

Crane Mansions

A novel about the redeeming power of cake

Gert Loveday

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On any cloudy winter's night when owls coast on the wind and dog foxes dart across shadowy spaces, the great slumped shape of Crane Mansions is a vast pit of darkness. It is forbidden for the inmates of the lower levels to have any lights there at night, and only in the upper levels where the Leaders dwell can an occasional light be seen to flicker behind drawn curtains. Travellers lost on the moors do not approach Crane Mansions for help. The building stands huge on a steep hill, dominating the flat expanse of moorland extending as far as the eye can see. The chained watchdog howls in the courtyard where the stables used to be. And in the garage, covered in a silk wrap, sits the Headmaster's Fusilier Royal in all its shining glory...

Chapter 1 Forked foot, feather

Dr Hubert Crane, Headmaster of Crane Mansions Regulatory School for the Indigent, master of this whole world of pupils, staff and servants, sat at his desk peering through his telescope at the pigeon loft outside his window. He could see a group of three birds. One had the iridescent band around its throat, another a russet and white body, the other, a lower type, probably female, was dark grey. They perched on the edge of the loft, iridescent band hopped down a square, russet followed, and then, 'What impudence,' whispered Dr Crane, inferior grey squeezed in next to iridescent band so he had to move aside. Then the dance began again. Dr Crane scribbled feverishly in a large red volume. These morning sessions were often his best work for the day and from them he formed new Axioms that he set the students to study for the next day.

'Why the windward whirling?' he declaimed as he wrote. 'And whence the nodder on the utmost perch?'

He was a plump, imposing figure in his academic gown, his curling white hair standing out round his red cheeks, his voice rich and mellow. He liked the sound of his own voice. He liked order and obedience, and he disliked being bothered with the details of running the school, for he was a scholar, a seer, a visionary.

Visitors to the school often said, 'What a handsome man. And so like his father.' In a general way, they were right. Dr Crane's crown of curly white hair and his noble Roman nose were a replica of his father's, and the Texts, Precepts and Axioms according to which he ran his school had their origins in his father's Rational and Regular Education System. But to the relentless exactitude of his father's regime, the second Dr Crane had brought the spirit of Poetic Inspiration. From its origins in his adored, long-lost Little Mummy's tales of fairies, ducklings changing into swans, children changing into bluebirds, through his youthful passion for the works of the poet Blake, to its culmination in a vision of Blake in old Nat Dodge's pigeon loft, of which we will hear more later in this story, Pigeonnic Augury had become his entire life. Slowly, infinitely slowly, he was advancing closer and closer to the Great Truth at the heart of things, the Truth that his pigeons signalled to him in their hoppings and bobbings, their cooings and wheelings and the patterns their colours made as they huddled on their perches. His volumes of Texts and Axioms grew ever fatter and the pattern of truth they revealed more perfect the more he reflected on them. It was strange then that on this bright morning his pigeons gave him no warning that the stately progress of his life was about to become a furious merry-go-round. Sighing as a bell sounded below, he made his way

downstairs towards the Break-fast hall, thinking of kidneys, bacon and porridge with double cream.

In the basement kitchen far below Ena Vowles was making a tripe sandwich for her cat Rameses, or Messie, as Ena usually called him. The tall black cat was watching her with intense dislike, resenting her slowness. All around them steamed a panoply of dull vessels from which the unique smell of the students' Break-fast issued like some evil genie. So strong was this odour that you could almost imagine it rising in a visible spiral from the rattling lids, and indeed the roof above Ena's head was stained yellow by years of Break-fast fumes. Break-fast, Midday Intake and Evening Gratitude, years and years of them coating the low roof that seemed to seep slightly. The bell sounded for Break-fast and she heard the shuffling noise of the students' feet in the bare corridor outside. Lord bless her, she thought, it was eat, eat, eat all the time with them. She was run off her feet in this ghastly hole of a kitchen and no one to help her with little Tibbie Clemons off sick. Turning her back on Rameses' accusing glare, she began to heave the steaming vessels on to the wooden trolleys that stood along the walls just as a tall, thick-set boy appeared in the doorway.

'And about time too, Stanley Sampson!' she said.

The boy took hold of the first trolley and heaved it into the wooden passageway without a word, then returned for the second and the third. His thick eyebrows were set in a puzzled frown over deep-set brown eyes and he breathed heavily through parted lips. Ena raised her eyes to heaven as he disappeared for the third time, and turned to the bench to finish Messie's sandwich.

In the long hall the students stood by their plates until Dr Crane and the other Leaders had seated themselves at the high table, from which white napkins, white china and fine glassware flashed in the meagre light that entered the high windows. Leader Hogue stood by the high table until all his colleagues were seated, his pale hands pressed together as if he were praying. Then he opened his hands and stretched his arms wide like the conductor of an orchestra, and waved them downwards to indicate to the Learners that they could sit. Millie Lord felt the cracked wood of her chair pressing into her frail little bones as she sat, and she couldn't help thinking of the bones that were there just underneath her skin, like the bones of those dead pigeons she saw last night in her – was it a dream, or was it a Seeing? Which one was worse, to dream a bad thing or to See it? As usual, she closed her eyes and blocked off her nose inside to eat her Oatch, and as usual Gertrude Shelton chanted in her bully's voice, 'Millie don't like 'er swilly! Silly Millie don't like 'er swilly!' but low, so no one at the Leaders' table could hear her.

At the Leaders' table Dr Crane was leaning back in his chair, his chin raised and his plump hand rising and falling, carrying the big-bowled spoon, the flashing crystal glass, over the mound of his stomach to the cavern of his mouth. Beside him Marcel Hogue sat hunched

slightly forward, his head over his bowl and his hand making just the slightest movement from bowl to mouth, as if he had worked out how to do it as unobtrusively as possible. His yellowish-grey hair swung forward from where it was tucked behind his ears, making a big C each side of his wide, pale cheeks. He was listening to Dr Crane, darting his eyes sideways and giving pigeon-like nods of agreement. In the subdued murmur of the Learners' voices, Dr Crane's low boom hummed like a distant swarm of bees.

'Billie,' said Stanley Sampson, 'do you dough the adswer to yesderday's wud?'

Yesterday's one. Millie could hear Dr Crane's voice saying it. Forked foot, feather, what is your voice to me? You weren't supposed to tell, but she felt sorry for Stanley.

'Maybe,' she said, 'maybe it's be careful of the evil things in the world?'

'Oh,' said Stanley.

She could see him trying to put it into his mind in case Mr Hogue asked him.

'You told Stanley!' chanted Gertrude Shelton. 'You told, and you're not supposed to tell!'

'Billie,' said Stanley after a silence, 'what's the evil thigs in the world?'

'Oh, money, and clothes, and cars, and having a good time, things like that.'

'What's havig a good dibe?'

'Um, having a thick blanket and a pillow, and being warm in bed, and running round outside in the sun,' said Millie promptly, because those were the things that came into her mind when she tried to remember her life before she came here. Before Stanley could ask another question, a scrape and a rumble from the Leaders' table indicated that Dr Crane was about to make his way into Assembly. The Leaders filed behind him, first Marcel Hogue, then Bernard Hamm, Basil Bowen, Odell Vincent and last of all, because she was a woman even if she was a Leader, Sybilla Shaw. Her long grey hair floated over the sleeves of her black gown like spiderwebs blowing in the wind, and her high-bridged nose looked red and suffering.

In the Assembly Hall they crowded into rows in front of the wooden benches waiting for the sign from Leader Hogue to sit. Dr Crane stood at the lectern with his head bowed, as if he were sucking up the meaning of the heavy brown books that stood there. Then he raised his head and pointed his nose right up at the ceiling, the signal for Marcel Hogue to wave his arms to tell the Learners to sit down. Down they went, huddling together on the benches that were just a bit too low and a bit too narrow for the older ones and a bit too high for the little ones. Millie could feel Stanley Sampson's arms shaking as he held them stretched out stiffly on big knees that jutted up almost as far as his shoulders. Dr Crane waited till there was absolute silence in the Assembly Hall.

'Consider their flight,' he said in a meditative voice, his eyes fixed on the rafters above their heads. 'Consider their traJECtory!' suddenly flinging the syllable out with a harsh crispness that made the Learners start. Stanley Sampson almost fell backwards from the bench. 'Their traJECtory!' And, fixing his eyes on a boy sitting in the front row, he went on,

in a wooing tone now, 'Blaskett,' closing his eyes and lifting his hands as if he was feeling some infinitely fine and soft thing in the air, 'Blaskett, consider the fine down that nestles under their strong wings.'

Blaskett blinked, and closed his eyes as if trying very hard to consider it. A long silence hung over the room. Millie could feel her face growing hot. Had he said it yet? Consider the traJECTory, was that it? Consider the, what was it, the down on their wings? No, he was taking up the heavy brown book from the lectern and dipping into the pages with his pale fingers. He read, looked up at them. Now he was going to say it.

'If there is soot in the air,' he said in an oddly brisk voice as if giving a recipe for soup, 'you may note that the bird shortens the length of its step if on a wooden or paved flooring, yet, in open fields, or walking along a fence, no such alteration in gait is noted.'

He closed the book. The upturned faces waited. As Dr Crane folded his hands and lowered them onto the heavy brown book, Mr Hogue stepped forward.

'The Leader of Leaders has delivered the Lesson,' he said in his metallic voice that reminded Millie of a knife cutting through soft cheese.

Millie's mind raced. Soot, that might be Sin of some kind. Was it good or bad to alter your step? It must be good if the bird did it, but only sometimes. Suddenly a horrible thought came to her. What if there were bad birds? Again she remembered the ugly birds of her dream. She'd never even thought of that. She just thought pigeons must be good. But what if Dr Crane was telling them that there were some bad pigeons? Her head was spinning. This might be a Bad Thought.

'But,' said Marcel Hogue, 'are we progressed enough to Intake the message of today?'

All the children lowered their heads as his gaze ran over them. And then it happened.

'Stanley Sampson,' he said, 'Forked foot, feather, what is your voice to me?'

Stanley breathed heavily.

'Well?' said Marcel Hogue. 'Stand up, Stanley Sampson. Forked foot, feather, what is your voice to me?'

Stanley said desperately, 'You dake your billow outside id the sud.'

Marcel Hogue raised his hands and took a step backwards as if pushed by a great wind. His pale eyebrows shot up above the round blue eyes.

'Your pillow?' he said, 'Your pillow, Stanley Sampson?'

'Yes, Bister Hogue,' burred Stanley, sweating, 'havig a good tibe, Bister Hogue, blease.'

Marcel shook his head sadly. He was enjoying himself.

'Stadly Sabsod,' he said, 'you are a fool of a boy. You are a low boy. You are a boy lacking in gratitude. You are the worst of all possible boys.'

Silence.

'Is that not so?'

‘Yes, Bister Hogue.’

‘Stadly Sabsod,’ said Mr Hogue again, ‘remove yourself to my office.’

Poor Stanley made his shambling way through the crowded benches, his furry head hanging low. Mr Hogue’s eyes darted around the room and settled on Gertrude Shelton.

‘Gertrude Shelton,’ he said, ‘Forked foot, feather, what is your voice to me?’

Gertrude stood up and threw her chest out.

‘People think they can do what they like, but that’s wrong, you hafta do what you’re told,’ she blurted, all on one note as if she’d learned it by heart. Which she had. As usual, she made Louie Sharp tell her the answer to the Text.

‘Hmm,’ said Mr Hogue, ‘hmm, a worthy thought. Sit down, Gertrude Shelton. Augustus Thinn, what do you say?’

A small curly-haired boy stood in one of the front rows.

‘Please, Mr Hogue, there’s lots of bad people round and you shouldn’t listen to them?’ he said, his voice rising so high at the end that it cracked into a squeak like the recorder Millie used to play.

Marcel Hogue’s face was relaxing into an almost-smile.

‘And you, Claus Turp, what is your message?’

‘Like Augustus Thinn?’ he said hopefully.

‘Like Augustus Thinn?’

‘Yes, like what he said?’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Don’t take any notice of bad people?’

‘That is not what Augustus Thinn said, Claus Turp.’

Claus fell silent, starting to make his way through the rows even before Marcel Hogue indicated, with an exaggerated pointing of his finger, that he was to join Stanley Sampson in the office.

Dr Crane flapped his arms in the Wave of Dismissal and turned from the lectern. Mr Hogue signalled to the Leaders and they filed out, leaving Sybilla Shaw in command of the Learners.

‘First Class Learners, STAND.’

For a moment the room was still. Row upon row of pale young faces turned towards the Upper Table. Slowly, and in a rumble and scraping of boots, Giles Snedhawk, Will Goshton and Ned Parcher rose to their feet. Snedhawk whispered to the other two. Then, one by one they bowed and blew a kiss to Miss Shaw and strolled out. A quiet gasp swept around the room, but Miss Shaw rapped out one word, ‘Silence.’ She showed no sign of the insult she had received except for a tightening of her mouth and a slight reddening of the tip of her nose. These boys were now at the Top of the Tree. They had lessons only with Mr Hogue and Mr

Vincent. Soon, if they were fortunate, they would achieve the position for which all their work under Dr Crane's rule had prepared them: admission as the lowest assistants of assistants into the government's elite Department of Parerga and Paralipomena. No females worked in that Department; no females reached the First Class to prepare for entry. Miss Sybilla Shaw was the only woman to become a Leader in the history of the school. She gave thanks every day for the honour. Not once had she ever questioned Dr Crane's teachings. If the senior boys chose to challenge her authority, so be it. She was only a woman.

As Millie's class clattered into the classroom and took their places on the narrow benches, Miss Shaw swept in and closed the door with a snap that resounded in the silence.

'I was SICK today, SICK at heart at the way you Learners of the Fifth acquitted yourselves,' she said. Her voice sank to a whisper. 'Two students sent to be Interviewed by Mr Hogue.' Then she raised herself on her toes and shrieked, 'The Disgrace, the Disgrace.'

Millie felt Miss Shaw's voice resounding in her head. Her ears were ringing.

'What IS the matter Millie Lord? Why are you shaking your head? Don't you think it a Disgrace?'

Millie tried to explain.

'Please Miss Shaw, poor Stanley does get mixed up and Claus was only trying to say the right thing.'

'Mixed up? The right thing? So you think you know better than Mr Hogue?'

'No, Miss. Sorry, Miss. I didn't mean to be wrong, Miss.'

Millie hung her head and let the familiar feelings of shame and confusion wash over her. At the front of the class she could see Gertrude's smug back, thick and solid as if to say, 'Look at me. I don't get mixed up.'

I hate her, thought Millie. And suddenly another thought came into her mind, And I hate this stupid school.

'Stand up on the bench, Millie Lord. Put your hands into wings and stay without moving until I say you may.'

Millie slowly climbed onto the narrow wooden bench. She was wobbly at the best of times, but today she had shocked herself with so many terrifying thoughts she was glad to have to concentrate on keeping her balance. What if Mr Hogue found out her ungrateful thoughts? He seemed to have a sixth sense about irregular thoughts and behaviour. Looking down on her classmates she stretched her arms out sideways into wings. She tried to think about the soft down under the pigeons' wings, their warbling coo that sounded so calm and friendly, but the image of the scraggy dead pigeons from her dream or Seeing came into her mind. She began one of the inner chants that she used to keep the world at bay:

There she weaves by night and day

A magic web with colours gay

And throughout the long aching morning she ran loops of her song through and through her brain.

