

A Chef-d'Œuvre

By Reginald Turner

As I, his literary executor, arrange and destroy his papers, I realise at last and to the full the tragedy of Alan Herbert's life. If ever man lived for his art, he did ; all that he had, of health and strength, of means and leisure, he gave to what he believed that art demanded of him. And art was no cant word to him. By talking of it he dazzled no clique, he became no lion of tea parties, he gained no undeserved renown. Sincerity, in all the plainness of that austere word, guided his actions and his thoughts. He possessed all the prejudices which so many of his kind affect, and for those prejudices he was ready to suffer. I have known him ill for a week from the hand-shake of a professional journalist, though several of his intimate friends were occasional contributors to the evening papers. Having known him all my life, I never took him quite seriously. At school and at home I had never detected anything abnormal in him, but, as boyhood is not critical of character, this is not surprising ; and I must confess that his parents, pastors and masters, who were all grown-up, thought him unremarkable. I never *thought* about him till my third year at Oxford. He was in his second year, and though I had seen him frequently while he was yet a freshman, I had never had cause to separate him, in my mind, from any of the other men I knew.

knew. The first time he surprised me was one day in the beginning of the October term. I had come up from the river after trying some of the freshmen for the boats, and I looked in at his rooms on my way to my own "Diggs." At that time, Alan was a very good-looking fellow of twenty-one, and as I saw him in his chair with a book in his hand, it struck me for the first time that he had a student's face. After a few moments' conversation, I happened to ask him what he was going to read for his final schools ; he seemed to me like a man who would read history, not being scholar enough for "greats," nor plodding enough for a pass. "I think," he answered, "that I shall not take my degree. Reading for a school narrows one." I had heard idle or stupid men say that before, and I told him that being at the 'Varsity one might as well do something and read with some object in view. As I said it his face lit up, and he answered :

"Do something ? I intend to ! I *am* reading with an object in view. A month ago I had no object. I intended to get a decent class and then go down and see what life I should drift into. But to-day my whole life is changed. You have heard of religious conversions. There are other kinds. I have been converted, I have found salvation, and I intend to live—don't laugh at me ! —for Art. I am not going to shrink from any of the hardships which such a decision brings with it. I take myself seriously, I believe in myself, because I know that concentration and determination always gives a man his heart's desire. Look at this book, it is the life of Balzac, perhaps the greatest literary character of all time, if we consider his circumstances and his influence. In this book I have found my salvation. Before I die I will produce a work which shall be abiding, which shall be my *raison d'être*, and by which I shall gain the true immortality. I am feverish now, the heat of conversion is upon me,

me, but I believe I have strength enough of purpose to persevere, for long years, for a lifetime, till at last I conquer. I know I seem to you now to be a prig, but I am not a prig. I am sincere!"

I saw indeed that he was in earnest, and I confess I was surprised and touched. "Are you going to write a *magnum opus*?" I asked, without any attempt at a sneer, but half in fun.

"The quantity of my work I cannot yet decide, its form I cannot yet tell, but neither concerns me very much. The smallest stars are those which shine the brightest."

"It is perhaps because they are the furthest off that they look small," I murmured.

"I know," he went on, without noticing my interruption, "that most men who have done great things in quality have also produced a large amount of work, but that is perhaps an accident, certainly not a necessity, and I shall do nothing in a hurry. Balzac produced for ten years work which was but a preparation, which might have been destroyed without loss to the world and with profit to himself. I shall prepare myself, but I shall not produce till I feel within myself that the time has come, when I can give to the world my heart's desire."

"My dear Alan, you won't find Oxford a very sympathetic place," I said, a little impatiently.

"No, I quite think that, and I shall not stay, when I have exhausted all it can give me for my purpose. I shall travel and I shall live alone; fortunately I shall be able to live my own life. But as yet I am in confusion, I have formed no plans either for studying the works of others, or for forming my own, but I *am* in earnest, and that's the great thing, surely."

That night we dined together, and I found him so *distract* a companion

companion that I vowed to see little of my enthusiast till his mania had worn off. For weeks I saw nothing of him, and one day, towards the end of term I was surprised to hear that he had been "sent down." He had been out all night and could give no better explanation than that he had gone out, and, forgetting rules and time, had walked all through the night, till, at six o'clock in the morning, he had astonished the porter by demanding admittance at the lodge. Of course neither Don nor Undergraduate would believe such a story, and so he was told that he would be rusticated for a year. I went to see him before he departed. When I got to his rooms, he was packing his books, and as I was trying to say something by way of sympathy, he shrugged his shoulders and told me that it was the first sacrifice his purpose demanded of him, and he didn't regret it. His people at home would not understand him, but he should hope for as little unpleasantness as his father's time with the birds (it was November) would allow him. And, after all, he said the 'Varsity was never kind to dreamers.—"Look at Shelley!"

Two years passed before I saw Alan again. During the year of his rustication, we heard he was abroad, and I received an occasional letter from him, sometimes from Spain and sometimes from Italy. When the year was nearly over I got a long letter from him. He told me that he could never come back to Oxford, with its rigid rules and narrow ambitions.

"I am going to-morrow," so his letter, dated from Paris, ran, "to Croisset, there perhaps to feel the spirit of the great Master steal over me. In the little rooms which I have taken I shall study and ponder over that great life which devoted itself to absolute perfection, and then when I feel I am sufficiently imbued with the perfect spirit of the scholar and the artist, I shall come to London and live quietly in my studio. How much nicer that word

word ‘studio’ sounds than ‘study.’ The one conjures up all beautiful, studious, and working things, the other merely conveys the impression of vain learning and formless severity ! ”

The letter was long, but I won’t quote more. I have here before me, as I write, my answer to that letter, and I confess I feel rather ashamed of it. For six months Alan stayed at Croisset, going occasionally to Rouen to chat with the booksellers and study life on the quay, very much after the manner of Flaubert, I suppose. Then he suddenly left for Italy again. I fancy a reading party drove him away from Croisset. At last one of my uncles told me he had seen him in London. His mother sent me his address. She seemed rather distressed about him, and begged that I would try and get him to take some interest in life. I wrote to him and he wrote back asking me to dine with him. He was living in some rooms in an old house off the Strand, and when I entered I noticed that his sitting-room was almost bare of furniture. The wall was covered with long strips of paper, on which were written what looked like genealogies. I was quite shocked when I saw my friend. In place of his former vigorous bearing, I found him thin, pale, and care-worn, and he certainly had not been cheating himself by pretending to work, for his face was that of one who studied by day and by night. As I looked around me, I saw two or three chairs, a bare writing table, and on the floor a heap of books in utter confusion.

“I thought we would dine at a restaurant,” he exclaimed, evidently thinking I was looking for some signs of an impending meal. “We shall be more free to talk over old times. This room is my studio, and while here I cannot take my thoughts from my work. I’m afraid you’ll find me a bore and an egoist, but living alone for two years with but one object in view doesn’t improve one as a companion.”

We

We went out to dine, and I found that Alan had indeed not improved as a companion. We talked of old times and friends, and he told me something of where he had been and what he had done since we last met. But our conversation soon flagged, and I was rather glad when he suggested that we should take our coffee in his rooms. When we got back, I saw that he flung himself into his chair with infinite content, and when our pipes were lighted and the coffee—excellent coffee by the way—was brought in, I began to feel quite cheerful. “And now, Alan,” I said, between sips of coffee and whiffs at my pipe, “now that you are back in London, you must neglect your friends no longer, and we shall expect you to marry.”

He laughed. “My friends are here on the wall, and as for my heart, I have given that away. An artist’s life is a lonely one, he has some hardships to endure, but he has compensations also. I should have liked to marry and to have had sons and daughters to carry me on into the future, but I intend to live in the heart and memory of every one that knows what beauty in Art is. I have certainly given my life and my soul to the service of Art. Since that day in Oxford when I told you my ambition, I have never faltered; all my actions have been taken for one object and though the way has often seemed hard, I have never regretted it, for I knew I was paying the penalty of my choice. I remember that day you asked me what form my work would take. I couldn’t tell you then, but to-day I can. The preparation is over, the work begun. Will you smile when I tell you how I have chosen to live? Please don’t; it means so much to me. I may in the future write much, or little, I care not which, but I am going to stand or fall, to stand I know it will be, by what in English must be called the ‘short story.’”

“Yes,” I said, rather vacantly, “the short story’s the thing.”

“Why!

"Why! I have always loved small gems rather than large ones. They can be judged, comprehended, embraced, more completely. Fiction involves creation. The characters are mine; I invented them, made them live, and they shall never die. Who was Hamlet? What woman gave him birth? What vault holds his body? Yet he is more real than any general, whose name is written large on bloody battlefields, or any king buried beneath a pyramid. Shall I produce a Hamlet? No; for I wish my work to be not a monument but a cathedral. A perfect orchestra is more beautiful than the most exquisite achievement of one single instrument. Nor shall my puppets be mere creatures of the imagination. As I conceived them, so have I traced their history. You see those genealogies on the wall? They are the ancestors of the persons in my story. I will have justification for every word they utter, reason for every step they take—reason and justification to myself. The world who reads my story shall not know, but I, the author will know, and knowing will convince. There is a waiter in my story, a Marseillais, he does but little, says nothing, is of no perceptible consequence. But do you think I would put him down among my other characters, knowing nothing of him? I am far too conscientious. At Marseilles I studied the man, I have invented for him a history, a family. No man springs from nowhere, and those who read with eyes open will realise that here is a creation, 'This waiter,' they will say, 'is not a mere *garçon de café*, but a human being with soul and personality.'"

I shifted my seat. In fact I was rather bored and just a little inclined to laugh; only his extreme seriousness kept me at attention. Alan looked at me. He suggested whisky, and I gladly accepted. I noticed he took none himself and asked him if living in southern cafés had made him forsake whisky for absinthe.

"I don't

"I don't drink spirits," he said almost shyly, "I am afraid of them. At any cost I am going to keep my head clear and my brain untainted. I don't want people to speak of my work as of that of a mad genius. Above all else I must be sane, and spirits give an unnatural energy, an excited imagination. To a satire or political pamphlet, alcohol may give point, but the maker of beautiful things must rely entirely upon himself and his lightness of touch, his keen insight. His impartiality is bound to be impaired by stimulants. I am afraid you think me a prig. I have warned you before!"

"You punish yourself, at any rate, Alan," I answered him. "Great writers have managed to get on without such austerity, and have even produced great work, if one can credit rumour, while consuming quantities of whisky; I thought it was what one associated with——"

"With journalists and such creatures, not with real writers. I will take nothing to vitiate my imagination, just as I will do and see nothing to vitiate my taste. I never go to a music-hall or a theatre. Idealist or realist, whichever you be, the theatre will spoil you. How dramatists can allow actors to interpret—interpret!—their works, has always been a very painful problem to me."

As he talked, I realised to some extent what this man's life was. He was single-hearted, he believed in himself, and he sacrificed himself to his opinions. I looked upon him almost with awe, certainly with some apprehension, and I rose to go.

"Come and see me sometimes—often!" he said, as we shook hands. "I am generally alone, and occasionally lonely, so don't be afraid of disturbing me. Friendship and the companionship of friends can do no one anything but good."

"Come and dine with me?" I asked him.

"No,

"No, society is different. You will find me here when you want me, but I should not be an amusing visitor to you. Look!" and he pointed to a bundle of uncut books, "here is my night's work—Italian love songs. My hero writes one and he must know what to avoid before he sets himself to the work. Ah! My hero . . . for five months I have searched vainly for his name. I have looked in directories; I have walked the streets looking at the names over the shops, in vain. I have found no name to suit him—no name which is *his*."

"Why not try Smith?" I thought as I went downstairs. But when I got to my cosy chambers, I felt myself to be a low brute with no aim in life, and I thought of my friend reading his Italian love-songs in his rooms off the Strand. I saw him continually all through that summer. He steadily refused to leave London. His work was really in progress, and whenever I came to town for a day or two between my various visits in the country, I found my friend hard at work.

"When is the *Chef d'Œuvre* going to be finished?" I asked him one day, and I silently prayed heaven it might be soon, for Alan waxed thinner and paler as the summer gave place to autumn.

"I've been at it for over two years now and I shall finish it in a few months, if all goes well," he said, cheerfully. "But sometimes I stop altogether. I look for a word for several days, and then don't find it in the end. There are countless other troubles too wearisome to relate. When it is all over, I shall go to the South."

But he was never to go. As winter came on he fell ill, and yet he stuck to work. Day after day, night after night, he was at his desk, writing, almost letter by letter, his wonderful story.

One day (it was mid-way through November), on going to see him,

him, I found him frantically writing. His face was flushed and I thought that on it I saw the mark of tears. When I entered, he stood up quite still and looked at me. I saw that something had happened.

"I must tell some one. I will tell you," he gasped out. "This morning, I saw my doctor, and he tells me I have to die—only three weeks more and perhaps I shall be dead!"

He took a stride to his table and snatched up his pen. "But I must finish this. I must launch it on the world. I must know that it is safe. I shall never in this world know the estimation they put upon my work, but I shall at least know that it is safe. I realise now how hard it must be for a mother to die when her child is about to begin life. But how much harder if her child doesn't live and she goes out into the darkness, leaving nothing."

"You are going to publish the story?" I asked. I felt that commiseration for his fate would be out of place.

"I am going to send it to H——," and he named the editor of a well known Review. "I shall send it with just my initials and address. Perhaps H—— may have heard of me and of my life. I rather hope not. This gem shall have no borrowed light. It shall go without a word into the literary world, there to take up its place. But now I must be alone, I must finish my work. Good night."

And I left him. Every day I went to see him. Every day he seemed more feverish, more unearthly. A week later, when I called, I found him in bed, weary and feeble but quite calm.

"It is finished," he said. "I sent it off this morning, and now I have done. I hope I shall hear from him quickly. I wrote a note with it, and said that I was going abroad shortly and should hope to hear from him in a day or two."

"Why

"Why not go abroad!" I suggested, though I saw clearly he was far too ill.

"I have given my life for that one story, but I don't regret it. Most men die and leave nothing behind. I have given the world a possession. I have given it my best."

Day after day I sat with him. As I watched him dying, I realised how singularly simple and devoted his life had been. And he, we both, waited eagerly for news of his life's work.

One morning, a fortnight later, as I sat reading to him, a passage from the *Tentation de Saint Antoine*, his landlady came in with a note. I saw it was from the office of the —— Review. I stretched out my hand to take it, but he prevented me, crying out with a petulant, childish anxiety.

"No, no, it is for me," he cried, clutching at it.

Thus the note ran: "Dear Sir,—We regret that your story, which we have perused with interest, can find no place in our pages. It is of no inconsiderable merit, but is somewhat crude and in places ill-considered. We should advise you however to persevere and in time no doubt you may produce something worthy."

As he reached the end, Alan Herbert turned his face to the wall and died.