

Jacques Bonhomme's Vision

A Story of the Middle Ages

Dyer D. Lum

1892

Through one of the narrow streets of old Paris late one evening a man was carefully picking his way. Pavements, sidewalks, gutters, street-lamps were then unknown, save to the few who had penetrated into Moslem Spain. Save from the dim light-shadows which occasionally flickered in the darkness before some open wine shop, there was no visible guide for a stranger, which evidently he was not, for he moved swiftly, passing the noisy mirth which came with the sound of clinking glasses, and only pausing to hug the wall when some carriage or cavalcade came rushing past, and then resuming his way in the street as if to avoid open cellarways near the houses. At the open coach gate of a courtyard he passed in and entered a building, where we will follow him up the stairs to a room which he entered without knocking. By the light of the fireplace an aged couple were to be seen in the room and evening meal in course of preparation, while the table seemed to indicate the expected arrival of a third person. From his cordial greeting it was apparent they were his parents. Carefully standing a somewhat long but not bulky package in a corner he cried out:

"Ah, mother! but I am hungry tonight. Long hours and hard work gives one the appetite of two."

"Well, Jacques," answered his mother, "you should be thankful you have them, else your appetite would prove but a sorry companion to you."

"I am, mother, so I am, and, Our Blessed Lady be thanked, the times bid fair to keep me busy early and late for a long while yet. But even then," he added smilingly, "I mustn't eat up all I earn, for there is other need for my earnings."

"Yes; Lisette was here today," said his father with a kindly glance on his stalwart son.

"The Saints protect her!" cried the young man with brightening features; "and if all goes well before next Lady's Day, my dear mother, you shall have a rest."

"So soon?" asked the old lady.

"How so?" queried the father.

"The master-armoror," replied Jacques, "likes me and my work and has given me some plans to draw out which, if I succeed, will secure me a higher position; and I know I will succeed for I have already nearly worked out the problem."

In the meantime the old man had lighted a dip and moved over to the table where his wife had already placed a large platter of hot stew from which all three at once proceeded to partake of supper.

Jacques Bonhomme, the younger, was a young man of apparently twenty-five years, with a bright, frank expression and dark hazel eyes which sparkled with intelligence and good nature. A dark moustache and beard, carefully trimmed, together with a high forehead and a certain delicacy of features gave to him the appearance of being above the artisan class, which his dress plainly indicated. His robust health and fine physique showed him to be an artisan of no mean class and, young as he was, "Jacques the artisan" had already won recognition for his skill and ability. The warlike temper of the age kept him at the forge or bench from early morning till late at night, his only recreation being on Sunday, when with his betrothed, Lisette, the daughter of a fellow craftsman, the toil of the week was forgotten.

The table cleared, he placed his package upon it and removed the wraps, displaying that early kind of firearm known as an arquebuse, at which he looked long and intently.

His father approached the table and said inquiringly: "What is that piece of mechanism, Jacques?"

"It's an arqueouse. the new fire-gun now being brought into use in our armies."

"*Sacre nom de dieu!*" ejaculated the old man, "is that one? How does it work?"

Jacques explained the mechanism, relieving his mother's look of anxiety by assuring her that in its then unloaded state it was as harmless as a sword or pike in time of peace.

"With these," said Jacques, with all the enthusiasm of an artist, "the whole science of warfare is being transformed. The peasant becomes the equal of the mailed knight; the ball from this is more deadly and potent than the noble's battle axe, for ere axe or sword can strike, the hand which wields it may be nerveless in death. The dainty lordling who boasts of his feats of arms in the tourney to win a fair lady's smile, high as his lineage may be, will find his peer in the humblest vassal who with this knows well its power and use."

"In the name of Our Lady, Jacques;" nervously acclaimed his mother, "mind your words: they savor strongly of irreligion. Did I not know you better my son, I should tremble for your soul's repose. Ah! it is an uncanny thing and might well be called the Devil's Own, for if all we hear of it be true the horrors of war will be intensified. and the mercy of our Lord can alone save the race from extermination."

"Nay, nay, mother," answered Jacques cheerily, "to the discerning eye this is one of the resources given by Providence to further civilization. It is difficult for anyone to forecast its full effect, but to my mind there arise far other visions than those you presage."

"Tell me, Jacques," earnestly pleaded the old man, "for dark as are the fears of your mother, I think them hardly blacker than the present reality. If there be a lighter shade that this deadly thing will impart to the cloudy future, turn the silver lining toward me, for I own it is to me, too, a gruesome weapon of destruction."

Jacques remained silent for a few minutes, but still intently inspecting the weapon in his hands. "Let me first state," he finally began, "that this has been intrusted to me to study out some improvements which I suggested might be made. To my mind it is at present a rather clumsy arm, but the improved form which I already dimly see, the mechanism of ddail which I have yet to work out, will surpass this as this does a cross-bow Yet even with increased destructive power the lining of the cloud loses none of its silvery hue."

"By increasing the destructiveness of the combatants?" queried Bonhomme *père*.

"Notwithstanding that, rather," answered Jacques thoughtfully, "I do not believe that increased destructiveness necessarily includes increased aggressiveness. Muscle will count less and discipline more. Now let us see what this involves. First; that armed peasants and hired mercenaries must give place to a regular soldiery, trained as to a profession and thereby become adept at it. Nor is this all; for second, the peasant and the artisan will be left in greater freedom to follow industrial pursuits; this in turn brings, third, higher sociality, which involves less warlike manners, a broader civilization, and a more all-inclusive ethical code."

"That may be," rejoined the old man, "but still the employment of this soldiery will be in the hands of those of whose rapacity we may not speak and to whom your 'sociality and broader civilization' are but meaningless words. With more destructive weapons will the haughty baron become less warlike? Will your walled cities become surer havens for skilled artisans?"

"Nay, nay, father, do not multiply objections," responded Jacques; "suppose that in the new order of things gunpowder is even now introducing there should come a time when neither your haughty noble nor your walled city will remain a necessity. Think you the 'haughty noble' alone can command the use of an arquebus? What of the brawny arms which make them, and which will improve them? He who makes the weapon I now dimly see in vision can use it as well, even if he be not a menial retained by another."

"Jacques! Jacques!" cried his mother in alarm, "What heresy is this? Would you fly in the face of those to whom God hath given authority? That those who rule over us should commission such as thee to make these dread weapons is right, for they have God's warrant, but when you hint at arming yourself by your own authority, you make me tremble for your soul's salvation."

"Nay, mother, I was but drawing upon my imagination for possibilities which lurk in the future of this new explosive. If the weapon itself can be vastly improved, as by God's will it shall be shortly, why may not the power of the explosive be also, when the explosive ball may be used without barrel, fuse, or clockwork, and yet timed with perfect accuracy? Then there will come a time, not only when man shall not dare to arm others against their fellows, but will not dare the acts of rank injustice which make industrial life a continual martyrdom."

"Jacques," replied his father With a sigh, "I am afraid your mother is nearer right. If with your new arms and new explosives each may be his own soldier, wage his own war, what would become of our social order? Without that your own skill as an armorer would be as naught. Leave to God's vicegerents the ordering of these arms, for against that no Christian may protest, but let not thy young blood lead thee to devise a weapon for thy own hands to sacrilegiously pit thyself against them; for God, not the Devil, rules."

The young armorer drew himself up to his full height, and with the arquebuse in one hand and the other raised to heaven exclaimed:

"Greed and tyranny may direct the use of these weapons by man against his fellow; power may add tower to tower and dungeon to dungeon to repress thought, but the time will come when with a general knowledge of gunpowder tower and dungeon will be razed and the haughty humbled. The time will come, though long after I am dead, when the gospel of destruction will end destruction; when the skill now relied upon to sustain rapacity and injustice will in self-defense turn against such allegiance; and while I shall weld my soul into a new arquebuse now, I doubt not that others coming after me will profit from my labors and carry on the work until at last *the resources of civilization* shall be such that hoary-headed injustice, however clothed or crowned, will tremble as Belshazzar at the unknown hand writing his sentence upon the palace wall."

“Peace, peace, Jacques,” cried out his weeping mother, “you know not what you say. Oh! my son, I beg thee see the *curé* and confess thyself, as I shall most certainly do for my soul’s sake. Think, too, of Lisette”—

“Lisette! Nay, mother, it is because of my great love for her that I love to picture to myself a happier future for our descendants.”

“My son, I can listen no more; I already feel that I cannot sleep, though the Holy Virgin knows that I do not believe that thou meanest harm. Shrive thyself, my son, and try to forget such heretical crotchets.”

Jacques’s plans were soon draughted and submitted, but also soon there came a Sunday when he and Lisette took no walk, and on the evening before the aged couple waited in vain for his footstep. All they could learn by the most diligent inquiry was, that on that evening, he had been met at the door of the armorer’s shop by two ecclesiastics, with whom he went on his way. The aged couple mourned him as dead, and, bereft of his support, sank through penury and want into the grave. Lisette lived, mourned, and—married.

But though Jacques Bonhomme walked no more with his fellow-men, he had indeed “welded his soul” into the new weapon, and his vision, partly realized in 1789, looms daily in clearer form, for “his soul is marching on!”

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