

II—A VISIT FROM MONSIEUR BENDA

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Hammmamet, 24 June 1945.

YESTERDAY afternoon, Jacques brought Julien Benda to see us. In the morning, we had met Jacques on the beach and he had talked about him. He said he was seventy-eight and a brilliant old man who hated going to see people or places, he replied when asked to do so, that he preferred his imagination. This sounded so unusual and sympathetic that I begged Jacques to use whatever wiles or guile he could to drag him to us.

Somehow, he succeeded.

Without much hope, I changed into my one new dress in five years—a pink cotton American Lend-Lease—snatched from the jaws of the *Marché Noir* well before it had got its teeth into it, and started waiting. Whenever I am cleaned up and tidy I wait, they always seem to go together and on the whole the combination is discouraging.

However, this time my boredom was not prolonged. About six o'clock Jacques's car drove up and there they were. Monsieur Benda was a small old man with a fringe of white hair and a beady and ironical face. He suffered, I guessed, from rheumatism, as he was heavily clad in a thick suit and his long French drawers peeped out from the ends of his trousers. The weather, June in Tunisia, was extremely hot.

That afternoon, before they came, I had searched through my library for *Le Trahison des Clercs* with the vague idea that I might—for the first time in my life—ask a well-known writer to sign one of his books for me. My subconscious told me firmly that I would not; I have always wished to do so but have never succeeded; something, perhaps cowardice—or even good manners—prevents me. But the idea still persists. However, *Le Trahison des Clercs* had vanished, perhaps the Germans had burnt it, with many others, or a borrower had mistaken it for a gift, as they so often do. In any case, it had ceased to be a complication.

I knew that Monsieur Benda would detest seeing the garden, particularly so as it is locally famous, so I took him straight indoors and settled him into the only and extremely uncomfortable armchair in our pillaged house, trusting that as a

Frenchman he would not be difficult from the 'comfort' angle, I felt he might be difficult from almost any other.

Conversation, until lubricated by glasses of wine, flagged a little. I searched my mind for the right subject to feed him with; at last I got him going by a remark on dictators, saying that if they were only forced to travel when they came to power—or even before—many wars might be averted, their complete ignorance of the mentality of other countries was always a menace.

'Yes,' he said, 'that went for Hitler and Mussolini, but Stalin *had* travelled.'

'Switzerland,' I said, 'they all go there at some time.'

'No, Stalin went all through Italy as well, and,' he added, 'one realizes what a remarkable man he is because he ignored completely all the things that people look at there!'

He began to warm up: he had himself travelled nearly everywhere. He talked about humanity, saying that the only race that had that virtue were the Anglo-Saxons, and he added generosity to them as well.

'I'll give you an example. Every moderate-sized house in England and America has a spare room for friends. Do you find that in France? Never!' He said 'never' with violence, looking round at his audience which included three French friends. I smirked with pleasure at this appreciation of our national virtues.

Then he told us how once, in America, he was in a train that divided at a certain place and how, too late, he discovered that he had missed the right moment and was in the wrong part of it for his destination.

'Naturally,' he said, 'as a Frenchman I began to cry out, to gesticulate—to make a scene. At once, a complete stranger, sitting near me, said "Don't—get—excited". He repeated this short phrase slowly to us in English with evident satisfaction, and paused dramatically. 'Then,' he went on, 'this stranger, this man who had never seen me before, told me that everything could be arranged, and it was. They telephoned, they stopped the train, they put me back where I should be, with kindness and humanity. Do you think that could happen in France? Never!'

Again there was a pause, and I began to think how charming he was. When one has lived through the war in a country where—unofficially—everything Anglo-Saxon, except their cigarettes, is almost universally disliked, one cannot help a feeling of warmth and gratitude at hearing a few kind words about one's race.

He talked about London: said it was the capital with the greatest personality in the world. When a French listener asked him why, he said it was difficult to explain, he thought it was the combination of tradition and a humane, ever-moving and changing democracy.

Then, when someone (perhaps it was I) made the usual banal remark about being forced to live in this horrible epoch, he replied: 'But why? You have all the epochs in history to choose from!' My husband laughed and said, 'That's what I've always done'. Monsieur Benda looked at him inscrutably.

The conversation turned to English writers; he said that he had met one of our younger poets in Spain, during the civil war.

'A good young man,' he said, 'very naïve and trustful.' His face became more ironic than ever. I thought it best not to press for his opinion on his literary merits.

On Proust: that he had set out to write one thing and it had turned—unconsciously—into something else, something far greater and more important than the writer had realized.

What he said about contemporary French writers was not what those writers might wish to hear, so I will leave that alone.*

By then it was nearly eight o'clock, he looked at Jacques and stood up to leave. But it was not quite the end. My husband, with the determination of a passionate gardener, walked him to a nearby sunken garden, with a pool backed by two Roman columns and made him look at it. He submitted, gently and with humanity.

SELECTED NOTICES

The Course of German History. By A. J. P. Taylor. Hamish Hamilton. 12s. 6d.

IN the past six years there must have been many who have sought, by the study of German history, to understand the crisis through which we have lived, many who have turned to the public libraries for help in this dark and problematical matter. They will not have found them very helpful. There is the learned and conscientious Dr. Gooch, of course, indefatigable with his scissors and paste, but not very illuminating on causes, and the unspeakable Mr. Dawson, who swallows everything whole; and then there are the Germans themselves, the interminable frothblowers of the Bismarckian era, who put so much in, and the virtuous neuters of the Republic, who leave so much out, and the German political thinkers, depth opening below depth (for nonsense can be infinitely profound), from whom one turns quickly away, even when they are summarized by Mr. Rohan Butler and M. Vermeil, overcome with

*It has just been published.—EDITOR.