

Randolph Bourne

In his tragically short life, Randolph Bourne (1886–1918) did as much as any essayist can to define and inspire a generation. He made his reputation with the generation-defining, taboo-defying “Youth and Life” in 1909. After graduating from Columbia in 1913, he won a fellowship that took him to Paris just on the cusp of the Great War, where he fell in love with French civilization and, as he recounts here, at least one Frenchwoman. Reading Bourne’s account (from *History of a Literary Radical*, 1920) of this oddly cerebral-sounding amour, it is probably worth recalling that he was terribly disfigured at birth by a ham-handed obstetrician with a forceps, and then, only four, was left hunchbacked and dwarfed by spinal tuberculosis.

Mon Amie

I

She was French from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, but she was of that France which few Americans, I think, know or imagine. She belonged to that France which Jean-Christophe found in his friend Olivier, a world of flashing ideas and enthusiasms, a golden youth of ideals.

She had picked me out for an exchange of conversation, as the custom is, precisely because I had left my name at the Sorbonne as a person who wrote a little. I had put this bait out, as it were, deliberately, with the intention of hooking a mind that cared for a little more than mere chatter, but I had hardly expected to find it in the form of a young girl who, as she told me in her charmingly polished note, was nineteen and had just completed her studies.

These studies formed a useful introduction when she received me in the little old-fashioned apartment in the Batignolles quarter on my first visit. She had made them ever since she was five years old in a wonderful old convent at Bourges; and in the town had lived her grandmother, a very old lady, whom she had gone lovingly to see, as often as she could be away

from the watchful care of the nuns. In her she had found her real mother, for her parents had been far away in Brittany. When the old lady died, my friend had to face an empty world, and to become acquainted all over again with a mother whom she confessed she found "little sympathetic." But she was a girl of *devoir*, and she would do nothing to wound her.

She told me one afternoon as we took our first walk through the dusky richness of the Musée Cluny, that the shock of death had disclosed to her how fleeting life was, how much she thought of death, and how much she feared it. I used the lustiness of her grandmother's eighty-four years to convince her as to how long she might have to postpone her dread, but her fragile youth seemed already to feel the beating wings about her. As she talked, her expression had all that wistful seriousness of the French face which has not been devitalized by the city, that sense of the nearness of unutterable things which runs, a golden thread, through their poetry. Though she had lived away from Brittany, in her graver moments there was much in her of the patient melancholy of the Breton. For her father's people had been seafolk,—not fishermen, but pilots and navigators on those misty and niggardly shores,—and the long defeat and ever-trustful suffering was in her blood. She would interpret to me the homely pictures at the Luxembourg which spoke of coast and peasant life; and her beautiful articulateness brought the very soul of France out of the canvases of Cottet and Breton and Carrière. She understood these people.

But she was very various, and, if at first we plumbed together the profoundest depths of her, we soon got into shallower waters. The fluency of her thought outran any foreign medium, and made anything but her flying French impossible. Her meager English had been learned from some curious foreigner with an accent more German than French, and we abandoned it by mutual consent. Our conversation became an exchange of ideas and not of languages. Or rather her mind became the field where I explored at will.

I think I began by assuming a Catholic devotion in her, and implied that her serious outlook on life might lead her into the church. She scoffed unmitigatedly at this. The nuns were not unkindly, she said, but they were hard and narrow and did not care for the theater and for books, which she adored.

She believed in God. "Et le théâtre!" I said, which delighted her hugely. But these Christian virtues made unlovely characters and cut one

off so painfully from the fascinating moving world of ideas outside. But surely after fourteen years of religious training and Christian care, did she not believe in the Church, its priesthood and its dogmas?

She repudiated her faith with indescribable vivacity. A hardened Anglo-Saxon agnostic would have shown more diffidence in denying his belief in dogma or the Bible. As for the latter, she said, it might do for children of five years. And the cutting sweep of that "enfants de cinq ans" afforded me a revealing glimpse of that lucid intelligence with which the French mind cuts through layers and strata of equivocation and compromise.

Most Frenchmen, if they lose their faith, go the swift and logical road to atheism. Her loss was no childish dream or frenzy; she still believed in God. But as for the Church and its priesthood,—she told me, with malicious irony, and with the intelligence that erases squeamishness, of a friend of hers who was the daughter of the priest in charge of one of the largest Parisian churches. Would she confess to a member of a priestly caste which thus broke faith? Confession was odious anyway. She had been kept busy in school inventing sins. She would go to church on Easter, but she would not take the Eucharist, though I noticed a charming lapse when she crossed herself with holy water as we entered Notre Dame one day.

Where had she ever got such ideas, shut up in a convent?—Oh, they were all perfectly obvious, were they not? Where would one not get them? This amazing soul of modern France!—which pervades even the walls of convents with its spirit of free criticism and its terrible play of the intelligence; which will examine and ruthlessly cast aside, just as my vibrant, dark-haired, fragile friend was casting aside, without hypocrisy or scruple, whatever ideas do not seem to enhance the clear life to be lived.

II

Accustomed to grope and flounder in the mazes of the intellect, I found her intelligence well-nigh terrifying. I would sit almost helplessly and listen to her sparkle of talk. Her freedom knocked into pieces all my little imagined world of French conventionalities and inhibitions. How could this pale, dignified mother, to whom I was presented as she passed hurriedly through the room one day, allow her to wander so freely about Paris parks and museums with a foreign young man? Her answer came superbly, with a flare of decision which showed me that at least in one spot

the eternal conflict of the generations had been settled: "*Je me permets!*"—I allow myself. She gave me to understand that for a while her mother had been difficult, but that there was no longer any question of her "living her life"—*vivre sa vie*. And she really thought that her mother, in releasing her from the useless trammels, had become herself much more of an independent personality. As for my friend, she dared, she took risks, she played with the adventure of life. But she knew what was there.

The motherly Anglo-Saxon frame of mind would come upon me, to see her in the light of a poor ignorant child, filled with fantastic ideals, all so pitifully untested by experience. How ignorant she was of life, and to what pitfalls her daring freedom must expose her in this unregenerate France! I tried and gave it up. As she talked,—her glowing eyes, in which ideas seemed to well up brimming with feeling and purpose, saying almost more than her words,—she seemed too palpably a symbol of luminous youth, a flaming militant of the younger generation, who by her courage would shrivel up the dangers that so beset the timorous. She was French, and that fact by itself meant that whole layers of equivocation had been cut through, whole sets of intricacies avoided.

In order to get the full shock of her individuality, I took her one afternoon to a model little English tea-room on the rue de Rivoli, where normal Britishers were reading *Punch* and the *Spectator* over their jam and cake. The little flurry of disapprobation and the hostile stare which our appearance elicited from the well-bred families and discreet young men at the tables, the flaring incongruity of her dark, lithe, inscrutable personality in this bland, vacuous British atmosphere, showed me as could nothing else how hard was the gem-like flame with which she burned.

As we walked in the Luxembourg and along the quays, or sat on the iron chairs in the gardens of the Parc Monceau or the Trocadéro, our friendship became a sort of intellectual orgy. The difficulty of following the pace of her flying tongue and of hammering and beating my own thoughts into the unaccustomed French was fatiguing, but it was the fascinating weariness of exploration. My first idle remarks about God touched off a whole battery of modern ideas. None of the social currents of the day seemed to have passed her by, though she had been immured so long in her sleepy convent at Bourges. She had that same interest and curiosity about other classes and conditions of life which animates us here in America, and the same desire to do something effective against the misery of poverty.

I had teased her a little about her academic, untried ideas, and in grave reproof she told me, one afternoon, as we stood—of all places!—on the porch of the Little Trianon at Versailles, a touching story of a family of the poorest of the Parisian poor, whom she and her mother visited and helped to get work. She did not think charity accomplished very much, and flamed at the word “Socialism,” although she had not yet had its program made very clear to her.

But mostly she was feminist,—an ardent disciple in that singularly uncomplicated and happy march of the Frenchwomen, already so practically emancipated, toward a definite social recognition of that liberation. The normal Frenchwoman, in all but the richer classes, is an economic asset to her country. And economic independence was a cardinal dogma in my friend’s faith. She was already taking a secretarial course, in order to ensure her ability to make her living; and she looked forward quite eagerly to a career.

Marriage was in considerable disfavor; it had still the taint of the Church upon it, while the civil marriage seemed, with the only recently surrendered necessary parental consent, to mark the subjection of the younger to the older generation. These barriers were now removed, but the evil savor of the institution lingered on. My friend, like all the French intellectuals, was all for the “union libre,” but it would have to be loyal unto death. It was all the more inspiring as an ideal, because it would be perhaps hard to obtain. Men, she was inclined to think, were usually *malhonnête*, but she might find some day a man of complete sympathy and complete loyalty. But she did not care. Life was life, freedom was freedom, and the glory of being a woman in the modern world was enough for her.

The French situation was perhaps quite as bad as it was pictured. Friendship between a girl and a young man was almost impossible. It was that they usually wished to love her. She did not mind them on the streets. The students—oh, the students!—were frightfully annoying; but perhaps one gave a *gifle* and passed rapidly on. Her parents, before she had become genuinely the captain of her soul, had tried to marry her off in the orthodox French way. She had had four proposals. Risking the clean candor of the French soul, I became curious and audacious. So she dramatized for me, without a trace of self-consciousness, a wonderful little scene of provincial manners. The stiff young Frenchman making his stilted offer, her self-possessed reluctance, her final refusal, were given in inim-

itable style. These incidents, which in the life of a little American *bourgeoise* would have been crises or triumphs, and, at any rate, unutterably hoarded secrets, were given with a cold frankness which showed refreshingly to what insignificance marriage was relegated in her life. She wished, she said, to *vivre sa vie*—to live her life. If marriage fitted in with her living of her life, it might take her. It should never submerge or deflect her. Countless Frenchwomen, in defiance of the strident Anglo-Saxon belief, were able both to keep a household and to earn their own living; and why not she also? She would always be free; and her black eyes burned as they looked out so fearlessly into a world that was to be all hers, because she expected nothing from it.

About this world, she had few illusions. To its worldlinesses and glitter she showed really a superb indifference. I brutally tried to trap her into a confession that she spurned it only because it might be closed to her through lack of money or prestige. Her eloquent eyes almost slew me with vivacious denial. She despised these “dolls” whose only business in life was to wear clothes. Her own sober black was not affectation, but only her way of showing that she was more than a *poupée*. She did not say it, but I quite appreciated, and I knew well that she knew, how charming a *poupée* she might have made.

Several of her friends were gay and worldly. She spoke of them with charming frankness, touching off, with a tone quite clean of malice, all their little worthlessnesses and futilities. Some of this world, indeed, shaded off into unimaginable *nuances*, but she was wholly aware of its significance. In the inimitable French way, she disdained to use its errors as a lever to elevate her own virtues.

III

Her blazing candor lighted up for me every part of her world. We skirted abysses, but the language helped us wonderfully through. French has worn tracks in so many fields of experience where English blunders either boorishly or sentimentally. French is made for illumination and clear expression; it has kept its purity and crispness and can express, without shamefacedness or bungling, attitudes and interpretations which the Anglo-Saxon fatuously hides.

My friend was dimly sensible of some such contrast. I think she had as much difficulty in making me out as I had in making her out. She was very curious as to how she compared with American girls. She had once

met one but had found her, though not a doll, yet not *sympathique* and little understandable. I had to tell my friend how untranslatable she was. The Anglo-Saxon, I had to tell her, was apt to be either a school-child or a middle-aged person. To the first, ideas were strange and disturbing. To the second, they were a nuisance and a bore. I almost assured her that in America she would be considered a quite horrible portent. Her brimming idealism would make everybody uncomfortable. The sensual delight which she took in thinking, the way her ideas were all warmly felt and her feelings luminously expressed, would adapt her badly to a world of school-children and tired business men. I tried to go over for her the girls of her age whom I had known. How charming they were to be sure, but, even when they had ideas, how strangely inarticulate they sometimes were, and, if they were articulate, how pedantic and priggish they seemed to the world about them! And what forests of reticences and exaggerated values there were, and curious illogicalities. How jealous they were of their personalities, and what a suspicious and individualistic guard they kept over their candor and sincerities! I was very gay and perhaps a little cruel.

She listened eagerly, but I think she did not quite understand. If one were not frankly a doll, was not life a great swirl to be grappled with and clarified, and thought and felt about? And as for her personality, the more she gave the more she had. She would take the high risks of friendship.

To cross the seas and come upon my own enthusiasms and ideals vibrating with so intense a glow seemed an amazing fortune. It was like coming upon the same design, tinted in novel and picturesque colors of a finer harmony. In this intellectual flirtation, carried on in *musée* and garden and on quay throughout that cloudless April, I began to suspect some gigantic flattery. Was her enthusiasm sincere, and her clean-cutting ideas, or had she by some subtle intuition anticipated me? Did she think, or was it to be expected of me, that I should fall in love with her? But perhaps there was a touch of the too foreign in her personality. And if I had fallen in love, I know it would not have been with herself. It would have been with the Frenchness of her, and perhaps was. It would have been with the eternal youth of France that she was. For she could never have been so very glowing if France had not been full of her. Her charm and appeal were far broader than herself. It took in all that rare spiritual climate where one absorbs ideas and ideals as the earth drinks in rain.

She was of that young France with its luminous understanding, its personal verve, its light of expression, its way of feeling its ideas and think-

ing its emotions, its deathless loyalty which betrays only at the clutch of some deeper loyalty. She adored her country and all its mystic values and aspirations. When she heard I was going to Germany, she actually winced with pain. She could scarcely believe it. I fell back at once to the position of a vulgar traveler, visiting even the lands of the barbarians. They were her country's enemies, and some day they would attack. France awaited the onslaught fatalistically. She did not want to be a man, but she wished that they would let women be soldiers. If the war came, however, she would enlist at once as a Red Cross nurse. She thrilled at the thought that perhaps there she could serve to the uttermost.

And the war has come, hot upon her enthusiasms. She must have been long since in the field, either at the army stations, or moving about among the hospitals of Paris, her heart full of pride and pity for the France which she loved and felt so well, and of whose deathless spirit she was, for me, at least, so glowing a symbol.