

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 the church; with the tributes—tributes both shaming and uplifting. Uplifting, because they were appropriate: everything I knew about the man who had died said that the tributes were appropriate (and I had known him for nearly forty years). But shaming, too, because it threw a sort of light on your own life, and made you uneasy about what you saw suddenly lit up there; not that it was a surprise, but it made you uneasy, nevertheless. For when your time comes, you thought—you tried to banish the thought, but that merely encouraged it; like a tiresome companion on a long journey; and this was not helped by sitting next to a man who was clearly losing it—when your time comes, you feared that those who would do the eulogy, who would pay tribute, would have to lie on your behalf. Maybe they wouldn't lie outright; but would have to de-emphasise certain traits and overstress others, the effect of which would be to lie. *A man is dead, that is the truth; call a lie a lie.* And you were sitting there thinking, while the Twenty-third Psalm was being sung, beautifully sung, and a poem by Martin Carter read, and a new poem by Kamau Brathwaite performed to perfection by the author, and the steel pan played—poem and steel pan done so expertly—you were sitting there thinking: I owe it to those who might give the eulogy on my behalf, who might pay tribute to the absent me, not to have to lie or go into contortions; so, in deference to them if nothing else, I

would have to adjust the *balance* of my life, starting now. So that those folk—it would be better if they didn't know me too well—wouldn't have to lie. And the thing to do now to effect that adjustment, would be to stop thinking about myself for a moment and surrender to the present occasion; associate myself with the tributes paid to a friend who—ah—already wouldn't know that it was a sharp but pleasant spring morning in north London, not even raining.

And then at the graveyard ('yard.' Why 'yard'?)—at the graveyard, more tributes; the songs, the hymns. The selection was balanced; mildly surprising, initially, but not in retrospect, and, on reflection, there was a rightness to it, the tone faultless; the departed would have approved: there were the hymns, the carols ('Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'); but also there was Marley. And then after 'We would meet by the river some day' and the 'Union Song' and 'The International' (our man was a Trades Unionist, too), there was 'The Red Flag.'

(ii)

That's when the warmth began to issue from the ground, countering the dampness. That's when—as I was thinking how right the 'sweet' in 'sweet chariot' seemed—that's when the sap from the ground started receding from shoes, stopped rising through feet; and after a quick glance at the prickling sound from nearby, I tried not to gaze at my new neighbour, whose voice was what the electric switch had suddenly turned on: the effect was a prickly blanket thrown over you, welcome but encouraging an itch. 'The people's flag is deepest red,' had come to the rescue.

The accent was Scottish; the full-throated gush of the vowels making 'red' and 'dead' more than the tired old rhymes you remembered, a surging wave-like memory of something from the deep ocean urging itself against the shore, the fear and excitement like something expected but unknown made me chime in, like a student on a demonstration, with 'Then raise the scarlet standard high...', etc.

And yes, our man being buried, the radical Marxist, had once studied to be a Catholic priest (we had been reminded about that in the church: was his legendary even temper, then, more than personality?) and that added to the piquancy. But new, revised images of him had already crowded that out: the realisation that he was not just a grandfather but a great-grandfather, his well-behaved-seeming, great grandchildren led up to the casket to say a dignified goodbye, prompting you to think that part of this man's luck was that he had founded a—what?—a tribe, a village, a

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, Haruki Murakami, a story about chance: the man in the story thinks of things and then they happen. He goes to a jazz club and wants the musician to play a couple of numbers not usually played, and without his requesting them, the musician duly plays the numbers. Then, in the same story, a man goes to a shopping mall one morning each week (this is in America) and spends part of the time quietly reading *Bleak House* in the cafe, and discovers that the woman sitting opposite him is also reading *Bleak House* (*she* discovers it, but the point that's being made is one of *chance*), and so on: the woman is about to have an operation for breast cancer; the man then discovers that his sister—from whom he has been long estranged, no contact between them for years—is also about to have an operation for breast cancer. She reveals this when he rings her on the spur of the moment. All this came to me as I stood in the graveyard, and heard the Scottish (female) open-vowelled chimes of 'red' and 'dead,' and glimpsed the tall man—a man I had not seen in perhaps thirty years—doing his best to upstage us all.)

Afterwards, we said the right things to each other—the man from the past whom we used to call Balham, and myself. Neither of us now lived in this country, I across the channel, he further afield; so it was no longer necessary to play the game of host and be seen through; and we could both take credit for that. We praised the other's health and bearing and robust look, perhaps not lying; and said the usual things of needing to meet on occasions not like this. And as we parted we knew that each was reviewing the last thirty years weighing up the balance of advantage to himself.

*This is like a footnote inserted in the story about a funeral. I had known Balham for, what, close to fifty years; we had been to school together; we had done our GCEs at the same college in Kilburn. He wasn't part of the group that you hung out with after school, the unofficial 'reading club' in the common room where you had a go at Shakespeare, and were relieved that some of the jokes in that early part of The Tempest were attempts you might improve on; though you were impressed, you remember, by old Gonzalo's definition of 'Commonwealth' to his sceptical mates. No, Balham was less of a friend, then, more someone you sought out on occasion because he came, originally, from your part of the world. He was tall (yes, and he had aged well) and his pal—also from my part of the world, and doing his GCEs—was an amateur boxer; the combination of tall man and putative boxer giving them a certain—not cachet—a certain **presence** in the school. Tall man and boxer admired my wrestling with Latin verbs (**conjugation conjugation**) and, perhaps, my knowingness about Dickens and Chaucer; and they invited me to play tennis at their table. I always lost. That they occupied one of the communal tables longer than was appropriate was my argument, not always voiced, to explain away my losing; the embarrassment of hogging the table undermining my resolve. But it wasn't the table-tennis that tested my loyalty to friends to whom I wasn't particularly close: it was the saying of grace at mealtimes.*

*Some of the boys at school pulled rank hinting that fathers and uncles were paid monthly—or paid themselves monthly—rather than weekly and therefore had salaries, rather than wages. Or that an older brother or cousin at this or that College had already been **fined** for walking on the sacred grass in the quad, laid down centuries before; and that even those reading non-Classics at the university had to fall in line and say Latin grace at dinner-time. Our friends' response to this—our friends the tall man and the boxer—was to make a show of doing grace, at their lunch table in Kilburn, before tucking into their whatever-it-was and chips. The grace was sung. The first line of that particular song of praise was usually 'The people's flag was deepest red....' I, a loser at table tennis, accepted the loser's penalty and, at the dinner-table, sang along.) End of footnote.*

When I collected myself in the graveyard and looked round at what had originated all this, the Scottish temptress had gone. (*She's on the train to Scotland. From London to Scotland. She will be on the train from Waterloo to Paris. No, she's on that earlier*

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? At the reception more introduction with old friends; people looking splendid in their best clothes, pity about the occasion (though the thought had occurred, earlier, outside the church, that so many black people on the street, tastefully-dressed, was a sort of statement that shouldn't be ignored). But here at the reception, duty done, the day 'enjoyed,' I had started to say goodbye to the gathering—to head for bus, tube, train and home across the channel, hopefully in time for a late supper—when I again ran into Balham, only now coming in. He is smug, I think, there is something of the Cheshire cat on his face; he will make you work for an explanation. So instead of pressing, I point to the appropriate room and recommend the curried goat. *What could he have been up to?*

So, time to retract some of the goodbyes and to talk (again) of general matters. (Hours earlier, in the church, one had been drawing up pros and cons: imagine never again seeing a woman's smile? *That was worth dying for. That was worth, surely, all the opposites of dying for; never again choosing your toothpaste, packing, in anticipation to visit a new place; or just identifying strange shapes in the clouds with your grandchildren: surely, the fellows who wrote, who told the Bible stories must have led sad lives.* But then again, imagine never having to worry about money, about taking your medicines, about how Africa is to be irrigated, is to be governed; about whether your partner loved (loves) someone else? *That's consolation of sorts.* Now, the discipline was to avoid praising each others' achievements or to crow about the new more-distant places of residence):

So we praise (again) the organisation of this event.

We approve of the *balance* achieved: music, tributes, poetry, hymns, the Gregorian chant; the 'flawless' Latin.

We are impressed by the *rhythm* of the journeying: the move from church, to graveyard to food, colonising not just different bits of London *but so much space.*

(Reversing earlier journeyings? Mounting a subtle resistance against the too-easy move from life to death? Don't push it.)

We praise the singing (and optimism) of black people. (*Who will not be deterred from burying their dead.*)

We praise the singing (and fatalism) of black people. (*Who seem at their best on these occasions.*)

We celebrate a remarkable man whose first public legacy in dying is to bring so many talents together. More than that, to occasion an event so huge in cultural import cutting across the absurdities of class and race, that this was, itself, the ultimate tribute. (*Would he were here to enjoy it.*)

At which point Balham reappeared, with his plastic plate and fork, nodding approval of the curried goat.

We praise the curried goat; and apologise again for venturing a comment on the financial cost of funerals.

I had done enough. I had played the game. I had, symbolically, lost at table-tennis again. So what had Balham been up to?

This is the story. Between the graveyard and the reception Balham went on a quest. He wormed his way—no, let's not be mean-spirited—he made his way back to the house of our dead friend: there were people there, of course, some family, friends, others helping to coordinate the event, to give directions on the phone; and maybe the odd person who didn't feel up to the graveyard, though the widow (a cruel, new word, new condition)—the widow turned out and commanded herself to be gracious.

So Balham had found his way back to the house, infiltrated the couple's library and rifled the man's private stock of books; at the end of which he had formulated a plan. The plan was to complete our friend's unfinished reading-material. Balham had gone through the shelves, identified bookmarks and resolved to get to the end of those books—presumably, he selected some and rejected others—those books that our friend who had died had been unable (or unwilling) to complete. It was elegant, it was imaginative, it was *appropriate*. Not for the first time in my life I envied this ('lesser') man. He was no longer the somewhat embarrassing tall boy at school hogging the tennis table; he was no longer the dubious character reading Sociology at university in Leicester and thinking himself a poet; he was now a man with a *conceit* that I envied. I wanted more detail about his programme of action.

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 then again: could the Dickens have been *Bleak House*?)

On the way to the station I found that the original excitement of Balham's idea started to fade: there were too many unanswered questions. Bookmarks are sometimes

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 someone who can't defend himself; worse, really, than forcing a child to eat his greens; for the child's protests are likely to be loud. Was this really as generous as it seemed?

It would be against the spirit of the resolution made in the church to compete with Balham (to upstage or undermine him); that early resolution, about the reigning in of 'self,' had to mean something.

I was at home, scanning my own shelves, checking the bookmarks: I would complete *Moby Dick*, I had always promised to complete *Moby Dick*, and would do so, whether a friend were alive or dead: that extraordinary sermon early on, and the image of Queequeg, first encountered forty years ago, needed to be re-engaged with. But what of *Britain's Royal Families* with the bookmark on page 178? In the middle of a chapter on 'The Kings and Queens of Scotland'? The bookmark was between the penultimate and last pages suggesting that the chapter hadn't been quite completed (or the bookmark would be over the page; though I had presumably got through the kings, from Alpin to Kenneth II, for whatever reason). What else? The bookmark in the hardback copy of Philip Roth's hugely-anticipated *The Plot Against America* was recent and temporary, soon to be moved forward; the one in Boccaccio lodged at the

‘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 attractive train of thought to encourage, given its more elevated beginnings, so I’ll disguise it for anyone eavesdropping by pretending it to be a game. I’ll give it a misleading working title, something like, ‘The Restoration of Scotland to the Commonwealth,’ to buy a bit of breathing space.