

THE IMPARTIAL HAND

A leaf from the diary of a walking tour.

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It was at Saussay-les-Ecuais, in the dead, accursed centre of the Norman plain, that we first saw the Impartial Hand. It had been a tiring day, and the wind of March, charged with dry and dessicated dust from a hundred miles of ploughland, had been pressing against our temples and aridly choking our throats till, as my companion the Monk expressed it, he did not think that all the Ganges and old Nile could ever make him feel moist inside again.

Along miles and miles of straight and pitiless road we had trudged dourly and sullenly. In the morning it was our custom to say wonderful things concerning the artistic value of the wide plain lying edgeways to our eyes, with its ploughlands alternately emerald and Venetian red – spotted here and there with the keen viridian of the springing flax, and over all the great flamboyant sky springing illimitably aloft. At least, that was how I put it in my note-book, while the Monk (whose line of business was other) took out his porte-crayon and jotted the whole effect down in the manner of an ancient illumination '*Right patiently in cloister nook y-wrought.*'

For the Monk is no friar of orders, grey, but a young brush-man of name and repute, presently (and till he can reach the Associateship) at Sturm and Drang with the Academy and all its works. Only since with his physiognomy the cowl and quarterstaff of Friar Tuck would mightily accord, for love and euphony the Monk we name him. In face of the station of Saussay-les-Ecuais there cowers the Hotel de la Gare. Now it has been my lot to tramp the brown earth in many countries, and to note the invariable badness of Hotels de la Gare, but never – no, never – was it my ill fortune to strike a worse hotel than the Railway Restaurant of Saussay-les-Ecuais. Humbly we asked for coffee; we suggested bread; we craved butter as a boon. Coffee we could have; bread, perhaps; as for butter! The tired, draggled woman only laughed. Messieurs must have come from a richer country than Normandy. There was not so much as a pat of butter nearer than Etrépagny. Well, then, coffee let it be! I fell to dreaming over my note-book, but the Monk, who from an art-student had made his own coffee, sat erect with arched nostril and supercilious eyebrow on the cock to detect any malfeasance in the manufacture of his beloved beverage.

Suddenly I looked up and found him on his feet.

‘Coffee Extract – as I’m a living sinner! I’m off! He cried. And withal he was out. I rose more slowly, and, being thus deserted, I quailed before the indignant gaze of the tired woman, who came to the door with the bottle of syrupy extract in her fingers, holding it open and unashamed. The scowl of the hulking landlord also was upon me. I hastily pulled out a piece of ten sous, and, laying it on the counter, I explained that my friend had long been subject to these attacks, and that it was best for all parties that I should make the best of my way up the road after him.

When I reached him, the Monk turned sternly upon me, quite suddenly and when I was least expecting it.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘did it run to a franc this time?’

‘No,’ I replied, strong in my conscious innocence, ‘it did not run to a franc.’

‘Half of it then, I suppose. You *are* a ninny!’ were the uncalled for words he used. But as I did not know what a ninny was, my feelings were less hurt than might have been anticipated.

Then we looked for a place to sit down and hunt the stray crumbings of the morning’s bread out of our knapsacks. But of all the inhospitable places in the world, commend me to Saussay-les-Ecuais. There was not so much as a green bank to sit down upon. Straight, irreconcilable, dusty walls bounded everything. A farmer came truculently towards us as we stood peeping cautiously in, and shut the high wooden doors of his yard in our faces – like one who would say, ‘Move on! No tramps allowed here.’

And indeed as I looked at the Monk, I did not greatly wonder. For from cap to boots the dust had covered all. It was hanging like cobwebs from eyebrow and moustache. It lurked in hitherto unsuspecting wrinkles of cheek and chin. I have seldom looked upon a more disgraceful spectacle than the Monk.

I found that he also had been regarding me with a long and rapt attention, and when finally he finished at my shoes, he made a remark.

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘after all I don’t wonder that old Jacques Bonhomme back there shut his gate.’

We were therefore in a humble frame of mind when we set out to seek a resting-place for our weary feet. I thought that if only we could have a wash, we might manage to dry ourselves on the inside of our coats, as indeed we had been doing for the past week.

‘Ha, a bridge!’ I cried as glad as if it had been the Grand Hotel of the City of Paris. ‘We can rest on it, at least, even if we cannot get a wash!’

‘You may,’ said the Monk, who was a little in front, ‘but as it is a bridge over a common drain, I am going on.

Finally, after many disappointments, all meekly we sat down back to back for mutual support on a mound of earth raked together by the art of the district cantonier, the guardian angel of the roads of France. Sadly I jotted down moralizings upon the transient state of man in my note-book, while the more cheerful Monk commenced a sketch of the rear works of a calf which was leaning too exhausted to stand upon its legs,

against an apple tree on the other side of the road. Just as he was putting in the sweep of the tail, the calf whisked a fly off its left hind foot and walked away out of sight. At this point the Monk made a remark, but as he spoke with a pencil in his mouth, I cannot say that I could more than guess the general sense of his observation. It appeared to be an invocation to the calf in the Phoenician manner, 'O calf, live for ever!' or something to that effect.

But I am forgetting the Impartial Hand. By this time we were ready to fall into his clutches. Affliction and the scorning of rude men had chastened the Monk, and as for me, I am meek by nature.

A gendarme on his rural rounds was coming up the road. We did not doubt that he had called upon our inhospitable but wholly excusable Jacques Bonhomme and had imbibed his suspicions. The Monk did not share my idea that it might be productive of good copy to be arrested. He intimated, in a language peculiar to him, that he was not taking any in his.

So, shutting up the unfinished sketch of the right hind quarter of the fickle Norman calf, we trudged down the road, keeping well ahead of the gendarme, and before we had gone far we were rewarded for our pertinacity.

For there proved to be another café in Saussay, blessed be the keeper thereof – and a douce and agreeable old lady is Madame Lavenue. At first I fear it must be confessed that Madame did not like us; but, thrusting the Monk behind me, I smiled and volunteered explanations. We were gentlemen of Scotland travelling for our pleasure. This we stuck to wherever we went, and to our profit. For the memory of the Auld Alliance is not yet dead in French hearts, and at least anything is better than to proclaim oneself English. 'Could we have a meal of any sort?' we asked Madame.

She stole a look round my defences and eyed the Monk, who was looking with desire upon the ranged bottles on the shining little bar.

She shook her head a little sadly. 'But no,' she said, 'this is only a café – I do not serve meals. There is a restaurant at the Gare. You will be served there.'

I heard the irony in her tones, and in a moment I knew that I had her.

'Ah, Madame, 'I went on, shrugging my shoulders as best I could, 'but we have been there. And that is the reason we come to Madame to cast ourselves on her mercies – an omelette, sardines, bread, a little wine, anything, but not the Restaurant de la Gare any more.

At this Madame Lavenue smiled. I looked about the shining tables. I praised the pretty crimson window blinds, the clean sanded tiles. I even looked the admiration I could not speak for the snowy goffered cap which became Madame so admirably.

'Monsieur is very agreeable. I shall be pleased to do my best for Monsieur,' she said at last – 'and for his friend!'

So to obviate delays we were served with a bottle of her best wine at tenpence a bottle, which we paid for on the spot, just to let her see the colour of our money. Then at a

pump in the yard we removed as much as possible of the caked Norman dust. We had scarcely returned to our wine when the door opened and the Impartial Hand came in. He sat down at a table and rapped sharply in the manner of a habitué with the heel of a tumbler. He was a brigand of a man, lean, haggard, disreputable, and from the moment of his entry he eyed us openly with much interest. The Monk and I were talking about our several boyhoods. And from what he told me I am glad I did not happen to be a master in any of the schools which the Monk adorned during the chequered period of his novitiate. While we sipped the red wine, he recalled incidents of fire and flood and barring out, and I jotted them down in my note-book, for one never knows what may come to be useful.

The Impartial Hand watched us keenly, dripping the water over the sugar into his absinthe till the green imp winked up at him from the bottom of the tumbler.

Then, having achieved this, the Impartial Hand spoke.

‘You are speaking English!’ he said, but in his native tongue.

‘We are- perhaps you speak English yourself, sir!’ I answered.

‘But no,’ he protested in haste: ‘yet because I have so very much travelled, I understand the English very well. You have been speaking to your brother of the places you have visited – Le Havre, Rouen, Paris. You have been entering in your book of expenses how much each shall pay. You have been writing down the things you have seen, in order to send the account of the voyage to those at home. Aha! Am I not right?’

We did not contradict him, and the Impartial Hand smiled and nodded. He had never been out of France himself, but he knew all other countries, and we were great travellers and had much voyaged. As for him, he was a dealer in pork, and had come to Saussay to buy pigs. But he had had the misfortune to leave his purse behind him, and such were the inhospitable habits of the country that even for this paltry glass of absinthe Madame might refuse to credit his explanation, and so place him in a painful dilemma. Could we – in fact, strictly a loan.

The Monk kicked me severely under the table, but I thought a franc might be worse spent than on the Impartial Hand. So with great pomp and circumstance he first of all pocketed the coin and then transcribed my address into a very dirty pocket-book. Then, with a bow worthy of a court, he informed me that I had rendered him one of the services which bind the hearts of men of the world together, and which do credit to our common humanity.

At this moment our modest repast was announced. Madame Lavenue appeared carrying a large dish with an omelette curving a noble bulk across it. Her little grand-daughter held the door of the kitchen open in order that the procession might approach with due dignity; then she herself followed with the salad. Madame set it down before us with a flourish, and then stood smiling and rubbing her hands, expectant of compliments. But before we could express our gratification, the Impartial Hand interrupted. Never, it appeared, had he been more surprised. These very viands spread before us were the

nutriment which had regaled his innocent childhood. Scarcely could he look upon the omelette of Madame Lavenue without being reminded of his own mother. He was moved in the tenderest emotions by the sardines, for his father had been a fisherman, and often in his unconscious infancy he had been cradled among the boxes of the silvery spoil. When he uttered the words, 'Sardines in oil!' emotion choked his utterance. We must pardon him.

We did. But it became a very evident necessity to invite this bright orphan waif to share these dainties, and this, in spite of the Monk's warning, I did.

Then it was that the Impartial Hand justified himself, and showed his quality. Madame Lavenue could not produce those souvenirs of his early youth quick enough. She ran out of eggs, and was compelled to fall back upon a kind of pancake locally flavoured with a conserve of apples. But this, it appeared, was equally one of the cherished reminiscences of our guest's various childhood. And all the time he kept hard at work, shovelling the tear-stained mementoes into his mouth with the blade of his knife, and pursuing them down his throat with the red wine of Madame Lavenue.

Meanwhile the Monk, with a countenance like a stone wall, continued his geographical gazetteer, to which the Impartial Hand kept nodding as often as he discerned the names of towns or countries of which he had heard.

'I haven't been in Africa – no more have I dwelt in the marble halls of Timbuctoo' thus the Monk with the air of one who furnishes important and deeply serious information – 'but not in Chicago nor Pekin, not in Constantinople, in Algiers, nor yet in Regent's Park or the Kyles of Bute, could I have found so complete an ass as this nodding Jerusalem cuckoo!'

And the Impartial Hand, who understood English, bowed in approval of the sentiment he was so far from comprehending. And all the while the Monk looked into his countenance with a smile, calm and bland and beneficent.

As Madame's wine mounted to his brain and the absinthe mingled with it, the Impartial Hand gave us an account of his life and pursuits. He was a piano tuner by profession, and came from Marseilles. He had long been a wanderer without house or home. He had a beautiful mansion at Etrépany, to which he was returning that night. He had (he just remembered) a wife and four children. But they would welcome us, if we would only favour him by accepting his hospitality. Then he put his head on his hand and sighed. In five minutes he had forgotten his many occupations and nativities. Once more he was an orphan. His father was a large landed proprietor in Alsace. For this reason he was able to speak excellent German, although for the present (owing to some strange mischance connected with the watercress not agreeing with him) he had forgotten the German word for bread and water, and considered that I was complimenting him when I called him a 'dummer Kalbskopf.' But this all had been swept away by the war. The Prussian hordes had killed his little brother of two years old, and carried the corpse off on one of their lances; his sister – but here again the emotions of the Impartial Hand proved too much

for him, and he had to retreat upon the second bottle of Madame Lavenue's red wine, in order to express his deadly intentions with regard to every German in the Fatherland. It was dusking to a quiet, ruddy dusk when at last we shouldered our knapsacks and set forward on the way to the town of Les Ecuils. The wind had fallen after the arid and vexing day. Right cheerfully we paid our bill, which amounted to less than five francs, and included three bottles of excellent wine, and all that the early recollections of the Impartial Hand had induced him to secrete in the inside of his blouse when he supposed that we were not looking.

But he could not think of deserting us. He would accompany us at least as far as the restaurant of the Gare, and there we should drink – at his expense.

But as soon as our feet touched the roadway the Monk and I fell with one accord into a clean heel-and-toe five mile gait, which in a trice left the Impartial Hand so far behind that he soon became no more than a voice crying tearfully in an unseen dusky wilderness behind.

Still, he was the Child of Misfortune. Had he not drunk with us? Had he not clasped our hands as comrades? And now we were deserting him. We would have none of his hospitality. And yet his family was noble – his own career, before the evil demon crossed it, far from undistinguished. Marshall MacMahon had on one occasion said of him – If we would only tarry he would tell us a tale worth telling.

But Les Ecuils lay before us far down that dusky road, which cut straight as a lance – shaft across the plain towards the Seine. Saussay dropped swiftly behind us, and so we had looked our last, please the deities, upon our friend and guest, the Impartial Hand. 'Do you know,' said the Monk, after a pause, 'I don't want to be censorious, but I shouldn't be surprised if that fellow was a liar!'