

CEMETERY WALKERS

THE five friends were finishing dinner, five middle-aged, well-off men about town, three married and two bachelors. They met like this once a month in memory of their young days, and after dinner they talked on till two o'clock in the morning. Their early friendship had lasted and they enjoyed one another's society, so that this gathering was probably the pleasantest evening in their lives. The conversation ranged over all the topics that interest and amuse Parisians; in their case, as with most salons anyway, it amounted to a re-hash in spoken form of the morning's newspapers.

The life and soul of the party was Joseph de Bardon, a bachelor who lived the life of a man about town in its fullest and most irresponsible form. He was neither a debauchee nor a degenerate but a man interested in everything, who enjoyed life to the full, being still young, for he was hardly forty. A man of the world in the broadest and most charitable sense of the word, he was intelligent but shallow; he had read widely if superficially, and had a butterfly mind which never bothered to get to the bottom of any subject. But his observation and his adventures, everything he saw, his contacts and his discoveries furnished him with a fund of stories at once amusing and reflective and of humorous comment, which gained him a great reputation in town as a wit.

He was always the chief speaker at the dinner. It was always assumed that he would have a story to tell every month. He started on it without waiting to be asked.

Smoking, with his elbows on the table, a half-empty glass of brandy in front of his plate, relaxed in the atmosphere of tobacco scented with the aroma of coffee, he seemed quite at home, as some people are absolutely at home in certain places and at certain times, for example a penitent in a chapel or a goldfish in its bowl.

He said between two puffs of smoke:

'An odd thing happened to me not long ago.'

Everyone cried simultaneously: 'Do tell us about it!'

He went on:

'Right you are. You know I often roam about Paris like collectors who are always searching the shop-windows. What I look for is incidents, people, everything that passes by, everything that happens.

'Well, about the middle of September we had a spell of lovely weather and one afternoon I went out, not knowing where I was going. One always has a vague desire to call on some pretty woman or other. One runs through one's picture-gallery, mentally comparing one with another, weighing the interest each arouses and the charm each exerts; and one's final choice depends on the whim of the day. But, when the sun is shining and the air is balmy, visits of this kind have no attraction.

'The sun was shining and the air was balmy. I lit a cigar and wandered aimlessly along the outer boulevard. Then, as I was strolling on, it occurred to me to go on as far as the Montmartre cemetery and go in.

'I am very fond of cemeteries; they induce a restful melancholy feeling which responds to some need in me. Moreover, there are good friends there, friends one can no longer visit; I still go there from time to time.

'Now it happens that this Montmartre cemetery recalls a love affair of mine, a mistress who meant a great deal to me and of whom I was genuinely fond, a charming little lady, whose memory, though very painful, rouses in me longings . . . for all sorts of things . . . And I go to dream at her grave . . . All is over for her now.

'I am also fond of cemeteries, because they are gigantic towns with huge populations. Just think of all the dead contained in this little space, of all the generations of Parisians housed here for ever, cave-dwellers for all time confined in their tiny vaults and holes in the earth, covered with a stone or marked by a cross, while the living occupy so much space and make such a commotion, fools that they are.

'Moreover, there are almost as many interesting monuments in cemeteries as in museums. Cavaignac's tomb has reminded me, though it is not in the same class, of Jean Goujon's masterpiece, the

effigy of Louis de Brèze, lying in the crypt of Rouen Cathedral. All so-called modern realistic art derives from it, gentlemen. This representation of the body of Louis de Brèze is truer, more terrifying, more alive, though carved in stone, still in the convulsions of his death-agony, than all the tortured contorted bodies on the tombs of to-day.

'But in the Montmartre cemetery one can still admire the impressive monument to Baudin; there are also those of Gautier and Murger, on which I saw recently a poor wreath of faded immortelles, put there, by whom, I wonder? Perhaps by the last shop-girl of his time, now a very old woman, perhaps a caretaker somewhere close by. There is an attractive statuette of Millet, uncared for and in a state of decay. May thy paean of youth never be forgotten, Murger!

'So you must picture me going into the Montmartre cemetery, suddenly conscious of a surge of melancholy, not entirely painful, the kind of melancholy that makes you think, when you are in perfect health yourself: "This place is a bit depressing, but I shan't be here for a good while yet!"

'The autumnal tang in the air, the warm dampness with the smell of dead leaves and the pale anaemic sunlight increased the feeling of loneliness and the transitoriness of human life, which pervaded the place with its odours of decay, while sublimating it into the realm of poetry.

'I walked slowly between the rows of graves, where neighbours have no opportunity for neighbourliness and no longer make love or read the papers. And I began to read the epitaphs, one of the most entertaining occupations in the world, I assure you. Neither Labiche nor Meilhac have ever made me laugh as much as the language of the ordinary tombstone. Paul de Kock's books never cause half the amusement of those marble slabs and crosses, on which the relatives of the deceased advertise their grief, their prayers for the bliss of the departed in the next world and their hopes to be with them again soon – not meaning a word of it!

'But the most attractive spot in this cemetery is the disused portion, full of great yews and cypresses, the old domain of those long dead, which will soon be used again; they will cut down the

leafy trees, fertilized by human bodies, in order to lay the corpses of to-day in neat rows beneath little marble slabs like so many slabs of gingerbread.

'When I had wandered long enough to cure my melancholy, I realized that I was beginning to get bored and that I must offer my faithful tribute of remembrance at the last resting place of my little friend. As I approached her grave, I was genuinely affected. Poor darling . . . she was so appealing, so passionate, so white, so fresh . . . and now, if one opened the grave . . .

'Leaning on the iron railing, I whispered my grief, which of course she could not hear, and I was just moving away when I noticed a woman in black in full mourning, kneeling at a tomb quite close. Her crape veil was raised, revealing a pretty head with fair hair. It was coiled round the head and shone as if with the rays of the rising sun under the black of her hat. I stayed where I was.

'She was obviously in deep grief. She had buried her face in her hands, oblivious of everything in her sorrow, rigid like a praying statue; no doubt she was recalling tragic memories behind the double curtain of hands and closed eyes, like a nun telling her beads, and she seemed like a dead woman herself, thinking of the dead. Suddenly I saw that she was going to cry by a little movement of the shoulders, like the shiver of wind in a willow. At first she wept silently, then more violently, so that her neck and shoulders shook. All at once she took her hands away from her eyes. They were full of tears and very appealing, like the eyes of a mad woman, as she looked about her, as one does on waking from a nightmare. She saw that I was watching her and seemed ashamed, covering the whole of her face with her hands. Her sobs became convulsive and her head bent slowly forward towards the marble slab. She rested her forehead on it and her veil, spreading out round her shoulders, draped the white corners of the tomb she loved like another pall. I heard her groan and she collapsed with her face on the slab and lay motionless and unconscious.

'I ran towards her, slapped her hands and blew on her eyelids, at the same time reading the simple epitaph: "Here lies Louis Théo-

dore Carrel, Captain of Marines, killed in action in Tonkin. Pray for his soul."

"The date of the death was only a few months before. I was moved to tears and redoubled my efforts, which were at last successful, and she came to. I was looking very concerned — I'm not such a bad-looking chap and still on the right side of forty. I knew instinctively, as soon as she opened her eyes, that she knew her manners and would be grateful. She behaved as I expected, still in tears, as she told me her story in broken sentences between convulsive sobs; how the officer had been killed in Tonkin after they had been married only a year, a love match, for she was an orphan without father or mother and had only just got the dowry demanded by Naval regulations.

"I consoled her and comforted her, raising her to her feet and supporting her. Then I said:

"You mustn't stay here; come away."

"She murmured:

"I'm incapable of walkin'g."

"I'll give you an arm."

"Thank you so much; it's most kind of you. You had come to mourn the dead too?"

"Yes."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"Your wife?"

"No, but someone I loved."

"One may love someone else as much as a wife; love knows no law."

"That is quite true."

"We walked away together along the cemetery paths, she leaning so heavily on my arm that I was almost carrying her. When we got outside, she murmured in a weak voice:

"I think I'm going to faint."

"Would you like to go and get something to drink?"

"Yes, I should."

"I saw a restaurant, one of those places where the friends of the

deceased go to cheer themselves up, when the funeral is over. We went in and I made her drink a cup of very hot tea, which seemed to pull her together. A faint smile came to her lips and she told me about herself. It was so depressing and wretched to be all alone in life, all alone at home day and night, not to have anyone left to whom to give one's affection, one's confidences, one's secrets.

'It all sounded genuine and charming as she said it. I became quite emotional. She was very young, perhaps not more than twenty. I paid her some compliments, which seemed to please her. Presently, as time was getting on, I suggested driving her home. She accepted and in the cab we sat so close together, shoulder to shoulder, that we were conscious of the heat of each other's bodies through the clothes — and that is the most exciting thing in the world.

'When the cab stopped at her house, she murmured: "I shan't be able to get upstairs alone, I live on the fourth floor. You have been so kind, I wonder if you would give me an arm up to my flat?"

'I accepted with alacrity. She went up the stairs slowly, getting much out of breath. When we reached her door, she added:

'"Do come in for a minute and let me thank you."

'Of course, I went in.

'It was a modest flat, even suggesting poverty, but everything was in good taste and well arranged.

'We sat down side by side on a little sofa and she spoke again of her loneliness.

'She rang for the maid to get me something to drink. The maid did not appear. I was delighted, supposing that she was only there in the mornings, what is called a "daily". She had taken off her hat. She really was adorable, with her blue eyes fixed on me, so steady and so blue, that I succumbed to an overpowering temptation. I seized her in my arms; she closed her eyes and I kissed them wildly, passionately again and again . . . I even went a little further.

'She struggled and resisted, repeating:

'"Please don't . . . stop!"'

'What did she mean? Was there a pause between the last two words? In such circumstances "please don't . . . stop" might mean

at least two things. To silence her I transferred my kisses from her eyes to her mouth and assumed that by "please don't . . . stop!" she meant what I wanted her to mean. She only put up a show of resistance and, when our eyes met again after this outrage to the memory of the captain who had been killed in Tonkin, there was a look of languid tender contentment on her face, which dissipated any anxiety I might have felt.

'I went on making love to her to show my sincerity and gratitude. After we had chatted for about an hour, I asked:

'"Where do you dine?"'

'"In a little restaurant close by."

'"Alone?"'

'"Yes, of course."

'"Will you come and dine with me?"'

'"Where?"'

'"At one of the big restaurants in the fashionable quarter."

'At first she refused but soon yielded to my insistence, satisfying her qualms of conscience with the argument: "I do get so bored all alone"; then she added: "I must put on something a little less depressing." And she retired to her bedroom.

'When she came back she was in half-mourning, charming, elegant and slim in a very simple grey frock. She obviously kept different clothes for the cemetery and the town.

'Dinner was a friendly meal. She drank champagne, became gay and animated, and I went back with her to her flat.

'The affair which had started in the cemetery lasted about three months. But one gets tired of everything, especially women. I left her with the excuse that I had to leave Paris. I made it well worth her while, when I went away, and she was duly grateful. She made me promise, even swear to come back to her on my return; she really seemed quite fond of me.

'I transferred my affections elsewhere, and a month passed without the desire to see my little cemetery friend again becoming too strong to resist. But I did not forget her. The thought of her haunted me like a mysterious psychological riddle, one of those unsolved problems one feels one must unravel.

'I don't know why, but one day I felt that I should find her in the Montmartre cemetery again, and I went there.

'I walked for a long while without meeting anyone except the usual types of us, the people who have not yet severed all emotional connection with those they have loved and lost. The grave of the captain killed in Tonkin had no mourner that day; there were no flowers or wreaths on the marble slab.

'But as I was wandering in another quarter of this labyrinthine city of the dead, I suddenly saw at the far end of a narrow avenue of crosses a couple coming towards me, both in full mourning. To my amazement, as they approached, I recognized the woman. It was she!

'She saw me and blushed; and, as I brushed against her as we passed, she gave me a tiny signal, just a flicker of the eyelid, which meant: "You mustn't recognize me," but also conveyed: "Come and see me again, darling!"

'The man was a gentleman of distinguished appearance, well dressed and an Officer of the Legion of Honour, about fifty.

'He was giving her his arm, just as I had done when we were leaving the cemetery.

'I walked on nonplussed, wondering what was the meaning of what I had just seen, to what species of the human race this woman belonged, who hunted among the tombs. Was she a common prostitute, a woman who had had the bright idea of picking up in the cemetery men who were sad, haunted by the memory of some woman, wife or mistress, and unable to forget the happiness they had lost? Was she the only one or are there several of them? Is it a recognized branch of the profession? Do they walk the cemeteries as they walk the streets? Are there regular cemetery walkers? Or was she the only one who has had this brilliant idea, showing a profound grasp of psychology, of exploiting memories of those loved and lost, made suddenly more poignant by these surroundings?

'And I should have liked to know whose widow she was that day!'

MISS HARRIET

THERE were seven of us in the brake, four women and three men, one on the box seat beside the driver, and the horses were making their way up the steep hill by the zigzag road at a walk.

Having left Etréat at dawn for a visit to the ruins of Tancarville, we were still half asleep, drowsy in the keen morning air. The women especially, unaccustomed to getting up at the hour at which men go out shooting, were continually letting their eyes close and their heads fall forward or yawning, blind to the beauty of the sunrise.

It was autumn. On both sides of the road stretched bare fields, yellow with the stubble of the oats and wheat already cut which covered the ground like a bristly beard. A light mist lay over the earth like smoke. Larks were singing in the sky and other birds twittering in the bushes.

At last the sun rose in front of us, fiery red as it topped the horizon, and as it climbed, brighter every minute, the countryside seemed to wake up with a smile and shake itself, putting off its night garment of white mist like a girl getting out of bed.

The Comte d'Etraille who was sitting on the box cried: 'Look, there's a hare!' pointing to a patch of clover on the left. The animal was moving almost hidden by the grass, only its long ears showing; presently it dashed across a ploughed field, stopped, went off again at full speed, changed direction, stopped again, nervously on the look out for danger, uncertain which way to go; finally it started off again with great leaps of its hind-quarters and disappeared in a broad patch of beet. All the men roused themselves to watch the animal's course.

René Lemoine commented: 'We've forgotten our manners this morning,' and looking at his neighbour, the little Baronne de Sérennes, who was struggling against sleep, whispered to her: 'You're thinking of your husband, Baronne. Don't worry, he won't be back till Saturday; you've got four days more.'