

E. A. MARKHAM

Bookmarks for John La Rose

(i)

The sound spread like the heat being switched on and the chill started to drain back into the ground; for it was damp in the cemetery, dank March in England; and you checked yourself, embarrassed for making connection between rebirth and its opposites; and everyone was so well-dressed, so rightly-dressed; and that rightness still chimed with events earlier, the singing in

community; and a man who had done so much might be expected to have some of his more familiar achievements—his knowledge of Spanish, of French, of Latin; his founding of a bookshop and a publishing house; his inauguration of a Book Fair—slip by you without undue reflection.

And so I embarrassed myself in the graveyard; and sang. I gave myself the usual silent telling-off for having fallen down so quickly on a resolution made an hour or so before in the church, not to appropriate this event; and, as usual, shifted the blame. I was lucky to put down this lapse in taste to glimpsing a tall man I hadn't seen in thirty years, maybe, also singing the chorus to 'The Red Flag.'

(So we need our funerals to bring us together, and I was thinking of a story by the Japanese writer, Jd [(o) 9.96 0 0 9.96 3eM46.79(o) 973[(n)6(ert6(r)3(s)4(da)-1(e) 97Jd [(oa (r)-1t

train from Sheffield to Edinburgh. I am sitting opposite, making a note for a story that won't get written. She's reading her book. At some point when the train stops at a station, Newcastle? Berwick, she looks up...)

(iii)

At the reception—it may have been called something else—at the reception in another part of London, excellent curried goat was served, among other things; rice, so much food, what must it cost

His stratagem made us look conventional; all those earlier platitudes for a friend who was not that much older than us; that mention of a father-figure, even as we resisted the notion of the father-figure for we were at the age when such an idea was worryingly close to the transcendental. It had been easy to agree that he had been a substantial presence *out there*, in the vanguard, as we say. If it was true that he had not exactly shielded us, not quite making us more secure or safe, hadn't he at least made us more confident in our temptation to articulate a contrary view, to protest against the unacceptable? And with his removal didn't we now all have to inch forward and fill a little gap that had opened up; and didn't that put on us the onus to speak out more confidently, in our own voice? Yes, yes and *yes*. But these were the normal things you said on these occasions. Now Balham had gone further.

And still he made me leave without satisfaction. I couldn't directly ask about authors and titles he might now be reading as a form of what? More than remembrance. Maybe benediction. So I left without a clear list of books he proposed to read to complete our friend's cycle of literary interest. I had no wish to emulate Balham. (I would, perhaps, have preferred to choose to read, in remembrance, something that the man must have enjoyed, *Anna Karenina*, say.) But I felt my curiosity about titles and authors somewhat vulgar in the light of the tall man's more magisterial concept. He did let slip that there was 'a thing on Hugo Chavez and Castro and the New American Revolution' as one of the unfinished books. Difficult to establish whether that was a title or a description of a political monograph. Then there was mention of the pile of political pamphlets by the bedside table, presumably not yet read. (He didn't reveal the titles of those pamphlets which would now be read in case they had not been read.) Another book casually mentioned in this context was something about travellers across *cultures* but he didn't name an author. He mentioned Heidegger and Sartre, but not whether philosophy or biography; and other authors he named included Naipaul, Monica Ali and Robert Antoni: he didn't specify the books. And did the clutch of random-seeming names—Martin Carter, Dickens, the Holy Bible—mean that there would be no form of selection by the reader? An interesting detail was the mention of the diaries of an Englishman who had run the National Trust. (I was later to identify him as James Lees-Milne. Curious.) But the

left in books by accident. What then? How did we know that our friend had intended to read those books to completion? He was a publisher, after all; he may have been just checking things in some of the books. Or parking the bookmark accidentally. Also, he wasn't alone in the house: what of the wife's, the widow's taste in reading: some of the marked books might be hers. Would it be ethical to be reading *her* books through to the end while she was alive? Wasn't that akin to finishing her sentences?

Even though I told myself that none of this might matter—the concept being the thing—that what Balham had initiated was something generous, different in spirit from the thing that a musician, say, might do in completing someone else's score, for that was public collaboration, your name was on the finished product, it was paying homage, but also self-serving. The same as with an architect finishing someone else's great building, for the building would be there as witness. So though Balham's homage would be altogether more subtle than that, yet... there was still something that smacked of imposing your will on the dead man. What if he had decided that he had had enough of the book in question and didn't want to pursue it? To force a man to read to the end, by proxy, a book of which he is already bored, is to play a trick on

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‘Seventh Story’ (which one was that?) brought nothing back to mind—though, with Plato, the marker between the much-read *Symposium* and the examined-in-the-distant-past *Republic* was one I would wish my bearer of tributes to pass comment on. What did this tell us: that one’s random reading was relatively broad but that one’s attention span was possibly short? Would completing these books be akin to tidying, to cleaning up the life? Was the dead man’s life as untidy as mine? And was that a lesson for me to get on with it and get my act together? The small panic is with the books not started. *The Making of Dr Johnson’s Dictionary* by Henry Hitchings, long on my desk, must be started just in case, as with Michael Holroyd’s much-deferred biography of Augustus John. What of the five-volume *A History of Women*, a decade, at least, on the shelves, only glanced at, shifted from one address to another, perhaps to demonstrate that the interest was long-standing. *This must not be overlooked by the one bearing tribute....* Oh, this is crazy.

In the bookshop yesterday I bought a second-hand copy of Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*. (In my half-hearted attempt to represent that ‘pile of political pamphlets by the bedside,’ I had pulled from... here and there, Terry Eagleton’s *The Crisis of Contemporary Culture*, and *Africa in the Shadow of Clash of Civilizations*, by Ali Mazrui, along with *US Intervention in Jamaica: How Washington Toppled the Manley Government* (by someone called Ernest Harsch), and a few others: it had all seemed so insubstantial). I had once heard a colleague at work mention that Ortega y Gasset had anticipated both Sartre and before him, Heidegger. That was a sort of interest my friend, who had died, might have wished to pursue. (I had heard him talk quite knowledgeably, to a charming Italian friend, about Gramsci.) So, I’ll add Ortega y Gasset to my list, if only to concentrate someone’s mind. This is not an entirely

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