

A Lost Wood

H.M. Tomlinson

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A CRITIC of letters was explaining the French Romantics and he dismissed, with but an impatient gesture, a suggestion by one of us that Rousseau was a harbinger of the Revolution. Literature, so the critic said, could do less to cause a general uproar than dear bread. Books, one gathered from the critic, and he knew more of them than did we who listened, were quite unrelated to the emotions of the multitude, which discharged in thunder and lightning provoked no more by letters than by daisy-chains.

The critic may have been right. I expect the change in us wrought by poetry is so slow in showing that when the transmutation is complete we know of no change. We cannot see what has happened to us. The poet, having done in his brief life his best, may get what comfort he can out of that. We are certainly obstinate in our old ways, conservative with flint arrowheads or any other familiar notion, and unmoved by revolutions which come about in imperceptible degrees. Could Sinai itself impose its revelation on a climber who was no Moses? All most of us would know at the summit of Sinai would be the uncomfortable draught sweeping barren rocks.

It is probable, we are forced to confess, that a few years of petrol have made a greater difference in the world of men than all the poets since Homer. To judge by the reformed highways and byways of England, and the talk of our neighbours, petrol has moved us more than all our converse with great literature. Petrol is more popular than religion, and whirls to delight a vast multitude of people who would remain as unaffected by Bach as a congregation of penguins. If the test were made, perhaps a little argument directed towards the choice of the right sort of motor-car might more easily raise a group of people to eloquence than an insult to the Trinity. Petrol is even dissolving the face of the English landscape. We are exchanging our woodlands for tarmac, and although tarmac is known to be kind to rubber tyres, yet its tolerance is hardly sufficient to compensate for the loss of swathes of orchards, meadows, and ancient buildings. One does not complain about this, for it would be just as foolish to complain of the untimeliness of a change in the wind.

Yet regret and disquietude, despite the improvements we are making in our condition, remain with us, for occasionally we remember our poets, and what inspired them to sing to us. Once there was a scrap of Surrey, which I had grown to accept as casually as one does those things whose importance is seen when they are gone. I think it was only common English countryside. There was nothing in it that a building contractor should desire it. Nobody with an eye to the future saw anything there. Its gravel soil was not worth an advertisement. It had only a desultory lane, with walnut, lime, and beech trees, and on a morning in late summer you were not likely to meet anything in it but a farm wagon laden with dried peppermint; mint and lavender were cultivated locally, and our only factories had stills for the extraction of the essences of herbs. The smell in the wake of that wagon on a hot day was a surprising suggestion of the virtue of Surrey earth.

I could not say the war began to change it, but it seems so. I do know that one part of the land, and corn grew there, through which the lane meandered, became very swiftly an aerodrome; and the aerodrome has not yet convinced me that it is better to see flying machines at their graceful evolutions than a field of wheat with a little wind and much sun on it. Alas, we were too busy then to consider in calmness the nature of the changes we were bringing about. I remember that, in the years of long ago, before we were even educated as far as the signs of Zeppelins by night, we had neighbouring ponds fed by springs in the chalk. At the bottom of one deep, transparent pool you could see a spring uprising; shadows coiled in the beryl. That was where, within twelve miles of Charing Cross, we watched a pair of kingfishers feeding their six youngsters; the babies sat in a row on an osier twig, which was oblique with their weight. The darting blue and chestnut of those neighbours of ours greatly distinguished us. One lucky young friend of mine saw in the same secluded grove, and as late as the days

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of the air-raids, a golden oriole. He still remembers it. To hear him talk of that wonderful visitor you might suppose that one day on his way home from school, where he had been learning of the brave things that were, he had surprised a dryad, who slipped into the bushes, but not before he could name her. Does Apollo live? So much was possible to him, that day.

Does he live? Well, not there; not now. Petrol has acted like magic on the place. Miraculous stuff, petrol! But the kingfishers do not like it. Nor does the lane wander any more. It has been disciplined, and we know how good is discipline. The lane is broad, it is direct. It has no dust, and has lost its smell of herbs. The old walnut trees do not lean over broken pales there. There are no trees. The lane has become a straight road with a surface like polished ebony. It is, in fact, a highway for motor-cars. It becomes dangerous every Sunday morning with an endless flying procession of engines on their way to the coast; the chain reverses towards evening. We do not hear the cornrake any more, when coolness and silence fall at eventide; we hear klaxons. We have no peppermint fields; we have filling stations. Our springs and ponds, owing to an increase in the value of gravel sites, have lapsed into areas of mud which cannot determine to dry completely, and are desolate with discarded tins. As for the golden oriole, you might as well look for a seraph. Petrol has achieved all that. We do not say a word against it, but merely point to the fact. It would be just as useful to interrupt, as a protest, the line of cars flying to the coast on a Sunday, in a moment of desperation and anger. There the cars are; they move faster than peppermint wagons, and modern youth often steers them in a fashion that mocks mortality.

It is easy to understand the popularity of petrol. As a stimulant it is taking the place of beer and whisky. Rousseau may not have helped to cause a revolution, but there is no doubt about the common emotion which petrol evokes. Petrol is taken, not in the hope that it will transport us to any better place, but merely that it will remove us swiftly from where we are. It is the latest anodyne in these years of discontent and irresolution. It would be ridiculous to expect us to know what we ought to do, for we do not always know what we want to do. Petrol settles the difficulty. We get into a car, and start the explosions within its powerful engine; then we are compelled to do something. We join an endless line of headlong vehicles, and to continue to be irresolute would be perilous. Last summer I trudged over a road, once a by-path in the West of England which a tramp could have to himself for most of a long day. I hoped to meet there a ghost or two from the past, because they used to know that road very well; and they might turn up, if the news got to them that I was there again. But I did not meet them. I met instead a procession of astonishing charabancs, some from Manchester, others from Birmingham, and one from as far as Glasgow. There was no room for a pedestrian but in the drains by the roadside, where he had to stride for safety through soiled nettles and briars. The local inns were no longer places of refreshment and gossip. About one of those inns, and I had had my mind set on it for an hour, a dozen huge social cars were parked. The road was bright with pools of black grease. The orchard of the inn was sad, through traffic for which orchards are not grown. And no room could be had at the bar, nor elsewhere within, for an idle traveller who had time to waste; other travellers were there, continually arriving and departing. They had no time to waste. Yet these travellers of the new kind appeared to be satisfied merely with travelling. They knew not why they were there; they had paid their fares. They stood about, waiting for the signal that they were to be whirled on again, with their backs to a land which is as good as most in Europe. They did not look at it. It did not exist in its reality for them; it was only on their route. They were satisfied with the knowledge that they were there; they could prove it with picture-postcards which could be bought at the inn counter.

Very early one morning, when on a voyage from the East, I was startled from sleep by a seaman. He had switched on my cabin light; it was summer, but he stood there chilling the cabin with his wet overcoat. What was wrong?

"Nothing, sir; the chief officer wants you on the bridge."

I went up hurriedly, in pyjamas and oilskins. Day had not come, but it was not night; night was lifted slightly in the east on a wedge of rose, though the wind was still bleak out of darkness. We were somewhere near the Burlings. What was this? My friend the chief officer pointed astern without a word. We were passing a ghost ship, under all canvas. The barque was so close that I could see the length of her deck. She was silent, and more pale than the twilight. She was tall, and tintured faintly with rose. Had we steamed back into another age? Was the past so near? I could see two men on her poop, but they were not looking at us. Only my friend, and the bridge of our liner, were material. My friend spoke. "I thought you would like to see her; it maybe the last time. Isn't she a beauty?"

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Even with my eye still on the receding barque I felt that sailor's behaviour was more curious than what he had wakened me to watch. His jacket, I had noticed, bore a row and a half of decorations won in war; he was a hard and busy officer; he infested that great liner like a stern challenge whose whereabouts was uncertain until he strode round a corner, and then he never stopped unless there was something which must be said. This unexpected tenderness of his for what was hardly more than a gracious apparition in a delusive hour surprised me; yet he had been so sure, without reason, that I, too, would have the eye to see the spectre, that he had summoned me from bed into the hour when there is no courage. We stood talking up aloft till the sun came and saw us.

So, though I dare not deny the critic who mocked the power of poetry to work upon us to as good a purpose as starvation, yet perhaps he was too trifling with the spell of what is imponderable. Our mutability, like the wind which bloweth where it listeth, is subject to sorceries having the necessity of the very laws which send zephyrs or hurricanes out of the immane. How often has a fond memory or sentiment, so doubtfully valid in garish daylight that we would not show it to a friend, decided us to an enterprise? And we were right. For that reason, the older we get, the more we doubt the obvious clue to any story; we have found too often that what was unrevealed at the time was more potent than anything we heard when the knowing people were explaining it. But for a barque appearing near us one morning, I should have thought my friend the chief officer was no more open to zephyrs and faint hints than the steel under us. That steel was obvious and compelling, and he was part of it. And after that voyage he sent a letter to me, disclosing a burden which not for a moment did I suspect a modern liner to carry. He was glad, he explained, to get out of London again. He called his steamer's bridge, which to me seemed to govern affairs large and complex enough to require a borough council for their management, his sanctuary. He showed a repulsion from our city which was as spontaneous and unreasonable as would be a mahatma's from a riot. He said his bridge, in the morning watch, was the only place where he could meet himself. He warned me that in London I should never meet myself. London frightened him. London was on no course. London was adrift. Its size and unrest were so like delirium that he ran from it. "Those new buildings you've got, they're Egyptian I tell you, they're horrible. Something has gone wrong with you if you like them. You'd better look out. They squat on the mind, ugly square masses, like tombs. I don't want to be under them as though I had no name, drifting at the bottom of them with the drainage of life which doesn't know where it is going. It doesn't, does it?" He said he only found himself again when watching his ship's head grow bright in the dawn, and nothing in sight but the empty sea and the sun. Then he knew his name belonged to him, and what he was doing, and why he was doing it, to some extent.

Perhaps rebellion comes as much as anything from the sense that, as a unit in the paraphernalia of the State, one's identity is lost. A slave may have a soul, and possess it in patience, but not an automaton. Made homogenous by machinery, we are the nation, and anonymous. And when our governing machines, multiplying and expanding, claiming greater space for their wheels, flatten and unify still more the ancient, varied, and familiar things which we did not know were good till they had gone, we learn why the soul is now a myth. We become a little fearful and desperate. It is as though a chilling air were felt from unseen ice gradually advancing, warning of another glacial age, to put our name and works with the Neanderthals. We rebel from the suggestion that we must go under the cold mass of a mindless necessity.

It was April; and that was a disturbing letter to receive when the primroses were due. I had no chance to reassure myself of my name by watching a ship's head grow bright in a broad dawn. It was Egypt for me, and the compelling rod. All I could do was to rebel for a day. I would decline to make a single brick. I began to walk away from the arid masses of London's honeycombed concrete, monuments of servitude, though I was careful to begin my escape at the ten-mile radius. I remembered that it was some years since I had walked in that direction, for the paths I used to know appeared to have been mislaid. Escape was not so easy from new, wide and straight thoroughfares dangerous with swift engines. Aeroplanes were chanting overhead, but no larks. A raw inflammation of villas was spreading through a valley, which was all verdant when last I saw it. Then my companion, he who once met a golden oriole, remembered a little wood in a hollow, aside from the traffic. That, he told me, would certainly be there. Nobody would have interfered with that. He found the lane to it, after some bewilderment with his bearings, which had shifted somewhat. There was no doubt that this was the lane, he declared at last, dubiously. It was? Then we must suffer it, erupted and raw. Its hedges, bearing the first leaves of the year, were displaced, and their roots were higher than their boughs. In some lengths of the lane granite kerbs had replaced the hedges, and an iron sinkhole or two improved the ditches. A new path, a motor-lorry careened

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midway in its deep mud, went straight into the wood. On the verge of the wood the hazels had been crushed and splintered, and their golden tassels hung disconsolate, as though we were on the track of a recent and lusty mastodon.

Improvement had come. In the heart of the wood oaks were being felled, and by the torn roots of one was a dead hedgehog, which had been evicted from its hibernaculum into the frigid blast of reform. Unseen but near a saw was at work, and its voice was like the incessant growling of a carnivore which had got its teeth into a body and would never let go. This Easter, by all the signs, was the last the wood would see. The bluebells had been coming, expecting no evil, and, had they been allowed the grace of a few more weeks, they would have put the depth of the sky between the trees; but carts and engines had crushed them, and had exposed even their white bulbs, as though the marrow of the earth were bared.

I do not say the Easter message of that wood was especially deplorable. I knew it was possible and even right to see those granite kerbs and the cleared foundations as an urgent message of life and growth. The children of men would play in new gardens there, in another Easter. Still, somehow that direct and unquestioning attack by our machines, especially on the fragile windflowers, was more dismaying than inclement weather. A mastodon might really have been there, with no mind but in its tusks, irresistible and forthright. "I thought you would like to see her; it may be the last time. Isn't she a beauty?" It may be that the sense of beauty has no survival value, to use a term of our biological appraisers; nevertheless, it does survive, so we may suppose there is something as primordial in it as in acquisitiveness. When we see the defacement of beauty we continue to feel as though light were put out in ignorance. And what we want, as certainly as new villas, is more light. Is there a light to check us when we are steering our wheels over the windflowers, the Pasque blossoms, and are replacing them with stones?

There were Greek pagans long ago, and some of their work clearly had a value by which, though not useful, it has survived; and the idle fancy was theirs that the windflower was stained with the blood of Adonis, slain by a boar, and that its pallor was from the tears of Aphrodite, who sorrowed over the beautiful youth. Even our own pagans, before Augustine gave their thoughts another direction, felt bound to conclude that the windflower was painted by the elves. Who else could have veined so delicately that fabric? Who else would have inspired daintiness with that modesty in the half-light of the woods?

Behind me I heard the motor-lorry heaving itself out of the mire it had made. It backed and crashed like a hippopotamus into another tracery of mist and emerald, and Adonis died again. I buttoned up my coat against the northerly blast. Let Adonis die. We cannot help him. The tears of Aphrodite are of no avail against the tusks of boars. Only the bolts of Zeus could prevail against the progress of our engines; and Olympus, we have been most credibly informed for many Easters past, is "to let"; and if we must believe the reports of our busy agents of estates, then it is about the only place that is to let.

Yet one of the things I clearly remember of the war was a bluebell. It was in Thièpvál wood. Men who have reason to keep in mind the valley of the Ancre will smile at that. Thièpvál had come to its end. Our engines had been there, had gone over it, and were loudly progressing elsewhere on the eastern hills. It was April, but there was no wood, no village, and no old chateau, though a little down the slope towards St. Pierre Divion was a tank on its side; one of the automata, too, had died. Life had gone; nothing was there but mud, bones, rags, helmets, broken rifles, and skulls. Thièpvál was Golgotha. We were turning from it, but were stopped by a fleck of colour in the drab wreckage; life had already returned to Thièpvál? It was a wild hyacinth. One bluebell to all April! What, still there and unafraid?

One may dare to hope that the marrow of earth has a more stubborn vitality than our dismay allowed; it may survive our engines. It survived the glaciers. After all, there may be in the frail windflower a virtue that will outlast the lorries. We have been surprised, before this, by the shy patience of what may have been lovely and of good report, yet otherwise was inexcusable. The slight but haughty gesture of my sailor friend, one dawn, saluting from the bridge of his ship the beauty of the world, no more valuable though it was than the pagan thought which celebrated Adonis in the petals of the windflower, may have been a sign that nothing could deflect a barque he knew from her right course. And how else could he prove his faith? He summoned me as a witness, he was so sure of fellowship. Yet there are no mathematics to support him.