I

It was in humble lodgings in Manchester's Great Ancoats Street that court reporter Douglas Fortescue dyed his hair black in August 1832 and decided to reform English poetry.

Following instructions gleaned from *Fashionable Life,* he had concocted a mixture of slaked lime and extract of coal tar; having previously rinsed with chlorinated water, he now carefully brushed the sticky paste onto his exceedingly sleek and shoulder-length hair, strand by strand.

It was high time to get rid of the tiresome ash blond. It reminded Douglas of Yorkshire, of fresh air, of too many meals, of a clan of lusty peasantry to whom the young Fortescue had the great misfortune to be related. It also reminded him of his brother Jeremy, who still lived in Yorkshire and who would—without the necessary assistance—remain blond until the end of his days. Douglas pondered whether he should post him a strand of black hair if the experiment were to prove

successful. Jeremy disapproved of his little brother's fanciful notions. He frowned upon his being in Manchester. He would rather have had him in Yorkshire, where he, widowed at an early age, was preparing his four children for adult life. This, he considered, was something his brother might likewise find beneficial. When he was done, Douglas wrapped a towel around his head, knotted it into a turban, and with a faint smile wiped the tarry brush on a copy of Byron's *Childe Harold*.

Byron was dead. Byron's throne was vacant. Nobody matched Lord Byron's erstwhile fame; Douglas Fortescue had to rectify this sorry state of affairs. He allowed himself no more than two hours to devise his plan of action, precisely the time recommended by *Fashionable Life* for the tar extract to take effect. Douglas was twenty-two years old, and as far as becoming famous was concerned, he was gradually losing his patience.

He abhorred poetry. He abhorred poets. He saw them as wretchedness personified, defenseless creatures tormented by love and hate and visions, poisoned by laudanum and hysteria. Poets felt. And felt. And felt. A chill ran down Douglas's spine as soon as he thought about poets. Occasionally, whenever he forced himself to read their works in order to familiarize himself with the forms poetry assumed, his hand jerked involuntarily to the smoked-glass spectacles in his waistcoat pocket, to his shield against the malign intrusiveness of the

world. Douglas Fortescue the court reporter had spent a good month's salary on this adornment. The dark glasses made it easier for him to coexist with human beings, yet they offered no succor against poetry.

His scalp itched as he leafed through his collection of court transcripts. He always kept the shorthand version when he submitted the fair copy to the chief clerk. Douglas read the squabbling about legacies, claims, and embezzlement, the clamor of factory owners in this or that dispute with their debtors. He read the deranged rantings of an innkeeper from Huddersfield who had done wicked things with his wife's corpse. He skimmed the lamentation of a maiden aunt who had taken care of her sister's children, latterly with arsenic. Slowly Douglas leafed through the life and confessions of an Irish thief, whom he recalled as a glimmer of light in his otherwise dreary life as a recordkeeper: freckles, broad shoulders, broad hands—far too big, like a puppy's paws—his shirt wrongly buttoned in his agitation, and a tuft of red chest hair bursting forth. Douglas quickly turned the page; singing the praises of youthful thieves was certainly not the road to Mount Parnassus.

Douglas allowed himself no favorites. Douglas Fortescue was even-handed. They all passed in front of his eyes, one after the other, agitated and close to tears, the heirs and the disinherited, the victims and the perpetrators, the elderly little chap with the goatee beard who had misappropriated funds,

the innkeeper, the spinster, the thief, and all the Manchester cotton barons in their sweat-stained silk shirts, verging on apoplexy. What did they have in common? They suffered. They struggled for words. They felt. And felt. Douglas adjusted his turban and grinned. It was so simple. A legion of poets had passed in front of him and he hadn't even noticed. Douglas laughed. He had devised a new laugh for himself, weak and unattractive, with a slight ring to it. He already had it down to a fine art.

A quarter of an hour before the dye was ready, Douglas Fortescue resolved to base his reform of English poetry on a court report. Five minutes later it was evident to him that the world should remain ignorant of this source of inspiration. Then he decided: no rhymes. Because rhymes, Douglas opined, were tedious and antiquated.

He removed the towel from his head, thoroughly rinsed out the dye, drew a parting in the middle, and combed his hair over his cheeks and down to his shoulders. Then he stood in front of the mirror. It was a success. His hair was black as night, with a certain tinge of ginger that *Fashionable Life* had already cautioned him about. He carefully let his hair glide through his fingers. It felt strange, unnatural, a novel material, created in some factory.

Douglas suppressed a vague disgust. Then he said, "A-ha." He sucked in his cheeks and raised his eyebrows. It was the deuce of a job turning this face into the face of a poet. Year in, year out, Douglas fought against the legacy of Yorkshire. He

avoided the sun and dined upon vinegared potatoes. Douglas had the same broad jaw as Jeremy, the identical short nose, and he was tall like Jeremy, far too athletic, far too hirsute. "A-ha," repeated Douglas. He wished he could purchase a face in a shop, one as perfect as the smoked-glass spectacles. He wished he were Doctor Frankenstein, and yet his own monster too. Occasionally, in moments of weakness, he yearned for a knight's armor: three layers of iron plates and a helmet with a riveted visor. Douglas looked into Douglas's eyes. The eyes pleased him. They were green, very green. He couldn't have dyed them better. "Oh," said Douglas. He shaved carefully, first his cheeks, and then his chest.

Douglas Fortescue's debut, a poem of twenty-two pages, appeared in London at the end of 1832. It made its author famous overnight. It was seized, banned, examined by experts, released again, reviewed, and banned once more, which further increased sales. The title was *Thirst*. It dealt with blood and a woman named Claire. It was a little hard to understand. The ladies detected the whiff of vampires. The journals, depending on their outlook, revealed it to be an allegory of love, of modern-day depravity, or of Manchester's industrial squalor. The English poets, led by Mr Wordsworth, gathered on the verdant shores of Lake Windermere to found a short-lived society for the preservation of rhyme. "Oh, children," sighed Douglas. "How passé!"

In two nights, increasingly plagued by heartburn, he had committed his work to paper. It comprised the confession of the deranged innkeeper from Huddersfield who had slain his Claire with a meat cleaver and then, in desperation, eaten her bit by bit. This was enriched with statements from neighbors and the local constabulary. Douglas had shaken and stirred all of this and rearranged it in an agreeable manner.

Purple and wet
Her little heart
And I squeezed it out like grapes
And we were married
Oh, married before God and men.

It was hardly surprising, thought Douglas, that such activity should provoke the gastric juices; nonetheless, he gladly accepted this in exchange for fame.

"A dream," said the poet Fortescue whenever people pressed him hard at the capital's soirées and salons, "nothing but a dream about *la dolce vita*." He said no more. He sucked in his cheeks, adjusted the smoked-glass spectacles, and uncomplainingly allowed himself to be ogled. He trusted the public. The public would understand *Thirst*. Because a poem's value, realized Douglas Fortescue, not without amazement, is gauged solely by the reader whom it delights.