



The Death of Lady Mondegreen

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Drawings by Bernarda Bryson

WHEN I was a child, my mother used to read aloud to me from Percy's *Reliques*, and one of my favorite poems began, as I remember:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,
Oh, where hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl Amurray,
And Lady Mondegreen.

I saw it all clearly. The Earl had yellow curly hair and a yellow beard and of course wore a kilt. He was lying in a forest clearing with an arrow in his heart. Lady Mondegreen lay at his side, her long, dark brown curls spread out over the moss. She wore a dark green dress embroidered with light green leaves outlined in gold. It had a low neck trimmed with white lace (Irish lace, I think). An arrow had pierced her throat: from it blood trickled down over the lace. Sunlight coming through the leaves made dappled shadows on her cheeks and her closed eyelids. She was holding the Earl's hand.

It made me cry.

The poem went on to tell about the Earl Amurray. He was a braw gallant who did various things, including playing at the bar, which, I surmised, was something lawyers did in their unserious moments (I grew up during prohibition, though I was against prohibition and for Governor Smith). The poem also said that he was the queen's love, and that long would his lady look o'er the castle doun before she saw the Earl Amurray come

sounding through the toun. Nothing more was said about Lady Mondegreen.

But I didn't feel it was necessary. Everything had been said about Lady Mondegreen. The other ladies may have pretended they loved the Earl, but where were they? The queen was probably sitting in Dunfermline toun drinking the blood red wine along with the king (he was in "Sir Patrick Spens"). As for the Earl's wife, hiding in the castle in perfect safety and pretending to worry about him, it was clear she only married him so she could be Lady Amurray. She was such a sissy she probably didn't even look doun very hard —she was scared she'd fall through the crenellations of the battlements. As a matter of fact, she looked like a thin wispy girl I once socked in the stomach while I was guarding her in basketball because she kept pushing me over the line when the gym teacher couldn't see her and who was such a sissy that she fainted dead away so that everybody said I should learn to be a lady when really she was cheating—but I won't go into that. Lady Mondegreen loved the Earl truly, and she was very brave. When she heard that Huntly (the villain) was coming after him, she ran right out of her castle and into the forest to be with him without even stopping to change from her best dress.

By now, several of you more alert readers are jumping up and down in your impatience to interrupt and point out that, according to the poem, after they killed

the Earl of Murray, they *laid him on the green*. I know about this, but I won't give in to it. Leaving him to die all alone without even anyone to hold his hand—I won't have it.

The point about what I shall hereafter call mondegreens, since no one else has thought up a word for them, is that they are better than the original.

Take Hizeray. Hizeray is that huge hairy muscular Etruscan in the *Lays of Ancient Rome* who was such a demon with the broad-sword and who committed one of the great betrayals of history. If Hizeray had been there, Horatius couldn't have held the bridge a minute. Horatius was very brave, but Hizeray was bigger. If not, why was he the first person Lars Porsena of Clusium thought of, when he swore by the Nine Gods that the great house of Tarquin should suffer wrong no more?

And named a trysting-day,
And bade his messengers ride forth,
East and west and south and north,
To summon Hizeray.

Hizeray was hard to find or the messengers wouldn't have been told to go in so many directions, but he had no excuse. The messengers blew so many trumpets that tower and town and cottage heard the blast. I hoped Hizeray would rush in at the last moment and knock Horatius into the Tiber. (I was on Lars Porsena of Clusium's side, though you're not supposed to be, because his name was so much better than anyone else's.) But he never did. When they say

Shame on the false Etruscan
Who lingers in his home,
When Porsena of Clusium
Is on the march for Rome—

they mean Hizeray.

Then there is Harold. You know Harold: "Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy Name." It's not one I would have picked myself, but if He has to have a name, Harold will do.

Harold can do extraordinary things. There's a hymn which tells about this. As it's printed in the book, it says that He "moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." Actually, of course, what it really says is that Harold "moves in a mysterious way—He wanders down a horn."

You must pray to Harold if you want something very specific. For instance, if you have discovered how terribly hard it is to meet somebody there, you say to Harold, "Lead us not into Penn Station." At the same time, Harold will protect you from those jittery, unreliable New York, New Haven, and Hot-foot trains. They aren't so dangerous when they're coming into nice motherly old Gran Central.

Even the mizz doesn't scare Harold. The mizz is a sort of elemental protoplasm, which looks like a thick, pulpy, shifting fog. It is inhabited by all sorts of strangely shaped, white, squiddy animals, who moan quietly to themselves from time to time. The mizz is in the Evening Prayer Service: "Let the sea make a noise, and all that in the mizz."

If you decide that Harold is your shepherd, you can be sure of being looked after. If He can't be there Himself, He will get in Good Mrs. Murphy and "Surely Good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life." I knew Mrs. Murphy, and I can't think of anyone I'd rather have follow me, though, knowing her, I think she would more likely be several blocks ahead. She could do almost as many things as Harold. She told fortunes in tea leaves, baked delicious bread in a frying pan, and once when her little boy climbed onto the top of the roof and was too scared to get down, she shouted up to him, "You





come right down, you little Irish basket," and like magic he got over being scared and came right down.

Mrs. Murphy lived in Massachusetts, where they have a holiday in April called Pay Treats Day. It always surprises and infuriates people who come from other states, because, just when they want to go out to buy shoes or bean pots, they find all the shops closed up tight, while the shopkeepers are out paying treats. This reminds me of Paul Revere, who rode to "spread the alarm through every middlesex, village, and farm." Middlesexes look a little like drumlins, if you know what they are, but they are made of hay, and so also look a little like haystacks. There is one middlesex exactly in between each village and farm, and people who are too poor to live in a village or farm live in a middlesex.

And where the middlesexes, villages, and farms slope down to the sea, beyond the dunes, beyond the rocky coast, stands the Donzerly Light on a rugged, lonely promontory. At twilight, the lighthouse keeper turns it on, and it begins to sprout rockets

and bombs which light up the flag pole with the great big American flag which stands right next to it. This is where you go to pledge the legions to the flag.

There's a rude bridge around here somewhere, but I can't quite find it. It's so dilapidated that it touches the flood.

THREE are many mondegreens which give vivid new insights into tired old ideas. With all due respect to Rudy Vallee, "I'm just a vagabond lover" seems a pretty wet notion nowadays. A friend of mine sang it "I'm just a bag of unloving." If you've heard anything at all about psychiatry (who hasn't?) you'll realize that a bag of unloving is a significant and basic concept, and when you get a bag of unloving in search of a sweetheart, you've got the basis for a well-developed neurosis, because as long as you don't have adequate feelings of self-esteem and love yourself, you can't love someone else. See?

There's nothing very interesting about a vagabond lover, except that maybe he didn't like his mother.

The other day I found, on the back page of the *New York Post*, a headline: "Giants Struggle Under Weight of 'Dead' Bats." This is one of the most terrifying scenes I can think of, particularly since there is some doubt as to whether the bats are really dead. That would be bad enough, but if they were all stirring and squeaking—it would daunt even Hizeray.

Then there are those people who, in between radio programs, sing a very precise, cheerful, staccato, little ditty that goes: "In just eight seconds, you get H-bomb." After I had counted eight seconds and hadn't got it, I came to enough to realize that they were continuing with "Gas and heart-burn with Alk-aid." So I began to wonder if some of them were singing "aid from" instead of "H-bomb" but at that point the announcer came on and said: "This is New York's fur station," and I knew there was a mondegreen influence loose in that studio.

And some years ago, before World War II, there was a quiet Sunday morning when I discovered that on the front page of the *New York Times* it said: "World Blows Near." As I puzzled over this, I felt, in my room, the faint, fresh breath of the winds which were moving the turning world. Whose world was it? What was going to happen?

You see, if you lay yourself open to mondegreens, you must be valiant. The world, blowing near, will assail you with a thousand bright and strange images. Nothing like them has ever been seen before, and who knows what lost and lovely things may not come streaming in with them? But there is always the possibility that they may engulf you and that you will go wandering down a horn into a mondegreen underworld from which you can never escape. If you want to be safe, guarded from the underworld and the creatures in the mizz, you have only to turn your back. And if you're this type of person, all you'll feel is a faint twinge of heartburn over what you have missed—and you know how to get aid from that.

You have only to decide, as Humpty Dumpty put it (more or less), which is to be master, you or the word.

I am for the word, and against you.

BECAUSE there was a time, before she met the Earl Amurray, when Lady Mondegreen was a bag of unloving. Forlorn, in her embroidered dress, she looked out over her own crenelated battlement, wondering, all alone, about when the world would blow near so she could see what it was all about. Suddenly, beyond the moat, beyond the meadows, there is a stirring like dust far away on the horizon. A trumpet blasts, and she sees that it is the Earl Amurray, riding down the winding road, surrounded by men on prancing horses. Actually, these are Robin Hood's men, on a day off from Sherwood Forest, and the sun is glistening on their tunics of link and green. As the Earl Amurray spies Lady Mondegreen, he and his men spur their horses to a gallop and shout their wild, strange battle cry, "Haffely, Gaffely, Gaffely, Gonward." Lady Mondegreen rushes down the long winding stone stair. She reaches the portcullis and it rises as if by magic. The Earl Amurray seizes her, lifts her onto his horse and they ride over the drawbridge together and out into the world.

At noon, they come to a babbling brook and they stop and tie their horse to a tree. Upstream a little way (*Here it is!*) they see a rude bridge. The Earl Amurray pledges his legions to the flag to April's breeze unfurled and they go off, marching as to war, while the royal master leans against the

phone, waiting for news of their victory.

Lady Mondegreen and the Earl Amurray are left alone by the brook. "Tell me," says Lady Mondegreen, as they sit down on the soft greensward in a crowd of gold and affodils, "Tell me [for she is beginning to get a little bit hungry] where is fancy bread?" And at this very moment, Good Mrs. Murphy, who has been riding a suitable distance behind on a sturdy mule, trots up and presents them with an Irish basket, which she has been carrying on her saddlebow. In it, wrapped in a damask napkin, is the fancy bread, a delicious small brown loaf, full of raisins and covered with white frosting.

After they have eaten, they wash their hands in the stream and they rest awhile. Lady Mondegreen lies back on the grass and listens to the soft sounds of the mumble-bees as they muzz among the affodils. The Earl Amurray entertains her by sounding through a tune in his fine baritone voice. Then they ride on. When night falls, they come at last to their own particular middlesex where they camp out under the stars, and Lady Mondegreen, because she loves him, does not say a word when he takes all the covers.

Tragedy lies ahead and there is no one who can save them. Hizeray is cowering in his home under a weight of dead bats. And alas, Harold, who has been watching them from above with a happy smile on His benign face, cannot help. His horn has vanished, and there is no way He can wander down.

But even though the worst will happen, Lady Mondegreen and the Earl Amurray have had their journey together. Even if hereafter they get H-bomb, they have sniffed the delicate fragrance of the affodils, tasted the fancy bread, and slept together in the middlesex. Lady Mondegreen knows what the world is all about.

Lady Mondegreen is me.

