LOVER under another NAME

Ethel MANNIN

LOVER UNDER ANOTHER NAME

In the sense that *Late Have I Loved Thee* could be described as the story of a modern St. Augustine, this book could be described as the story of a modern St. Francis, though the implications go beyond the renunciation of material possessions. Through the life of its central character the book is concerned not only with money in relation to life but also to art, and with the practical application of the Christian ethic in the *Angst*-ridden contemporary scene. The author contends that the book is 'religious' in a far deeper sense than *Late Have I Loved Thee*, because whereas the "Francis Sable" of that novel was concerned with ritual and dogma, the trappings of religion, the "Tom Rowse" of this book was concerned with what he himself called 'the little more and the little less and how much it is of the Nazarene story', his own particular 'Vision of Christ' which as a sculptor he carved in lignum vitae, the 'wood of life', in terms of Christ driving the money-changers out of the temple.

The story is told in the first person, and the scene is set in London —Greenwich—and in Paris, where, 'on the bread-line', he serves a long apprenticeship to his art. It is a story of material and spiritual struggles, his love-affairs, and the long bondage of his one love, in which there was so little happiness yet without which he would not have known the lightning-flash of revelation on his particular 'road to Damascus'.

On all that it touches—money, art, love, religion—the book is highly controversial, but "Tom Rowse" in telling his story, with complete honesty and frankness, cites Blake—with whose writings he is deeply preoccupied, and who is, with the spirit of a dead sculptor called Brenovski, the source of his inspiration both as an artist and a seeker after truth—who declared that 'Every thing that lives is Holy', and being persuaded, as Blake was, that 'the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God', like Blake he 'cared not for the consequences but wrote', for, he tells us, 'other lost travellers dreaming under the hill, in the labyrinth of living'.

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ETHEL MANNIN

LOVER UNDER ANOTHER NAME

'The artist, who is only the lover under another name. . . .'

(BASIL DE SELINCOURT in his
Introduction to Blake's Selected Poems.)

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E. M.

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For

ALAN ALLEN

'Tho' thou art worshipp'd by the names divine
Of Jesus and Jehovah, thou art still
The son of morn in weary night's decline,
The lost traveller's dream under the hill.'

(Epilogue to *The Gates of Paradise*.
William Blake.)

'The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.'

(*The Everlasting Gospel*.
William Blake.)

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Part I

HUNGER AND LOVE

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1

FOR MOST people who don't live there Greenwich means, I suppose, the green wooded hill of the park rising unexpectedly from the river after the five-mile stretch of dockland greyness from the Pool—a green hill crowned by the Observatory globe, and forming a background for a Wren waterfront of domed and pillared buildings, with glimpses of colonnades and wide lawns and scarlet geraniums, and immediately behind and adjacent to all this, stately yellow houses with bow windows and a lost-nobility air.

But that Canaletto-cum-Regency façade, with the intimations of faded gentility behind, is not the whole of the picture. There is a hinterland about which the weekend trippers who have come to Greenwich in recent years by water-bus know nothing, and which is of no interest except to those who live there, or who, like myself, were born there. The trippers come to spend a few pleasant hours on the hill and round about; they climb up to the Observatory and admire the view and examine the twenty-four hour clock and make little jokes about Greenwich mean time; they look respectfully at the Nelson relics in the museum, and admire the herbaceous borders of the well-kept gardens, the elegance of the faded Regency houses—"They knew how to build in those days! I suppose they're all flats now . . ."—and at a cafeteria pavilion set among King Charles II's massive sweet-chestnuts they can get tea by courtesy of the L.C.C. Why should they go further and fare drearily with mean streets of a Deptford drabness in unpleasant proximity to the gas-works?

When I was a boy I never thought Observatory Hill or the Naval buildings or the Queen's House so very wonderful. In common with all the other hinterland kids I was glad the park was there to play Red Indians in. Nowadays I believe the kids play gangsters and hold each other up with tommy-guns, but in my time, before the first bout of global warfare, it was Red Indians and cowboys and bows and arrows; comparatively speaking, it was the Age of Innocence. In the company of other snotty-nosed ragamuffins with dirty knees I scampered up and down the steep wooded slopes, lay in ambush in grassy hollows, hid inside hollow trees centuries old, and had a high old time.

But any old piece of wasteground or rubbish dump would have served as well, and the strip of beach below the pier at low water was more exciting; you could paddle there, and you never knew what you might find among the washed-ashore garbage of old shoes, bits of wood, cabbage stalks, and sea-weedy tangles of refuse.

For the boy that I was the broad highway of the river running out to the sea was vastly more exciting than any green hill, and a tug chugging along with a string of barges sunk deep in the grey water was as alive for me as all the stately architecture was dead. My father had told me that when he was a boy a fishing fleet sailed from Greenwich to the North Sea, and that they would go as far as Iceland and Greenland. I would think of this when I saw the great red-brown sails of the barges spread against the sky; in my mind I would see a whole Armada of tawny sails gliding down the river. Where they were bound for didn't matter; all that mattered to the boy that was young Tom Rowse was that they were off somewhere, which seemed to me, living down by the gas-works, a fine thing to be. I didn't want Iceland or Greenland; we learned about Greenland in a hymn at Sunday School—'From Greenland's icy mountains'—and Iceland sounded equally chilly. I certainly didn't want to go to sea like my brother Martin. He went as fireman, and it seemed to me he might just as well have gone to work at the gas-works like our father, as work shifts in the furnace heat of a boiler-room in the bottom of a ship. Martin joined the Merchant Service because he wanted to travel. He saw a bit of India and Australia, it's true, but his travelling came to an abrupt end in 1917 when he was torpedoed and drowned. He was nineteen.

I narrowly escaped the war, being just eighteen when it ended. It was bad luck on my parents that if they had to lose a son it should be their favourite, and not even a grave for my mother to water with her easy tears, only the impersonality of his name on a war-memorial. It was all the worse luck on them because young Tom turned out the way he did.

I am writing this book for my own son. I've walked out on him, it's true, but it isn't quite as the bare statement of fact suggests. Bare statements can mislead. You can state that Jesus was a Jew of Nazareth who was executed as a political offender. It is true, but most people would agree that the fact is a long way short of all there was to it. That I am a good deal concerned with

the little more and how much it is of the Nazarene story is part of the reason for recording my confused attempt at interpreting it. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say it is the cause of all that made the recording seem necessary. I walked out on everything except one thing, which was an idea of something which for the sake of convenience we will call God. That hounded me down the labyrinthine ways all right.

But in my lost traveller's dream under the hill, in my particular labyrinth of living, I had a guiding star to make me a little moony night, and if his poetry was more obscure nevertheless the fiery, sun-in-splendour clarity of Bill Blake's ultimate vision was something of which poor Thompson was physically and spiritually incapable, in bondage as he was to the black-gowned ones on the one hand, dark preachers of death, 'of sin, of sorrow, and of punishment, opposing nature', and his own neuroses on the other. For Blake, Jesus was the bright preacher of life, of creativeness; he was God, and imagination eternity.

One of the things you learn in the labyrinth, if you learn anything—and it is not uncommon to learn nothing—is that Love is both the Lion and the Lamb, uniting in itself both Innocence and Experience. But that the artist is only the lover under another name—that is esoteric. For that fiery particle of truth it is necessary to serve a long noviciate—sometimes a lifetime. I served the noviciate and received before I was forty the revelation, and the 'firm persuasion' for its acceptance. Now all that remains is to 'care not for the consequences but write'—for other lost travellers dreaming under the hill, not least the one who is flesh of my flesh, created in a night that had neither moon nor star, but only the cold darkness of a tenement room, in the last phase of the noviciate. Then I had not learned how to 'love without the help of anything on earth'; materially I had something then, and having it had nothing. Now—but it were better to go back to that mean street under the green hill where it all began.

2

THIS IS my first book, and it will be my last. Writing is not my trade. This is the flesh made word, the wingèd life bound down to paper, and there is a sense in which both writing and reading

are unnatural practices, a living at second-hand. Yet there is the need for communication, and to be communicated with.

I have read a good many of the proletarian's-progress type of novel, and admirable many of them are, so painstaking in their creation of the working-class background and atmosphere, so accurate in detail, acute in observation—so photographically true in all particulars, material and spiritual. Nothing remains to be said about it; it has all been dealt with efficiently and exhaustively by Messrs. H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, D. H. Lawrence, and a horde of lesser writers.

I do not, therefore, propose to enter into the drab details of my childhood and boyhood in the house-in-a-row that opened on to the pavement in one of the streets where the visitors to Greenwich do not go. It was a home without culture of any kind. The only 'literature' that ever came into the house was *Old Moore's Almanack* and the *Pink 'Un*—the former because my mother was deeply superstitious, and the latter because my father was 'interested in sport'—that is to say, he backed horses without ever going to race-meetings, and he enjoyed watching other men play football. I don't know what other interests my father had, unless it was what in our circles we called 'the booze'. As a child I feared him because with the drink in him he would shout and swear, and because my mother always held him over my brother and me as a threat—'You wait till I tell your father!' and 'Your father'll take his belt off to you and tan your hide!' As often as not she *would* tell him, and he would take his belt off to us, or clout us over the head with his heavy hand and threaten to 'knock the stuffing out of us' if he had any more of it. As a boy, when I no longer feared him I hated him; later still I despised him; but finally the contempt petered out into indifference.

I felt sorry for my mother because he often clouted her too when he was 'boozed'. I never managed to love her when I was a child because she was always betraying me to my father, and I was jealous, too, because she always favoured Martin. When I got older I realised her stupidity and was irritated by her, though in later years I saw her as pathetic and discovered a kind of pitying love for her, and tried to make up to her a little for my youthful impatience. When I left home my father, from time to time, wrote me illiterate whining letters, the burden of which was that whereas he had hoped to have two sons to comfort him in his later years, here he was turned fifty and one son dead

and the other might as well be, for all the help he was to him; it was no doubt his fate to work until he dropped, etc.

When I think of him I find it difficult to believe in what the Quakers call 'that of God in every man'; it is much easier to believe in an overdose of what the orthodox call 'original sin'. He seemed to me both stupid and a brute. Yet my mother lived with him some forty years and would never hear anything against him, even when she was walking around with a black eye he had given her and deceiving herself that the neighbours really believed her story of how she had run into a lamp-post, or something equally as unlikely. She always made excuses for him—Dad was 'hasty-tempered'; or he had had a little too much to drink—it was his weakness, she would unnecessarily explain—and 'wasn't responsible'. He was her man, and as such demanded her loyalty, for better or worse, come hell or high-water.

When I was fourteen I left the board-school and was apprenticed to the carpentry trade, because although I was stupid at lessons and was invariably at the bottom of each class, I was considered to be 'good with my hands'. There was a carpentry and a gardening class once a week for the boys, and a laundry and cookery class for the girls, and in both these classes I did well because I was interested; making things grow, and making things out of pieces of wood—all this was creative and exciting. The only class-room lessons I was any good at were drawing and painting, but we only copied things and were never allowed to design, so that the real creative impulse was frustrated. Still, I liked handling pencils and crayons and brushes, and though it cost me marks I did not always copy so exactly, but reproduced things, shapes and colours, my own way. I had a great feeling for outlines and colours and what could be done with them.

Fortunately, near the end of my time at school, we had an intelligent art-master and he recommended that when I left I should go to the Technical School night-classes and what he called 'study art properly'. I had talent, he said, and should do something with it. When I told him that though I liked drawing I preferred wood-work, he said I could combine the two; I could make wood-cuts and wood-engravings from my own drawings; I might even in time be able to make a living at it, illustrating books and designing Christmas-cards.

I was interested, but I still thought it would be more satisfactory to work in wood in a big way, not, as I thought of it,

'niggle' with it. And my parents, of course, would entertain no 'fancy notions'; there were certain accepted ways of earning a living, and 'messing about' with something called 'art' wasn't one of them. My father knew a cabinet-maker who could 'do with' a lad, so I was apprenticed to him.

My employer, Mr. Snell, grandly called himself a cabinet-maker, but had any customer wanted anything as elaborate as even a modern bedside cupboard, he would have been hard put to it to produce it. He was little more than a jobbing carpenter who had worked for a firm of builders and decorators and was now on his own, earning on an average less than when he was an employee but released from the burden of having to get up early in the mornings and stay at a bench a regular number of hours. He was lazy and gloried in it.

"What we want is not more employment," he would assert, "but bigger and better unemployment! So that people have got time to live, see?" He was a natural-born anarchist, endemically agin the government—any government, all government. Governments, he would declare, are rods nations create for their own backs. His favourite book was Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. He was fond of asserting that in a rational society, in which every able-bodied person did their share of work, no one need work much.

This I thought admirable. Unfortunately we did not live in a rational society, and it seemed to me that Mr. Snell extracted his money's worth from young Tom. My apprenticeship to the cabinet-making trade included running to the 'local' for jugs of beer, and to the fried-fish shop for the fish-and-chips off which my employer lunched. I would much rather have eaten my lunch as he did, from a greasy newspaper, seated on a form in the workshop, among the sawdust and wood-shavings, and looking out on to the river, than go home to the 'proper' meal my mother so devotedly prepared for my father and me every mid-day. Mr. Snell ordered me around a good deal, fetching and carrying, waiting on him, running errands, whilst doing as little work as possible himself; nevertheless I thought him a nice old man. In later years it was quite a shock to look back and realise that he couldn't have been more than forty at the time, if that. He was a medium-built man with bright blue eyes, a lot of untidy straw-coloured hair, and a big gingerish moustache with long waxed ends. With his always neat collar-and-tie he was sartorially true

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