

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Groves

Tom Sharpe

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About the Author

Tom Sharpe was born in 1928 and educated at Lancing College and Pembroke College, Cambridge. He did his national service in the Marines before going to South Africa in 1951, where he did social work before teaching in Natal. He had a photographic studio in Pietermaritzburg from 1957 until 1961, and from 1963 to 1972 he was a lecturer in History at the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology.

He is the author of sixteen novels, including *Porterhouse Blue* and *Blott on the Landscape* which were serialised on television, and *Wilt* which was made into a film. In 1986 he was awarded the XXIIIème Grand Prix de l'Humour Noir Xavier Forneret and in 2010 he received the inaugural BBK La Risa de Bilbao Prize. Tom Sharpe died in 2013.

Also by Tom Sharpe

Riotous Assembly
Indecent Exposure
Porterhouse Blue
Blott on the Landscape
Wilt
The Great Pursuit
The Throwback
The Wilt Alternative
Ancestral Vices
Vintage Stuff
Wilt on High
Grantchester Grind
The Midden
Wilt in Nowhere
The Wilt Inheritance

**TOM
SHARPE**

The
Gropes



arrow books

To the doctors in Catalunya: Montse Figuerola, Francesc Xavier Planellas, Pere Sola, Montserrat Verdaguer, who saved my life in 2006.

Chapter 1

It is one of the more surprising facts about Old England that one can still find families living in the same houses their ancestors built centuries before and on land that has belonged to them since before the Norman Conquest. The Gropes of Grope Hall are one such family.

Neither rich nor titled and having never excited the envy of their more powerful and influential neighbours, the Gropes had kept their heads down, worked fields still bearing the same names as they had in the twelfth century, and had gone about their business without taking the slightest interest in politics, religion or anything else that could have got them into trouble. In most cases this was not due to any deliberate policy. On the contrary, it had to do with inertia and the determination not to be burdened with ambitious and able offspring.

The Gropes of Grope Hall can be found in the County of Northumberland. They are said to be able to trace their ancestry back to a Danish Viking, one Awgard the Pale, who had been so seasick on the voyage over the North Sea that he had deserted the raiding party while it was sacking the nunnery at Elnmouth. Instead of raping nuns, as he was supposed to do, he had thrown himself on the mercy of a skivvy he had come across in the bakehouse, who was trying to make up her mind whether or not she wanted to be raped. Not being in the least beautiful and having twice been turned down by Viking raiding parties, Ursula Grope was delighted to be chosen by the handsome Awgard and

led him away from the appalling orgy in the sacked nunnery to the isolated valley of Mosedale and the sod hut in which she had been born. The return of the daughter he had hoped he had seen the last of - and in the company of the enormous Awgard the Pale - had so terrified her father, a simple swineherd, that he hadn't waited to find out the Viking's real intentions but had taken to his heels and was last heard of near York selling hot chestnuts. Having saved Awgard from the horrors of the return journey to Denmark, Ursula insisted that he save her honour as an unraped nun and do his duty by her. It is thus that the House of Grope is said to have been created.

Awgard changed his name to Grope, and so alarmed were the few inhabitants of Mosedale by his size and awful melancholy that Ursula, now Mrs Grope, was in time able to take possession of their thousands of acres of uninhabited moorland and eventually to establish the Grope dynasty.

As the centuries passed, the family legend and the dark secret of their origins encouraged succeeding generations of Gropes to keep themselves to themselves. They need hardly have bothered. The strain of melancholy and aversion to travel that had so afflicted Awgard continued in the Grope blood.

But it was the Grope women whose influence was most profound. To be twice rejected by Vikings, not normally discriminating in their choice of victims, as unworthy of violation had clearly left a psychological scar on the Founding Mother. Having secured Awgard she was determined never to let him go. She was also determined to hang on to the thousands of acres that his gloomy aspect and dangerous reputation had secured. That the Viking was in fact a deserter and terrified of the sea made both tasks easy. Awgard was always at home and refused even to go to the market in Brithbury or to the annual pig-gelding fair and mud-wrestling on Wellwark Fell. It was left to his wife

and their five daughters to drive hard bargains at the market and indulge in the dubious activities at the fair. Since the daughters took after their father in size and strength and had inherited his red hair while combining these assets with the unprepossessing looks and determination of their mother, the result of the said mud-wrestling matches was never in doubt. Here, as in all matters involving the Grope women, the female line prevailed. Indeed, whereas in every other family, the eldest son succeeded to the estate, with the Gropes it was the eldest daughter who took over the Grope acres.

This became such a firmly established tradition that it was widely rumoured that, on those infrequent occasions when the first-born was a boy, the infant was strangled at birth. Whatever the truth, it was certain that over the years the Gropes produced an unusually large number of baby girls, though this may have been due less to male infanticide than to the fact that either by choice or the Grope women's overt masculinity, the men they married tended to be somewhat effeminate.

Following the tradition laid down by the Founding Mother, the bridegrooms were forced to change their names to Grope. All too frequently they were forced into these marriages themselves. No ordinarily virile man would willingly have proposed to a Miss Grope even in his cups, and it may well have been as a result of the Misses Gropes' insistence on challenging local bachelors to a bout of mud-wrestling at Wellwark Fair that the event lost its attraction and finally died out. Even the most stalwart wrestlers hesitated before accepting the challenge. Too many young men had emerged from the ordeal half choked with mud and unable to deny that in the contest they had proposed to their opponents. Besides, the Grope girls were too formidably united to brook any denials. On one dreadful occasion a fiancé who had the temerity to say, when he could get the mud out of his mouth, that he would rather

die than go to the altar and become Mr Grope, was hurled into the mud pool and held under until his determination was fulfilled.

To make matters worse, those male Gropes who survived the exigencies of being born alive had their careers chosen for them. They went into the Church if they could read or, if they couldn't (the majority weren't given the opportunity to learn), were sent to sea and seldom seen again. No sane man would have returned to Grope Hall to follow in their fathers' footsteps herding sheep, serving in the kitchen and only being allowed to speak when they were spoken to by their wives and mothers-in-law.

There was no escape. Early on in the family history a few of the husbands had managed to reach the dry-stone wall that bounded the Grope estate, and even, in one case, to get across it. But the desolate nature of the landscape combined with the fatigue of having to satisfy their wives' voracious appetites in bed made them incapable of getting any further. They were led back to the Hall by infuriatingly friendly bloodhounds specially trained to track down errant husbands and, after a severe dressing-down, were sent to bed supperless.

Even in less savage times the Grope women continued to dominate their menfolk and saw to it that as far as possible the existence of the estate went unnoticed. Of course the Hall was far removed from the original sod hut to which Ursula had first brought Awgard the Pale. Generations of strong-minded women with effeminate husbands to urge them on with talk of silk arrases, plastered ceilings and Venetian green chairs, not to mention the privacy and convenience of indoor water closets over outdoor earth ones, could not have been expected to leave the house in anything approximating to its original state. All the same, change came slowly and piecemeal. Nothing was wasted and nothing too ostentatious was added, at least externally, to draw attention to the Hall. Even the turf from the sod

hut was reused to pack the gap between the planked bedroom floors and the ceilings below to deaden the sound of conjugal activities above.

By the nineteenth century Grope Hall had assumed the aspect of a large and relatively comfortable Northumbrian farmhouse, its thick grey stone walls and small windows doing nothing to hint at the strange traditions that had gone into its making and which still persisted in the mentality of the Gropes themselves. True, it was impossible to find a man in the district who was prepared to come within striking distance of a Miss Grope and, while the custom of mud-wrestling and its awful consequences had died out centuries before, the memory of those terrible occasions still lingered on in the neighbourhood. In fact, in some ways it contributed to the prosperity the Gropes enjoyed. A Miss Grope had only to put in an appearance at Brithbury market to empty the sale ring of all faintly marriageable men and drive the price of livestock down if the lady was buying, or up if she was selling.

By the 1830s the problem of finding husbands in Northumberland had become so severe that it was only the invention of the railway that saved the family from having to think seriously about recruiting fathers for their children from the local madhouse, with all the deleterious effects it would have had for future generations. Not that being married to a lunatic was necessarily an insuperable problem. In the past, several husbands had turned out to be so infertile or incurably impotent that desperate measures had had to be taken, either the kidnapping of passing strangers or paying for the sexual services of improvident tradesmen with large families to support. More than one traveller through Mosedale had undergone the horrifying experience of being waylaid by a Mrs Grope dressed as a man and forced to commit what he took to be an unnatural act before being stupefied with gin and opium and left unconscious in a ditch miles from Grope Hall.

The coming of the railways changed all that. It was possible to travel all the way to Manchester or Liverpool and return with a fiancé, albeit one who did not know he was engaged to be married until he was confronted by the Rev. Grope and forced to say 'I do' in the little chapel behind Grope Hall. The fact that several such bridegrooms were already married and had wives and families was happily overlooked, for this proof of their fertility only made them more attractive. Not only that, they also had a ready-made and perfectly understandable motive for changing their names. And at the same time, the knowledge that they were liable to prosecution and long prison sentences for bigamy gave them an attachment to Grope Hall they might not otherwise have had.

But the most persistent problem was that of firstborn males when girls were wanted or, worse still, Mrs Gropes who failed to produce female offspring at all. The Registration of Births & Deaths Act of 1835 made the old remedy of strangling or suffocating baby boys at birth a decidedly risky procedure. Not that the family had ever admitted having recourse to such a thing.

A dearth of female heirs was a particular problem for Mrs Rossetti Grope who was seemingly incapable of producing girls.

'It's not my fault,' she wailed when a seventh baby boy arrived. 'Blame Arthur.'

This excuse, later to be proved scientifically accurate, did nothing to satisfy her sisters. Beatrice was furious.

'You shouldn't have picked the brute in the first place,' she snorted. 'Any fool can see he's disgustingly licentious and masculine. Don't we know anyone round here who has a spotless record for fathering only girls?'

'There's Bert Trubshot over in Gingham Coalville. Mrs Trubshot has had nine lovely girls and -' started Sophie.

'Bert the night-soil man? I don't believe it. An uglier man I never did see what with his acne and ... are you sure?'

asked Fanny.

Sophie Grope was.

'I am not being bedded by Bert Trubshot!' screamed Rossetti hysterically. 'My Arthur may not be the perfect husband but at least he's clean. Bert Trubshot's absolutely filthy.'

Her sisters looked at her with angry eyes. No Grope had ever refused to do her duty before. Even during the Plague when other farms in the district had shut their doors against strangers, a barren and widowed Eliza Grope had bravely dragged a number of terrified men misguidedly looking for the safety afforded by the remoteness of Mosedale to her bed and had given them succour. Not that her efforts had been rewarded in the way she hoped. She had died of the plague herself. But her example had set a standard for all later generations of Gropes to follow.

'You will lie with Bert Trubshot whether you like it or not,' Beatrice told Rossetti darkly.

'But Arthur will be furious. He's a very jealous man.'

'And a hopeless husband. In any case he won't know anything about it.'

'But he's bound to find out,' Rossetti said. 'And he's very keen on his loving.'

'Then we'll just have to see he loses interest in that side of things,' said Beatrice.

Three months later, when Rossetti was sufficiently recovered and her baby boy had been consigned to the usual orphanage in Durham, Arthur Grope was given an excessively strong dose of sleeping draught in his soup and had just enough time to comment that it tasted better than the soup usually did before falling asleep over the boiled mutton and carrots. Later that night he had a most unfortunate encounter with a broken bottle of brandy from which he never fully recovered.

In the meantime, Sophie and Fanny set off in a curtained carriage for Gingham Coalville to fetch Bert Trubshot. They

found him going about his noisome task at two o'clock in the morning and while Fanny approached him from the front - ostensibly to ask if they were on the right road to Alanwick - Sophie, armed with a loaded blackjack, rendered him unconscious with a judicious blow to the back of his skull. After that it was a simple matter to drive him back to Grope Hall where, after he had been scrubbed and blindfolded and liberally anointed with several bottles of perfume, given a great many oysters and some crushed pearl, he performed his duty in a state of hallucinatory delirium brought on by concussion.

Even Rossetti found the experience less distasteful than she had expected and felt a sense of loss when he was finally drugged and driven back to Gingham Coalville. What Bert Trubshot felt when he was found stinking of perfume and stark naked on the doorstep of the Trubshot cottage was the back of his wife's hand and a degree of regret that he had ever married such a violent and unlovely woman.

Arthur Grope was feeling even worse. Lying in Wexham Hospital he was painfully aware of what had happened to him but couldn't for the life of him imagine how or why it had happened.

'Isn't there something you can do?' he asked the doctors in an already altering voice, only to be told there wasn't much left to do anything with and anyway he shouldn't have drunk so much brandy. Arthur said he couldn't remember having drunk any brandy at all, not a drop, because he'd been a teetotaller all his life but that, if what the doctors told him was true and his only pleasure in life had gone for good, he was damned well going to drink like a fish in future.

Arthur's resolution to become a full-blown drunk was reinforced when, nine months later, Rossetti Grope gave birth to an unusually ugly daughter with black eyes and dark hair and none of the features that had distinguished the boys he had previously fathered. He died a deeply

bitter and alcoholic castrato a year later and was followed to the grave shortly afterwards by Rossetti and her daughter, both of whom caught pneumonia during a singularly cold and wet winter.

Fortunately for the Grope family, Fanny made good the shortcomings of Rossetti, producing seven baby girls without benefit of clergy by making regular repeat visits late at night to Gingham Coalville where, being less sensitive and hygienic than her late sister, she enjoyed the attentions of Bert Trubshot. Thanks to a night-soil man, the female Grope line was once again secure.

Chapter 2

By the middle of the nineteenth century the gentrification of British society, which had begun almost a hundred years before in the South, finally reached Mosedale and Grope Hall. The Gropes, having already installed indoor water closets and Venetian green chairs, did their best to ignore this further assault on the grounds that like all previous fashions it would soon pass. But inevitably even Beatrice, now the dominant mistress of the Hall, finally succumbed to the lure of antimacassars and the cluttered furnishings that had been popular elsewhere fifty years before. The old tin baths that had sufficed the family for their annual ablutions for so many years were discarded and replaced with a huge iron bath equipped with taps and regular cold and occasional hot water and the female Gropes were to be found bathing at least once a week.

But for the husbands and the odd son still lurking about, things continued much as they had before. Grope menfolk brewed ale for their wives and distilled various lethal spirits which they called brandy or gin according to their colour as they had for generations, and if they were lucky, or if their wives desired their services that night, were allowed to take the occasional bath in a nearby river.

Gentrification aside, men and women generally went about their business as though nothing material would ever change. But they were wrong.

At the start of the twentieth century coal was found on the estate in larger quantities than ever before and in

seams so thick and in such close proximity that not even Adelaide Grope, the one daughter to possess a shrewd business mind and acting head of the family in place of the now senile and bedridden Beatrice, could resist the prospect of immense wealth. The naval arms race with the Kaiser's Germany had just begun and the demand for coal to build and fuel dreadnoughts was enormous. A narrow railway line was built along the desolate valleys, trucks loaded to the brim trundled down to the great ironworks and shipyards sixty miles to the east and returned filled with sturdy men to work the mines.

Almost overnight the Gropes became relatively rich, both in money and in an apparent surfeit of men who might service the Grope girls, even if they wouldn't marry them. But it wasn't to be. The sinister reputation of the family, and nine awful dogs, descendants of the friendly bloodhounds but now decidedly unfriendly, deterred any men, whether new to the district or not. So did the girls. In truth, Beatrice's daughters, all five of them, retained too many of the physical attributes of their forebears to hold any attraction for even the most desperate man. Soon the miners steered clear of Grope Hall altogether, moving only in groups, a single man being an easy target. From the windows of the Hall predatory eyes watched them clamber out of the empty coal wagons in the morning and cling to the sides of full ones returning at night. There was nothing the Grope girls could do.

Adelaide, however, who retained the ruthless attributes of her ancestors, still found ways to exploit both the new-found Grope riches and the sudden increase in available men. For one thing, she had foreseen the taxation problems that lay in the possession of ostentatious wealth. To ensure that the taxation authorities would be unable to establish the true profit from the mine she had drawn up the contract herself. It was an extraordinary document, to put it mildly. All profits were to be in gold sovereigns payable