

Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition Of
Humphry Clinker*, 1771

Characters: Mr Matthew Bramble (squire), Mrs Tabitha Bramble (sister of Mrs Bramble and owner of Chowder (lapdog), Mrs Winifred Jenkins (maidservant), John Thomas (postilion); Humphrey Clinker (beggar)

... Chowder, after having tore my uncle's leg in the confusion of the fall, had retreated under the scat, and from thence the footman drew him by the neck; for which good office, he bit his fingers to the bone. The fellow, who is naturally surly, was so provoked at this assault, that he saluted his ribs with a hearty kick, exclaiming, 'Damn the nasty son of a bitch, and them he belongs to!' A benediction, which was by no means lost upon the implacable virago his mistress—Her brother, however, prevailed upon her to retire into a peasant's house, near the scene of action, where his head and hers were covered, and poor Jenkins had a fit. Our next care was to apply some sticking plaister to the wound in his leg, which exhibited the impression of Chowder's teeth; but he never opened his lips against the delinquent—Mrs Tabby, alarmed at this scene, 'You say nothing, Matt (cried she); but I know your mind—I know the spite you have to that poor unfortunate animal! I know you intend to take his life away!' 'You are mistaken, upon my honour! (replied the squire, with a sarcastic smile) I should be incapable of harbouring any such cruel design against an object so amiable and inoffensive; even if he had not the happiness to be your favourite.'

John Thomas was not so delicate. The fellow, whether really alarmed for his life, or instigated by the desire of revenge, came in, and bluntly demanded, that the dog should be put to death; on the supposition, that if ever he should run mad hereafter, he, who had been bit by him, would be infected—My uncle calmly argued upon the absurdity of his opinion, observing, that he himself was in the same predicament, and would certainly take the precaution he proposed, if he was not sure he ran no risque of infection. Nevertheless, Thomas continued obstinate; and, at length declared, that if the dog was not shot immediately, he himself would be his executioner—This declaration opened the flood-gates of Tabby's eloquence, which would have shamed the first-rate oratress of Billingsgate. The footman retorted in the same stile; and the squire dismissed him from his service, after having prevented me from giving him a good horse-whipping for his insolence.

The coach being adjusted, another difficulty occurred—Mrs Tabitha absolutely refused to enter it again, unless another driver could be found to take the place of the postilion; who, she affirmed, had overturned the carriage from malice aforethought—After much dispute, the man resigned his place to a shabby country fellow, who undertook to go as far as Marlborough, where they could be better provided; and at that place we arrived about one O'clock, without farther impediment. Mrs Bramble, however, found new matter of offence; which, indeed, she has a particular genius for extracting at will from almost every incident in life. We had scarce entered the room at Marlborough, where we stayed to dine, when she exhibited a formal complaint against the poor fellow who had superseded the postilion. She said he was such a beggarly rascal that he had ne'er a shirt to his back, and had the impudence to shock her sight by shewing his bare posteriors, for which act of indelicacy he deserved to be set in the stocks. Mrs Winifred Jenkins confirmed the assertion, with respect to his nakedness, observing, at the same time, that he had a skin as fair as alabaster.

'This is a heinous offence, indeed (cried my uncle) let us hear what the fellow has to say in his own vindication.' He was accordingly summoned, and made his appearance, which was equally queer and pathetic. He seemed to be about twenty years of age, of a middling size, with bandy legs, stooping shoulders, high forehead, sandy locks, pinking eyes, flat nose, and long chin—but his complexion was of a sickly yellow; his looks denoted famine, and the rags that he wore could hardly conceal what

decency requires to be covered—My uncle, having surveyed him attentively, said, with an ironical expression in his countenance, 'An't you ashamed, fellow, to ride postilion without a shirt to cover your backside from the view of the ladies in the coach?' 'Yes, I am, an please your noble honour (answered the man) but necessity has no law, as the saying is—And more than that, it was an accident. My breeches cracked behind, after I had got into the saddle' 'You're an impudent varlet (cried Mrs Tabby) for presuming to ride before persons of fashion without a shirt'—'I am so, an please your worthy ladyship (said he) but I am a poor Wiltshire lad—I ha'n't a shirt in the world, that I can call my own, nor a rag of clothes, and please your ladyship, but what you see—I have no friend nor relation upon earth to help me out—I have had the fever and ague these six months, and spent all I had in the world upon doctors, and to keep soul and body together; and, saving your ladyship's good presence, I han't broke bread these four and twenty hours.'

Mrs Bramble, turning from him, said, she had never seen such a filthy tatterdemalion, and bid him begone; observing, that he would fill the room full of vermin—Her brother darted a significant glance at her, as she retired with Liddy into another apartment, and then asked the man if he was known to any person in Marlborough?—When he answered, that the landlord of the inn had known him from his infancy; mine host was immediately called, and being interrogated on the subject, declared that the young fellow's name was Humphry Clinker. That he had been a love begotten babe, brought up in the work-house, and put out apprentice by the parish to a country black-smith, who died before the boy's time was out: that he had for some time worked under his ostler, as a helper and extra postilion, till he was taken ill of the ague, which disabled him from getting his bread: that, having sold or pawned every thing he had in the world for his cure and subsistence, he became so miserable and shabby, that he disgraced the stable, and was dismissed; but that he never heard any thing to the prejudice of his character in other respects. 'So that the fellow being sick and destitute (said my uncle) you turned him out to die in the streets.' 'I pay the poor's rate (replied the other) and I have no right to maintain idle vagrants, either in sickness or health; besides, such a miserable object would have brought a discredit upon my house.'

'You perceive (said the 'squire, turning to me) our landlord is a Christian of bowels—Who shall presume to censure the morals of the age, when the very publicans exhibit such examples of humanity?—Heark ye, Clinker, you are a most notorious offender—You stand convicted of sickness, hunger, wretchedness, and want—But, as it does not belong to me to punish criminals, I will only take upon me the task of giving you a word of advice. Get a shirt with all convenient dispatch, that your nakedness may not henceforward give offence to travelling gentlewomen, especially maidens in years.'

So saying, he put a guinea into the hand of the poor fellow, who stood staring at him in silence, with his mouth wide open, till the landlord pushed him out of the room.

In the afternoon, as our aunt stepped into the coach, she observed, with some marks of satisfaction, that the postilion, who rode next to her, was not a shabby wretch like the ragamuffin who had taken them into Marlborough. Indeed, the difference was very conspicuous: this was a smart fellow, with a narrow brimmed hat, with gold cording, a cut bob, a decent blue jacket, leather-breeches, and a clean linen shirt, puffed above the waist-band. When we arrived at the Castle, on Spin-hill, where we lay, this new postilion was remarkably assiduous in bringing in the loose parcels; and, at length, displayed the individual countenance of Humphry Clinker, who had metamorphosed himself in this manner, by relieving from pawn part of his own clothes, with the money he had received from Mr Bramble.

Mr Bramble did not know whether to chide or laugh at this declaration—He foresaw much contradiction on the side of Tabby; and on the other hand, he could not but be pleased with the gratitude of Clinker, as well as with the simplicity of his character—‘Suppose I was inclined to take you into my service (said he) what are your qualifications? what are you good for?’ ‘An please your honour (answered this original) I can read and write, and do the business of the stable indifferent well—I can dress a horse, and shoe him, and bleed and rowel him; and, as for the practice of sow-gelding, I won’t turn my back on e’er a he in the county of Wilts—Then I can make hog’s puddings and hob-nails, mend kettles and tin sauce-pans.’—Here uncle burst out a-laughing; and inquired what other accomplishments he was master of—‘I know something of single-stick, and psalmody (proceeded Clinker); I can play upon the jew’s-harp, sing Black-ey’d Susan, Arthur-o’Bradley, and divers other songs; I can dance a Welsh jig, and Nancy Dawson; wrestle a fall with any lad of my inches, when I’m in heart; and, under correction I can find a hare when your honour wants a bit of game.’ ‘Foregad! thou are a complete fellow (cried my uncle, still laughing) I have a good mind to take thee into my family—Prithee, go and try if thou can’st make peace with my sister—Thou ha’st given her much offence by shewing her thy naked tail.’

Clinker accordingly followed us into the room, cap in hand, where, addressing himself to Mrs Tabitha, ‘May it please your ladyship’s worship (cried he) to pardon and forgive my offences, and, with God’s assistance, I shall take care that my tail shall never rise up in judgment against me, to offend your ladyship again. Do, pray, good, sweet, beautiful lady, take compassion on a poor sinner—God bless your noble countenance; I am sure you are too handsome and generous to bear malice—I will serve you on my bended knees, by night and by day, by land and by water; and all for the love and pleasure of serving such an excellent lady.’

This compliment and humiliation had some effect upon Tabby; but she made no reply; and Clinker, taking silence for consent, gave his attendance at dinner. The fellow’s natural awkwardness and the flutter of his spirits were productive of repeated blunders in the course of his attendance—At length, he spilt part of a custard upon her right shoulder; and, starting back, trod upon Chowder, who set up a dismal howl—Poor Humphry was so disconcerted at this double mistake, that he dropt the china dish, which broke into a thousand pieces; then, falling down upon his knees, remained in that posture gaping, with a most ludicrous aspect of distress. Mrs Bramble flew to the dog, and, snatching him in her arms, presented him to her brother saying, ‘This is all a concerted scheme against this unfortunate animal, whose only crime is its regard for me—Here it is, kill it at once, and then you’ll be satisfied.’

Clinker, hearing these words, and taking them in the literal acceptation, got up in some hurry, and seizing a knife from the side-board, cried, ‘Not here, an please your ladyship—It will daub the room—Give him to me, and I’ll carry him to the ditch by the roadside’ To this proposal he received no other answer, than a hearty box on the ear, that made him stagger to the other side of the room. ‘What! (said she to her brother) am I to be affronted by every mangy hound that you pick up on the highway? I insist upon your sending this rascallion about his business immediately’ ‘For God’s sake, sister, compose yourself (said my uncle) and consider that the poor fellow is innocent of any intention to give you offence’ ‘Innocent as the babe unborn’ (cried Humphry). ‘I see it plainly (exclaimed this implacable maiden), he acts by your direction; and you are resolved to support him in his impudence This is a bad return for all the services I have done you; for nursing you in your sickness, managing your family, and keeping you from ruining yourself by your own imprudence—But now you shall part with that rascal or me, upon the spot, without farther loss of time; and the world shall see whether you have more regard for your own flesh and blood, or for a beggarly foundling taken from the dunghill.’