

Talk by the Road JOHN DOS PASSOS

TELEMACHUS and Lyaeus had walked all night. The sky to the east of them was rosy when they came out of a village at the crest of a hill. Cocks crowed behind stucco walls. The road dropped from their feet through an avenue of pollarded poplars ghostly with frost. Far away into the brown west stretched reach upon reach of lake-like glimmer; here and there a few trees pushed jagged arms out of drowned lands. They stood still breathing hard.

“It’s the Tagus overflowed its banks,” said Telemachus.

Lyaeus shook his head.

“It’s mist.”

They stood with thumping hearts on the hilltop looking over inexplicable shimmering plains of mist hemmed by mountains jagged like coals that as they looked began to smoulder with dawn. The light all about was lemon yellow. The walls of the village behind them were fervid primrose color splotted with shadows of sheer cobalt. Above the houses uncurled green spirals of wood-smoke.

Lyaeus raised his hands above his head and shouted and ran like mad down the hill. A little voice was whispering in Telemachus’s ear that he must save his strength, so he followed sedately.

When he caught up to Lyaeus they were walking among twining wraiths of mist rose-shot from a rim of the sun that poked up behind hills of bright madder purple. A sudden cold wind-gust whined across the plain, making the mist writhe in a delirium of crumbling shapes. Ahead of them casting gigantic blue shadows over the furrowed fields rode a man on a donkey and a man on a horse. It was a grey sway-backed horse that joggled in a little trot with much switching of a ragged tail; its rider wore a curious peaked cap and sat straight and lean in the saddle. Over one shoulder rested a long bamboo pole that in the exaggerating sunlight cast a shadow like the shadow of a lance. The man on the donkey was shaped like a dumpling and rode with his toes turned out.

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Telemachus and Lyaeus walked behind them a long while without catching up, staring curiously after these two silent riders.

Eventually getting as far as the tails of the horse and the donkey, they called out: "*Buenos días.*"

There turned to greet them a red, round face, full of little lines like an over-ripe tomato and a long bloodless face drawn into a point at the chin by a grizzled beard.

"How early you are, gentlemen," said the tall man on the grey horse. His voice was deep and sepulchral, with an occasional flutter of tenderness like a glint of light in a black river.

"Late," said Lyaeus. "We come from Madrid on foot."

The dumpling man crossed himself.

"They are mad," he said to his companion.

"That," said the man on the grey horse, "is always the answer of ignorance when confronted with the unusual. These gentlemen undoubtedly have very good reason for doing as they do; and besides the night is the time for long strides and deep thoughts, is it not, gentlemen? The habit of vigil is one we sorely need in this distracted modern world. If more men walked and thought the night through there would be less miseries under the sun."

"But, such a cold night!" exclaimed the dumpling man.

"On colder nights than this I have seen children asleep in doorways in the streets of Madrid."

"Is there much poverty in these parts?" asked Telemachus stiffly, wanting to show that he too had the social consciousness.

"There are people—thousands—who from the day they are born till the day they die never have enough to eat."

"They have wine," said Lyaeus.

"One little cup on Sundays, and they are so starved that it makes them as drunk as if it were a hog'shead."

"I have heard," said Lyaeus, "that the sensations of starving are very interesting—people have visions more vivid than life."

"One needs very few sensations to lead life humbly and beautifully," said the man on the grey horse in a gentle tone of reproof.

Lyaeus frowned.

"Perhaps," said the man on the grey horse turning towards Telemachus his lean face, where under scraggly eyebrows

glowered eyes of soft dark green, "it is that I have brooded too much on the injustice done in the world—all society one great wrong. Many years ago I should have set out to right wrong—for no one but a man, an individual alone, can right a wrong; organization merely substitutes one wrong for another—but now. . . . I am too old. You see, I go fishing instead."

"Why, it's a fishing pole," cried Lyaeus. "When I first saw it I thought it was a lance." And he let out his roaring laugh.

"And such trout," cried the dumpling man. "The trout there are in that little stream above Illescas! That's why we got up so early, to fish for trout."

"I like to see the dawn," said the man on the grey horse.

"Is that Illescas?" asked Telemachus, and pointed to a dun brown tower topped by a cap of blue slate that stood guard over a cluster of roofs ahead of them. Telemachus had a map torn from Baedeker in his pocket that he had been peeping at secretly.

"That, gentlemen, is Illescas," said the man on the grey horse. "And if you will allow me to offer you a cup of coffee, I shall be most pleased. You must excuse me, for I never take anything before midday. I am a recluse, have been for many years and rarely stir abroad. I do not intend to return to the world unless I can bring something with me worth having." A wistful smile twisted a little the corners of his mouth.

"I could guzzle a hogshead of coffee accompanied by vast processions of toasted rolls in columns of four," shouted Lyaeus.

"We are on our way to Toledo," Telemachus broke in, not wanting to give the impression that food was their only thought.

"You will see the paintings of Dominico Theocotopoulos, the only one who ever depicted the soul of Castile."

"This man," said Lyaeus, with a slap at Telemachus's shoulder, "is looking for a gesture."

"The gesture of Castile."

The man on the grey horse rode along silently for some time. The sun had already burnt up the hoar-frost along the sides of the road; only an occasional streak remained glistening in the shadow of a ditch. A few larks sang in the sky. Two men

in brown corduroy with hoes on their shoulders passed on their way to the fields.

“Who shall say what is the gesture of Castile? . . . I am from La Mancha myself.” The man on the grey horse started speaking gravely while with a bony hand, very white, he stroked his beard. “Something cold and haughty and aloof . . . men concentrated, converging breathlessly on the single flame of their spirit. . . . Torquemada, Loyola, Jorge Manrique, Cortés, Santa Teresa. . . . Rapacity, cruelty, straightforwardness. . . . Every man’s life a lonely ruthless quest.”

Lyaeus broke in:

“Remember the infinite gentleness of the saints lowering the Conde de Orgaz into the grave in the picture in San Tomás. . . .”

“Ah, that is what I was trying to think of. . . . These generations, my generation, my son’s generation, are working to bury with infinite tenderness the gorgeously dressed corpse of the old Spain. . . . Gentlemen, it is a little ridiculous to say so, but we have set out once more with lance and helmet of knight-errantry to free the enslaved, to right the wrongs of the oppressed.”

They had come into town. In the high square tower church-bells were ringing for morning mass. Down the broad main street scampered a flock of goats herded by a lean man with fangs like a dog who strode along in a snuff-colored cloak with a broad black felt hat on his head.

“How do you do, Don Alonso?” he cried; “Good luck to you, gentlemen.” And he swept the hat off his head in a wide curving gesture as might a courtier of the Rey Don Juan.

The hot smell of the goats was all about them as they sat before the café in the sun under a bare acacia tree, looking at the tightly proportioned brick arcades of the mudéjar apse of the church opposite. Don Alonso was in the café ordering; the dumpling-man had disappeared. Telemachus got up on his numbed feet and stretched his legs. “Ouf,” he said, “I’m tired.” Then he walked over to the grey horse that stood with hanging head and drooping knees hitched to one of the acacias.

“I wonder what his name is.” He stroked the horse’s scrawny face. “Is it Rosinante?”

The horse twitched his ears, straightened his back and legs and pulled back black lips to show yellow teeth.

“Of course it’s Rosinante!”

The horse’s sides heaved. He threw back his head and whinnied shrilly, exultantly.