

Easter day

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Easter day

It was years ago, at the time when Japan was the happy land of the rising sun, with smiling people greeting you everywhere and the towns and countryside as yet unmarred by the ugly scars of war. Easter had come. It was a glorious morning too... I was strolling through the blossoming cherry-trees near Takarazuka, the meadows were already thick with grass and the rice paddy-fields lay before me like a smooth carpet of tender green, while the bamboo groves looked so beautiful with the bright sunshine piercing the natural darkness of the place. While resting under a cherry-tree bending its branches heavy with pink petals over me, I watched a Japanese farmer climb a small hill nearby and stop on top of it. I could feel how imbued he was with happiness over the glory of the scenery but I became perturbed when I saw him clap his hands and bow with deep reverence to... the sun. Then he went away with a lighter heart. — At the time I could not yet speak the language well; otherwise I would have explained to him that he should not give thanks to the sun, but to the real creator of all these things. We would no doubt have come to speak about another glorious Easter morning nearly two thousand years ago, when those who had not believed in vain really met the Master face to face in the peace of a garden also ablaze with flowers and buds of reawakening Nature. It was not a dream, as some might still think to-day. No, it was real, so real that they could touch him, feel Him, and convince themselves that He was not a ghost but their beloved friend and Master who, a few days earlier, as a parting message, had uttered these words which were also meant for so many among us: «I am not going to leave you friendless» (John 14:18).

Many of us need the courage which Easter can give us. Not all of us are surrounded by friends whom we can love and with whom we can experience from time to time moments of affection and bliss. There is that ugly loneliness which is ever present to spoil all our hours of freedom. With Christ's words however we immediately realize that our state of misery is not meant to be permanent, that a friend somewhere must and will be found. How this friend will be found is another question. We must let ourselves be guided, and perhaps accept situations that do not fit well into our plans. Maybe the friend we are so eagerly looking for must first be found in the one who Himself spoke the above encouraging words, and then only will our eyes be opened and we shall see where the other friend can be discovered...

On that gorgeous Easter morning in Japan I was pondering over many such thoughts, wondering whether I would meet a friend somewhere. In the afternoon I had to leave Kobe by ship for Yokohama, and when I boarded the NYK Liner the crowd on the pier was already shouting «banzai» to those leaving, while holding in their hands the colourful paper ribbons that were meant to unite them for a few minutes longer to those on the ship. When out at sea, we were delighted to behold the peaceful sight surrounding us: the green Kobe hills, the dark pine-trees on Awaji-Island and the many tiny green islands that studded the sea. My cabin passenger was a Canadian student just returning from Beirut

university to his bleak Manitoba. He seemed to have been lonesome for a long time for he spoke effusively to me right from the start. Together we went around the decks and lingered for a while in order to have a last glimpse of Japan before darkness. Huddled together in a corner of the lounge, was a group of strange-looking people. They spoke in whispers, their faces were sallow and fear lurked in their colourless eyes... somewhat apart, sat a young man staring aimlessly around him. Both my Canadian pal and I felt something queer about him, for he gave the impression of being a walking ghost. He looked at us whenever we did not watch him, but when he noticed that we began speaking about him he became as pale as dough, his lips quivered and his eyes looked down in utter despair. We approached him and said hello but he did not answer. I noticed then that the group was speaking in German so I addressed him in that language. Like a beaten dog he raised his wet eyes towards us, and when he saw that we really wanted to speak to him, a slow, sweet smile illuminated his face. We shook hands. How thin they were! He told us in a shaking voice that he and the others were Jews from Eastern Germany and that, after long and awful years of concentration camps and persecution, they had at last succeeded in getting away and were now on their way to the States. He could not tell more, he had already spoken too much. He was again trembling all over but a secret happiness was glowing within him. We could hardly understand why... Then an old woman, his mother, came to join us. She was crying and only had the strength to say, «Oh, thank you, thank you». The son, too, had tears in his eyes but he was beaming now. And we understood why he was so happy when the mother gathered enough energy to say, «you are the first people to speak to my son for years...»

When we left him, he was no longer bewildered, he could face life with courage again. He was one of those whom the Master had promised not to leave friendless.

At night I tried to remember all the details of that eventful day: the glory of the sunny morning under the blossoming cherry-trees, the Master's words, the expectation as to what friend I would receive, and the answer: a persecuted Jewish youth from Europe to whom I had been given the privilege of speaking the first friendly words on a beautiful Easter day...

Reno.

*Love is a flame whose fuel is the flesh,
Which, burning in that unconsuming fire,
Distils the milky due of chaste desire
Whose secret sap wells ever sweet and fresh.*

Lord Alfred Douglas.