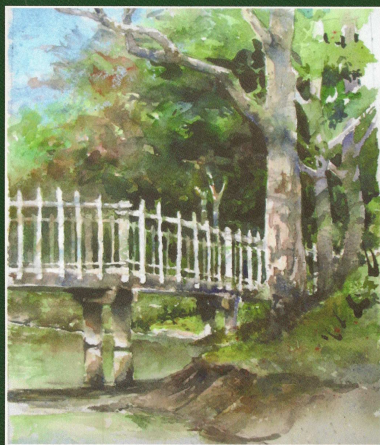


# Tobacco Styx Bridge



Enis St. John  
Author of *Cuckold Creek*

underway. When the trustees were all assembled, he began the meeting without waiting for Pusey to arrive.

"I received a letter this morning from Dr. Pusey containing his resignation. The only explanation he gave was that it was time for new leadership," JJ said nervously.

Charles, like the others, acted as though he had not understood the words. Seeing the confusion around him, JJ repeated the statement with emphasis.

"It appears that Dr. Pusey has resigned and left the county. I talked with Victoria, and she also got a letter. I left there just a while ago and she is terribly distressed—out of her mind, really—but there is a doctor with her. After reading the letter she received, it is very clear that Alan has left for good—he's not coming back. He's left his wife, the college, and the county, and he didn't say where he can be reached. He's made a clean break. I don't expect that anyone at the college has heard anything, since there is no mail delivery on Saturday." He looked at Charles for confirmation, and Charles nodded.

"I would like to keep this contained until at least after graduation tomorrow, and until we have more information. Charles, what do we need to do to make graduation as normal as possible?" JJ asked.

"Not much. I'll just announce that Dr. Pusey can't be with us, and do all the things that he would normally do. It's been the same ceremony for seventeen years, and we're not likely to mess it up. I do think the faculty should be told prior to the ceremony. Perhaps as they form up, I could make a brief announcement to keep them satisfied until it's over. It was Pusey's habit to meet with the graduation speaker for breakfast before the ceremony, so if there is no objection, I'll go see Dr. Burns. He's staying at the Holiday Inn. Outside of that, I guess it is business as usual."

"Shouldn't we take some kind of official action in case the press finds out?" someone asked.

"What would you suggest?" JJ asked in return.

"I don't know. But we should say that we have appointed an acting president and control of the college is assured." Charles raised his hand and was recognized by JJ.

"It isn't quite the same as being overthrown by a junta. I don't think you have to take any official stance until you are certain of the information. You don't want to say something or take an action that you will have to retract later on," Charles reasoned.

"Quite right," JJ said. "For the time being, I would refrain from going to the Pusey house. It is full of friends trying to help, and there is a funereal air about the place. Victoria thinks that some harm has come to him, or that he has amnesia and is wandering around in a daze and will soon be returned to her, but I don't think that either is the case. What he wrote was clear and concise and substantiates his intention to leave and not come back. The college should not be involved in that show at the house. Although someone will say that he left because of problems at the college, I think his reason for leaving is more personal than his difficulty here. If he wants to be found, he will be found. Quite frankly, he resigned his position to us, and we should meet again next week to accept or reject it—although I don't think that rejection is an option. I suppose that's all I have at the moment," JJ said, obviously ending the meeting.

Charles was the only one to rise. The rest wanted to linger and talk among themselves, making sure that even the smallest bit of information or speculation was extracted and digested before they adjourned.

When Charles got home, he went into the kitchen and drew out a bottle of Beaujolais-Leynes Le Clos from one of the twelve round spaces in the plastic rack he called his wine cellar. It was currently his favorite. He opened it with his Laguiole knife and poured some of the blackish opaque wine into a medium-sized glass with a rounded bowl. He sipped and tasted and sipped again. He preferred the intensity and friendliness of this wine over the more subtle Bordeaux that he had occasionally caged from the collections of friends. After years of having

an ambiguous relationship with wine, he now purchased those he enjoyed drinking more than discussing. But he also wasn't kidding himself. He bought only those wines that he could afford, which also happened to be those that could not sustain a lengthy conversation. He puckered a bit at the tannins, sipped again, and savored the spice and taste of black cherry on his palate. If he visited France again, he thought, he would make a pilgrimage to Chateau de Lavernette and the beautiful hills and valleys around Leynes. Leigh came into the kitchen from the office and took a glass from the cabinet.

"Just a little bit," she said. "Is it good?"

"It's very good," he said, and he poured a two-fingers measure into her glass.

"I had a telephone call from our good friend, Louise. She said that she had just come from the Pusey household, and it was in chaos."

"Already? I've just heard the news and been sworn to secrecy, and now it's already on the street? Wow," Charles said. "Did Victoria call everybody in the county?"

"She called most of her friends looking for him and became hysterical over the phone, and they, in turn, rushed to her rescue. They were milling around the first floor of the house while Victoria was stomping around upstairs, crying and screaming. Eventually someone ordered six pizzas and a case of beer from Joe's up the road, and the site of the party-cum-wake was in full swing. Evidently no one knows anything, but some cynical person remembered that she will eventually need some money. When Louise left, they were trying to assess the fiscal damage to the Pusey partnership. She thinks that he took the cash with him. Evidently, it was pretty intense over there. I feel so sorry for her."

"As do I."

"What are you going to do?"

"The same thing I have been doing, why?"

"Well, you wanted the presidency once upon a time. Do you still? Leigh asked.

"I don't think so, not now. I wanted it the first time because I thought I knew what the college needed, and how to get it, but it was clear to me then. Now it's obscure. He may have ruined it for the next person. It has been hard enough for us getting out of the hole and onto a level playing field, but now ... now he's blown the field to hell, and I can't see how it's going to be salvaged out of the status quo, or what it will take to save it. I haven't had time to think about it. There is such a sense of mystery and drama developing around it, and I don't want to get caught up in it."

"I hate to mention this, but it may be that they won't even consider you a viable candidate. After all, you had a close partnership for a long time. They may want to throw all the rascals out."

"True, although being a good partner doesn't mean that your abilities and style are the same. Outside of playing pretty good tennis together and having some fondness and friendship for each other, we really had very little in common. Maybe that's what kept the partnership together, although lately I haven't been a very good friend. I've been more critical of him—perhaps too critical. He was shrinking from the college—disengaged, you could say, like he didn't want to hear about it. The more he retreated, the more I ragged on him for retreating. When you withdraw, like he was doing, and don't participate in making things happen, you lose a sense of purpose and enthusiasm. Your work becomes meaningless. I think he even admitted as much to me the other night. Well, enough of this blather. We still have time for a set if you'd like."

"I'm going to start on supper, so you go ahead. Play with the kids if you can find one," Leigh said.

Charles changed back into his tennis clothes and found a worthy opponent in his oldest son, but he couldn't concentrate on the game. The emotional fire of Pusey's disappearance was still raging in his mind, and he couldn't extinguish it with physical