TREGIAN’S GROUND
The Life and Sometimes Secret Adventures of Francis Tregian, Gentleman and Musician

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As you came from the Holy Land of Walsingham
Met you not with my true love by the way as you came?
How should I know your true love that have met many a one.
As I came from the Holy Land, that have come, that have gone.

‘WALSINGHAM’
POPULAR BALLAD
I

Cantai un tempo, e
Se fu dolce il canto,
Questo mi tacerò
Ch’altri il sentiva.

Once I sang, and
That song was sweet
‘But now I must cease
Lest others hear.

PIETRO BEMBO / MONTEVERDE
‘SECONDO LIBRO DEI MADRIGALI’

It is strange, but I thought of England only this morning.

Daybreak comes early this time of year, and the weather is glorious. I was awoken by an unusual flapping in the henhouse. A fox perhaps? I scurried downstairs as fast as my legs would allow and crossed the yard. Neither the maidservant nor Madame Dallinges was up yet, and there was but a single red ember glowing in the hearth.

No fox.

I was about to return to bed, when I noticed the sky. It was of a pale blue unusual in these parts, dotted with sparse, milky clouds like those that form along the coast in my own country just before dawn. They disappear over the course of the day, if the weather is fine, absorbed by the heat or scattered by the winds.

The earth exhaled a dewy scent, a nightingale sang, and the reddening dawn behind the Jura peaks heralded another radiant day.

For a moment I was transported to the countryside around Wolvedon Manor, as it was when I was a child. I could almost feel the sea-spray and hear the lapping of the waves.

I was brought back to the present by the footsteps of Jaquotte, the maid, who had entered the kitchen and was busying herself around the
fire. Madame Dallinges came down next, and as usual I offered to fetch water from the well. As usual she declined.

I thought no more about Wolvedon after that. Just a faint, sweet melancholy lingered. I most certainly did not take it as a premonition.

After matins, I got on with my work, and as usual remained absorbed therein until the angelus struck at noon.

It’s been nearly a quarter of a century that I’ve lived here now, and I still go for a walk at this time, up to the Crossing of the Ways, a crust of bread in my pocket, sometimes a book too. I sit beneath the great linden tree, on a bench I built myself. I can spend hours here, and often do, particularly at this time of year. Asked what I do up at the Crossing, I sometimes say that I go there to pray, and indeed there is a cross by the side of the road, a little way from the linden tree. But truth be told, I am content to let my thoughts wander, and if I do happen to talk with God, it’s on friendly terms, man to man, so to speak. People on their way to the lake prefer the Drovers’ Road, which is wider and takes the shorter, steeper route down. But going in the opposite direction, it is well known that the climb is gentler on this side. The road takes you via Morges, but the longer way is worth it, particularly if you’re heavily laden. I see riders and coaches pass by from time to time, and sometimes people on foot. They come from the surrounding villages, from Lausanne or Geneva, and are generally returning to Echallens, or travelling to Yverdon or Payerne, even to Berne. Occasionally, they travel in the other direction. Some faces are unfamiliar, but most are well known to me.

I heard this morning’s two wayfarers approaching from far off. They came from the direction of Yverdon at a fair pace, deep in discussion. I couldn’t make out what they were saying at first, but then their words struck me like an arrow through the heart: they were speaking English.

My first reaction – after so many years! – was panic. Had they seen me? Where could I hide? I managed to reason with myself: everyone has forgotten me after such a long time. Indeed it was probable that the two men drawing closer at a brisk pace, round-faced and bright-eyed, were born after my... after I had departed, shall we say.

And anyway, who would recognise the Francis of old, beneath this beard, these shabby clothes?

I composed myself before they reached me. My only protection was to make sure they didn’t notice that I understood English.
Everyone in Echallens is convinced that when Benoît Dallinges brought me back in his cart all those years ago, I was returning home after losing my entire family to the plague. He was the only one in these parts who knew where I really came from, and why. But I must say that on this particular morning, it was hard indeed to pretend not to understand English.

The two travellers were called Thomas and John. Thomas (the memories connected with that name!) was a Cornish sailor: I could tell by his accent and appearance. If I uttered but three words in English, he would likely know me for a fellow countryman. He and his companion were going to Genoa. I didn’t quite grasp why they were travelling on foot, since they spoke only a primitive sort of French, picked up on the road, no doubt. I attempted to question them without giving myself away, and they tried to answer using their limited vocabulary. They soon returned to their debate, taking no more notice of me.

And that’s when I understood – my pen can hardly form the words, the thing is so incredible: England had abolished the monarchy and Charles, the King himself, had been arrested!

John was an Anglican and Thomas a Puritan, but that didn’t stop them being friends. They had agreed to travel to Genoa on behalf of an English ship-owner, and had followed the Salt Route, by way of Vallorbe. Now they were going to Lausanne, before taking the road to the Piedmont. Their opinions on the causes of the civil war differed, but they were in complete agreement regarding the facts: the King reigns no more, England is a sort of republic called the Commonwealth, power is held by the House of Commons, the Lords do their bidding and there is even talk of abolishing them. The Church of England is persecuted by the Puritans, or is it the other way round? I found it impossible to comprehend fully what they were saying, or to place all of the names. The Head of State is one Oliver Cromwell, a descendant of that other, no doubt, who was a great friend of my grandfather John. I gathered that Cromwell has repealed the laws against recusants, as those of us who remained Catholic are called. But perhaps I was mistaken and confused my desires with reality.

I would have liked to meet these compatriots again, and draw them out, so I asked them – not directly, mind you – if they were staying awhile in our part of the world. They didn’t think so.

I had to make a superhuman effort not to press them with questions:
how does the Commonwealth operate? What is happening in the army? The fleet? The Church?

When I returned home, after they had gone, Madeleine Dallinges asked if I was ill.

‘Just a little indisposed, it’s nothing,’ I replied, wishing to be left in peace. I went upstairs, and here I sit at my table.

When Dallinges rescued me from the roadside, half-dead and consumed by fever, he heard me raving in English.

‘Where are you from?’ he asked, when I was fit enough to talk.

‘From . . . from Venice.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Pietro Ricordi.’

He made no comment. But he must have seen I was not telling the truth, for I have never been a very good liar.

‘Are you Catholic or Protestant?’

I was reluctant to answer. What if this stranger was a fanatic from the opposing camp? But judging by his portliness and his gentle grey eyes, I knew instinctively that this was an equable fellow.

‘Catholic,’ I muttered.

‘Well, in that case I’ll take you home with me. I live just outside Echallens. We’re Catholics too. It’s not like Geneva, out here in the countryside. If you are happy to attend Mass and pray quietly, nobody bothers you. Not that there aren’t any fanatics here – there are. Two or three years ago there was very nearly open war between Berne and Fribourg, but things quietened down, thank the Lord. We are not so concerned with such matters. Personally, I think it absurd that people kill each other over religion when we are all good Christians, pious believers. All these endless squabbles about whether to make the altar out of stone or wood, whether it should be placed here or there. Take our priest: in the middle of conducting a Protestant funeral, he tells the grieving family that anyone following the reformed religion will be damned anyway. Or the pastor, who scurries off to Berne to complain at the drop of a hat. Like senseless children, I sometimes think. If we were heathens, I might understand.’

He glanced at me, as if suddenly realising that he shouldn’t be sharing his innermost thoughts with a stranger who might be a spy. But doubtless I looked no more a spy than he did a fanatic.
‘If you’d been a Protestant,’ he went on, ‘I’d have left you with one of my cousins, who is of the reformed faith. We discuss religion from time to time, he and I, but we never quarrel. We see each other about; our paths cross at church. . . . ’

‘How so?’

‘Well, you see, there’s just one church for all the villages in the Echallens bailiwick. On Sundays the Catholics go there first, for Mass, followed by the Protestants for the preaching.’

Hearing this calm voice talk of a single church for Catholics and Protestants as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I felt I had reached the right place. I let go, and fell into a deep sleep. I was safe.

We journeyed on for some time before he asked me another question:

‘What is your profession?’

‘I have been a courtier. And a merchant. I have been to war, and made music too.’

‘What sort of music?’

‘I play the organ and the virginal.’

‘I’ve never heard of the virginal.’

‘It’s the name given in England to a certain type of keyed instrument, similar to the spinet, the muselaar or the harpsichord, but set in a case so that it may be carried easily. They’re very popular. I have learned how to make them, too.’

‘Would you know how to restore an organ?’

‘I believe so.’

‘You can read and write, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well there’s reason enough to take you to Echallens. I shall hire you to repair our organ. That’ll set the Protestants on edge, right enough.’ He chuckled. ‘Can you copy music?’

For a moment, it seemed he was reading my past.

‘Perfectly,’ I admitted finally. ‘I have always copied my favourite scores.’

‘Then there’s work for you in Echallens. Now, before I bring you home and take you in as a brother, under the roof I share with my wife and children, I wish to know what it is you fear, what it is you are fleeing. And I would like the truth. Your name is not Pietro Ricordi and you are not Italian.’

He sensed my hesitation.
‘I swear to you before God that I will not tell a soul, not even my family.’

This man had rescued me. He had trusted me and cared for me purely out of kindness, without trying to discover who I was. I hesitated no longer.

‘My name is Francis Tregian. I am English. I escaped from prison but I am not a criminal, neither a killer nor a robber. On the contrary, it is I who have been robbed. My only wrong was to be my father’s son, and Catholic. I am given for dead; and if those from whom I wished to escape knew that I were alive, they might try to kill me. But I would like to live, in peace, far from wars and feuding.’

I told him everything.

He made no comment apart from clicking his tongue at the most dramatic points.

‘You speak French perfectly,’ he said, by way of conclusion.

‘Yes, it’s a gift, I believe – my musical ear. In the Low Countries nobody knows by my accent that I am not Dutch. In Reims I pass for a local. In Italy I am as Italian as the next man.’

‘Perfect. We will speak no more of England; and while we’re at it, you don’t speak English. Take one of our local names and keep your Christian name. I know some Tréhans in Rances. You could call yourself François Tréhan.’

‘No, it’s too much like my real name.’

‘True. Then you could be François Cousin, a distant relative who has lived in Italy. My wife’s name is Cousin.’

‘Cousin is an English name too.’

‘Is that so? Well there are more Cousins than Dallinges in these parts, I know that for a fact. Another reason for you to take the name. Agreed?’

There was no other choice for the time being.

Things fell naturally into place. People forgot that I was ever not one of them as they saw me working in the church and at the register office, met me at the Dallinges house, came up to the Crossing to share their thoughts or cares, to seek my counsel or to have me read or write private letters. The Dallinges children called me Uncle François from the very first day, and now their own children call me Grandfather. I occupy a spacious room in the loft of the Dallinges cask workshop. It contains a writing table as well as a workbench for repairing the instruments that people bring me from far and wide; I build new ones too.
Dallinges presented me with three small, stout volumes that he had found in Lausanne, where his business sometimes took him: the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. It was like seeing an old friend again. I soon spoke French with the local accent, and I learned the patois. The whole region knows me as François Cousin, instrument maker and scribe, originally from the village of Corcelles. That is how I was registered by the officials of both Berne and Fribourg. It was under this name that Dallinges introduced me to the priest, the pastor and the local parishioners.

He never brought up the subject of my past again, but every now and then he would prompt me:

‘François, you should write your story. Few people have had a life like yours.’

‘Who would I write it for?’

‘For posterity. For me. For yourself.’

I shrugged.

‘It wouldn’t interest anyone. And anyway, I’m no writer.’

He did not press the matter but, one day, doubtless returning from Lausanne, he brought me a ream of paper.

‘For you. For your memoirs,’ he said.

That was many years ago.

I have always kept this paper. Until this morning, I never dreamed of using it.

But those two Englishmen. And that clear Cornish sky.

I am ready. The tale must have been ripening within me, ever since the first time Dallinges suggested I write it down.

There are two difficulties, however. First, I have never been able to express myself: I have always relied on the words or the music of others to define me. And second, I have no idea which language to write in. It’s been a good quarter of a century since I last spoke English, and even when I talk with God, it’s in Italian or French.

But I feel the company of my departed friends and companions close about me, reading over my shoulder. I am writing for all of us. And for us, French, Latin, Italian, Dutch or English – what difference does it make?