a smock-frocked boor.

"Aha, we saw him at our meeting place too," said some farmers in chorus.

"In the midst of our drink and clatter he disappears just like that."

"He seems quite reserved and sure as hell doesn't like a ton of company and noises."

Finding the scholar gipsy has been my sole quest. I myself have given orders to farmers and farm boys, whose role is to scare the rooks in lone wheatfields, to lookout for the scholar gipsy. Wait, have I seen the scholar before? Maybe I had, or maybe I didn't know it was him. I am always on the look-out for you, scholarly nomad. I keep asking others I meet to find you and bring you to me. I am deeply fascinated by you. Sometimes in the summer-heat, I lie in a boat moored to the cool bank. I watch the warm, green-muffled Cumner hills from my little boat and wonder if you are somewhere there, in the deepest part of your shy retreats.

When Oxford University students returned home on summer nights, they swear that they have noticed the scholar gipsy make his way across the Thames River at Bab-lock hithe. "I have seen him enjoying the company of nature by letting his fingers trail in the gushing water," said Harry, a recent graduate of Oxford. "Oh, me too! I am amused by the man's eccentric behaviour. When I saw him, he was lying backwards in a punt with a bunch of flowers on his lap. He was quite interested by the moon's dim light on the stream. I wonder what his stream of thoughts were and where it led him to," narrated another student excitedly.

In May when the summer season just shows its head, maidens from faraway hamlets come to celebrate and dance around the Fyfield elm after the

harvest is done and dusted. "I have seen the nomad roaming through the darkening fields, crossing the stile," said Matilda who regularly visits the place on festive occasions. Jumping with joy and wearing a beaming smile, 12-year-old Louisa gleefully said, "He was kind enough to offer me a bunch of white anemone and dark bluebells." Louisa's sister Eliza joined her and said, "And I got purple orchises with spotted leaves. They were pretty cool, cool enough to lighten anybody's mood." While the damsels have seen him there, he disappears before they could confabulate with him. None can describe his personality and new-found interests precisely.

Surprisingly, there have been other instances where people momentarily noticed the scholar gipsy in a pensive state but at second glance he was gone, no more to be seen. Farmers who take a break from their back-breaking work have mentioned of seeing him standing on the Godstow bridge. Even homemakers who sit at the doorstep to darn clothes have witnessed this gipsy watching the threshers in their grange. He is also spotted in Bagley Woods which is the ideal resting place of the gipsies. As superstitions abound the gipsies that they are dangerous creatures possessing magical powers, the villagers don't let them stay anywhere near the townlet. So, the scholar gipsy dwells in forests by setting up a tent. He is once seen in Thessaly observing a little black bird. While the bird is playing with a stick, the scholar gipsy is waiting for that heaven-sent spark to shower on him.

Dear scholar gipsy, you seem so familiar to me. Didn't I meet you once in winter with you sitting on a wooden bench? You then climbed the Cumner range adoring each snowflake as they fell on you. It was Christmassy with festal lights and your eyes were sparkling as you watched the Christ-Church Hall. I remember it all...wait, is this all but a dream?

I now come to terms that 200 years have passed since Glanvil birthed you, yet you seem so fresh and lively in my head. It's hard to digest the fact that this feeling of knowing you is all but a figment of my imagination.

If you are real, you must be sleeping peacefully in some sequestered churchyard with a yew tree nearby. I bet you hadn't felt the lapse of hours just like we modern men do. I am on the lookout for you to find answers to some of the crucial problems in life. If you can hear me, please tell me what wears out the life of mortal man? We have tried a thousand schemes and yet the pressures of our age are insurmountable!

I am dying to know why you dropped out of Oxford. Is it because you want to run away from the materialistic grip of life? By reading about you, I can make out that you cleverly approached life with a single aim, single business

and an ultimate desire. You didn't choose the path of ordinary folks who had a 1000 aims yet no mental peace or tranquillity. You didn't lead 100 different lives. Although you were a wanderer, you didn't let your mind wander. You didn't let doubts exhaust you. I admire your unwavering hope. From you, I've learnt how to be patient and stick on to it till we achieve our wishes. Now I know that if we lose patience even for a sec, we may slip into the abysmal despair.

Like a truant boy you were combing the countryside in search of that divine spark. You were bubbling with optimism while preserving your fresh wits. The age you were born in was a beautiful one free from any afflictions. Your life was clear as the freshly flowing Thames.

Dear scholar gipsy, if you had been like any one of us, you would long be pronounced dead. But now you are immortal in the pages of Glanvil's book. You lived in happy times. So be where you are. Don't you dare enter the modern age which is already burdened by modern diseases. Our heads are overtaxed and our hearts are palsied. Please do not come near us else you will lose your bubbling energy and fall sick very easily. Be like Queen Dido who turned away her false companion Aeneas. The forests can offer you a protective and tranquil life. Rest there, listen to the nightingales and freshen your flowers but don't you dare come anywhere near us. Just like how the Tyrian trader re-coursed his sea-route upon seeing the Greek coaster, go away from us even if we greet you.

Goodbye scholar gipsy, be blessed and be where you are!
