Cote d'Or

H.M. Tomlinson

Table of Contents

Cote d'Or.....**1**
H.M. Tomlinson.....1

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IF you look out in time, Dijon is a name on a railway station to be seen in France when you are going elsewhere. The first time I noticed it was at three in the morning, in January 1914, when an abrupt jolting wakened me, and I was curious to learn how much nearer we were to Switzerland. Dijon then was only a group of French soldiers in cherry−coloured trousers under a feeble lamp; then our train moved on. Dijon was of no significance.

The next time I was there we were kept in Dijon Station a very long time. Our train was on its way to Paris, and was crowded with soldiers for now it was early in the September of 1914 some with wounds which were noticably gangrenous; and if they were not wounded men then they were weary fellows, in trousers not so cherry−coloured as formerly, who were in no mood to talk of war, who had been fighting for weeks, and had been ordered, just as they were, to another battlefield. Some of us were twenty−four hours standing in a corridor of that train, in a smell I got to know rather better later on.

And this autumn, travelling in France again, I was reading a book, and had got to a point in it where its author was assuring me that peacemakers, however blessed otherwise, can never be historians, and then my train slowed, and stopped, with a familiar jolt. Dijon! This time it was my destination. Well, whether it is impossible for an unbeliever to write fiction, or a Buddhist to write philosophy, or a Christian to write poetry, or a man who is all for peace to write history, are doubts I do not care to resolve; yet I did feel for a few minutes there in Dijon again, merely as a man who sometimes thinks that peace has a few good points, that history must be far from easy to write. How get in everything? How could one be as impersonal and as right as a seraph reporting to the Ineffable? It was foolish, of course, to glance along Dijon's platform for the group of soldiers once glimpsed under a weak lamp wearing a uniform long forgotten; still, somehow the men of the war who are less than nameless, who might never have been more than shadows which became one with night when their feeble lamp went out, were more real to me than all the activity in that railway station of the present.

It is impossible for some of us to write history? I should say it is. One had better call history the least satisfactory department of biology, and leave it to anybody who is confident he understands a fact when he meets one. It is no good going for facts to the sad and lonely who ponder what is invisible; they may confuse things. The trouble for such writers, if they attempt history, is that they will see humanity as men and women, and so stand in danger of getting hopelessly lost. You may write anything you please about the myth called humanity, and you are safe from mockery, because generalities concerning a myth must be right; but once you begin on Tom, Dick, and Harry, you had better be careful. Those fellows wore trousers, and fell in love, had children, and on the day they were "called up" they went out to lonely corners to think it over. For them war meant separation, ruin, and the end, by all the odds. It was not for them a generality which only affected an abstraction called humanity. And we happen to remember a few of those fellows. How can they be omitted from history when history is nothing without them?

I do not know. But they are omitted. So history, to some of us, be it as august and wise as is possible while forgetful of the inhabitants of Dumdrum, is but interesting; it is addressed to the reason and never to the bowels. It belongs to anthropology, that most romantically speculative subject, which changes its centre of interest with each psychological fashion; that is, once a year. Nevertheless, I am bound to confess that recently the ticket collector at

Dijon station stood not in the autumn of 1914; he demanded a valid voucher, which I had taken the precaution to bring with me. That was lucky, for by the look of him I am sure that Frenchmen knew nothing of a Dijon I could see. It was not on the map, much less on the line of the P.L.M.; so he allowed me to go in and out of a forgotten Dijon station just as I pleased; everybody's ticket for that place had been given up long ago, I suppose.

Then there was a lengthy automobile drive in the Côte d'Or towards a sunset of the autumn of the present. I suppose the French will never believe it of the English, because the French are given to logic and the English to sentiment, but there are many of us to whom much of France is the same as home. We passed that evening a hill on which stood one battlemented wall of an old castle; the rest of the castle was rubble and thicket. That was where in 1423 the Duke of Bedford, before Joan of Arc made him feel a bit less ducal, married Anne of Burgundy. Yet I do not mean such monuments as that; not anything of such historical note. But when day had nearly gone our car passed the side of a common village home, a pale wall with an exclamation on it: BYRRH! You will know how I felt about it if ever you have been checked by an exploding shell when crawling amid ruins, and have looked up to see that heartfelt word confronting you on the only wall left upright in a French hamlet. Besides, the Côte d'Or, is geologically, a Dorset on a bolder plan; the hillsides which give us the wine you know have the forms of those noble downs you see in the unfrequented England between Lulworth Cove north−west to Lyme Regis, and are built of similar rocks. Those limestones have the seal of an ammnonite as a guarantee of their quality, and they weather as buffs and greys which shine, when they are waterworn, with the rich softness of nard; they tell you at a glance that this earth is ample and generous. When writing history, how is it all to go in?

Then our car swerved into a hollow where the night was thicker in patches probably here was another village and it came to a stand by a shallow terrace above which was a large and ancient door with one small lamp. The oil lamp was humble, and did not make much of the hall within; the night kept close around us. There was the smell of a log fire. A broad staircase of stone went up from the hall, apparently to the invisible stars. It rested on darkness round a bend. A few old portraits seemed on the point of emerging from the gloom, at our entrance, but hesitated on the verge of distinction, perhaps shy of modern interlopers.

We were welcomed by an American and his lady. This was their house, though built before a revolution that was nothing to do with them; it was not their revolution. I held a candle up to one portrait; a shrewd and bearded face screwed its eyes down at me. The candlelight shone on a steel corselet. Messire Francois de la Plume! Seigneur there in 1580. The American in his tweeds gazed at Francois in his steel; but this little history is unable to record whatever may have passed between them, though I know it would be highly interesting to learn. Philadelphia now; but once it was Francois de la Plume, who was military governor of the fortress of Semnur when Henri III was king of France, and Drake, on the English side, was just back from Ternate, and the Spanish Armada was getting into being. Besides, the son of these Americans flew for France in 1915, long before his countrymen were in it. So as to history, it seemed to me like that staircase, the bottom steps of which were obviously substantial, but they neared us out of impenetrable shadows from round a corner of night; you might think you could guess what was out of sight, but most likely the guess would be oddly wrong.

It has been my lot to get accustomed to several French chateaux, whether or not I liked their circumstances, but here for the first time my bed was provided with a canopy of crimson brocade fifteen feet high. Peace was in this house. I did not in the silence of this French house listen to distant guns, the mutterings of Ypres. In the outer dark now there was but the questioning notes of owls; and it was strange that the rapid evolutions of a bat, who was confused by my candle, should have been quite noiseless. The room was so large that after the bat had passed through the candle's utmost effort he was gone; the transits of the bat were swift, intermittent, and baffling. His shadow would pass over my history book like a hieroglyphic too brief in any case for deciphering. It was no easier to understand than the muttering of Ypres in the night.

I will not say it is possible for a lover of peace to write history, because that kind of man, like a pro−German, or a pro−Boer, an English baron, or a hundred−per−cent American, may be anything, even a rascal. He might write anything; he might pretend to be an ancestral voice prophesying war, at the right price. But in the morning I did

wonder, looking from my window, which was above a moat where a shoal of carp were playing follow−my−leader over a stick beyond was a meadow under the Burgundy hills and the sun, where a herd of white cattle were grazing I did wonder whether any book worth the name can be done except by a mind at peace. I felt then that poetry, at least, is not likely to be given to men whose minds are at war with this or that. Perchance peace is not the absence of war, a mere certainty that for the present the ships and the railway trains continue on their schedules. The state of peace, perhaps, is but a personal matter, and for those who can attain to it the guns, should they go off, and the authority of the pro−consul's guard, do not count. I wondered that morning whether without the harmony which only a mind sure of its centre can bestow upon the perplexing prospects of earth, we are as likely to find great art justifying our cities as we are to chance upon Apollo managing a glue factory. In spite of Ruskin's assurance of the poetic inspiration of conflict, in which he is supported by some hearty critics of our own day who would have us believe that the best fellows are as curly−fronted bulls, lords of the cows and the ranges, I doubt that our latter−day democratic need for bomb−shelters will move us in the way the builders of the Gothic cathedrals and the great musicians were moved. We greatly desire great art to arise in our cities. We desire, in fact, to have things both ways; to retain our glue−factory when it is so profitable, and with the glue we want the flashing of the wheels of the chariot of the sun. We would look up from the clangour of our prosperous industry, in which we desperately hope to find peace and security, and expect to find also the contributory poets standing attentive while chanting the glory of our state to give us heart. For we badly need encouragement; we want the justification of our condition by the bards as they celebrate its beauty. That would remove a lurking doubt we have.

The poets, unluckily, do not oblige us; not convincingly; not even Whitman. We are beginning to suspect that much of Whitman's celebration of the Modern is bluff. Whitman bluffed himself. He shouted himself down for he did not want to pause, even for a moment with lusty iteration of the naturalness of ugliness, of the native attraction of barbarities and squalor, and the intimate hairiness of chests and legs. He had to do that, for to be logical he had to make a comprehensive embrace of the society which he had persuaded himself he had accepted; but now and then, as a poet, he must have felt as horrified as we see Charlie Chaplin is on the tightrope in 'The Circus' when the monkey's tail gets into his mouth. Whitman may say it is enjoyable, but we turn to 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' and we do not believe him. He never fully accepted it. There came a time when he let himself go at the money−changers and those who trample pearls. He did not feel he was superior, even then, being a great man, but once in his life such a master is bound to break loose and interrupt the service in the temple of Mammon, to the pious indignation of all godly worshippers.

This French house is of the early eighteenth century, though it has inherited twelfth−century moat and towers. There is a shrine somewhere in its garden with an indefinable tradition, to which the villagers have been in the habit of repairing in devotion; but the American owner ot the place, who may or may not be a Presbyterian, but who certainly owes no allegiance to Rome, is as scrupulous that the devout rite be maintained, if the villagers desire it, as that the mellowed house itself should be kept from sacrilege. So I was in the way of learning tolerance in the old place, where the only sound of life in the heat of noon is the undertone of unseen wings in the lofty aisles of its avenues of elms and limes, a sound that is an assurance, in the midst of still antiquity, of latent energies yet to be fulfilled: there is nothing actively patriotic in a mind given to reverence of what is lovely and of good report. To judge by the appearance of the suburbs of London, for motor roads, and houses as shrill as piercing screams, are destroying Surrey, and by the prospect of the eastern suburbs of Paris, where the horrors that arise in the development of the English countryside are even exceeded, we on our side of the Atlantic could no more be trusted with the guardianship of a corner like Salem, Mass., than any native incorporation of energetic realtors. The truth, I fear, is that ardent patriotism anywhere is shown in a pride which expresses itself, for the most part, in but an ugly, loud, continuous, and nonsensical noise; nations care less for their best achievements and traditions, which belong to all the world, than they do for their Sunday newspapers and chickens. This chateau of an ancient line, a happy relic, was saved from falling into a hen−roost and a store for farm litter by an American; not because he is an American, but because he is more than that, and would cross China, if he could, to save the world from the loss of some rare porcelain. To him beauty is not national, but is the charge of whoever happens to know it.

In all its aspects created beauty is our chief justification before Heaven, and so its care is the charge of any man on whom light has fallen as a sign. That nation is the great nation where this sign of grace is most welcomed; but as yet that sign is nowhere welcomed as a national historical event so noteworthy that even a peacemaker could record it joyfully without reproof. I merely remark, therefore, that this American is also a citizen of the only country some of us now acknowledge as ours, a privilege he shares with many unknown soldiers who wore all the varieties of the steel hat; a country which never discusses the problem of disarming, for there is no anxiety about its frontiers, a country which has no premier or president to whom one of its people would give five minutes' attention, unless he had something to say; though I must admit that the tax it levies upon anyone willing to bear it is fairly heavy. It is not one of the new little countries which the late war released from bondage, though it is far more ancient than any Great Power, if not on the map. Its citizens know each other, when they chance to meet, but that is as much as you can say about them. They do not often meet.

There is an avenue of old trees leading up to the house, in which the full day is but a greenish twilight. When the house is seen in sunlight beyond the framing end of the avenue, its front, of Caen limestone, looking to the south, seems self−luminous, and of the placid shine and colour of a newly−risen harvest moon. The ridge of the steeply pitched tiles of the roof is as casual along the blue of the sky as an outcrop of coral rock, which frost has moulded, and the tiles, too precipitous for verdure, are immemorial with lichens. An artist had to build such a place, and it took two centuries to finish it, but its light is no less than the aura from the k~st that man has done on one of his more likely places under heaven. You get not only a surmise of his ancient establishment, which was long before Rome was built, or even Athens became possible, but you learn that, in spite of the energetic efforts of some of his kind towards a more efficient organization of his resources, which have seriously interrupted him, he has done rather well. If it is not possible to feel foolishly hopeful about him, yet in such a scene one may be tranquil. He has some good things to go upon. He has been givep a right lead, if only he could happen on the clue to its whereabouts. If he wants it at any time, it exists for him.

We know, as critics of letters, and as critics of much else, that it would be silly and softening to consider the lilies. They make no effort. They make no noise. If they are not noticed they do not grieve. They merely are. It is possible they do not worry even when their sweetness is wasted on the desert air. It would be ridiculous to consider a virtue which merely is, and claims nothing, not even recognition. Such a virtue is no better than the voice which was inattentive to its business because it was still and small. A proper instinct warns us to ignore those hints. If ever we paused to consider whether something not altogether without importance was to be learned from a sign that made no effort to attract our attention, there is no telling but that things might go hard with us. To give attention to a voice which was so gentle it could not be heard, if one preferred not to listen to it, but which, if the ear were so inclined, could empty out the importance of much that was loud and urgent, might have grave consequences. We know that well enough; but in the deadening uproar of our ever−revolving machines we can be perfectly safe, and no harm can come to us. We can gravitate together into crowds, for moral support, and loudly cheer things in common for an assurance that we are doing well.

But in that ancient house in Burgundy one sadly felt, after reading a modern book sure of its popular appeal with its force and eloquence, a suggestion of amusement in the unaltered quiet and repose. Perhaps the place had heard all that before, and knew what had happened. The dangerous idea came that, by chance, you had wandered into another dimension. You were lost in the spacious quiet of it. You had better be wary. If you stayed there long enough you might find you had forgotten a way back to a world that had been left somewhere round the corner on another plane. How to return to safety? I was considering this, sitting on the stone terrace; and a moon, quite as you now suggest, began to play tricks with its light about the old towers, and within the dim aisle opposite of tree−columns, and made me see things which have no existence for sane people; then something began to speak beside me.

I record but the literal truth. There was a voice. Nobody was there. No voice could be as small as that either, nor as composed. No bell, for the sound was bell−like, could be so minute. It sounded clearly enough, however, where the order of things was not quite right. There was no escape. The voice could not be ignored. I had to listen.

The sound was so frail and musical that it could be heard only when the air had been emptied of sunlight and the head of serious thought. Fairies have been abolished; and time they were, too, because when there seems no escape from the control of matters of fact we can dispense with magic spells. I knew, in truth, that the music I heard was but the soliloquy of a small lizard. Yet if only our own words could be made light and simple enough to carry that music . . . though who would hear it except when the moon was at her tricks? How could one do work which was worth doing when back in Babel with this hungry generation, make an effort to translate into forthright deeds the eloquence of our major prophets, attend to the call to duty by a church militant, rise to the inspiration of our glorious history, if confused by such an oblique hint?