

## INTRODUCTION

IT WAS not much more than a handful of years ago now that I met and in time came to know, in a lower class of public house in one of our greater cities, the man whom I shall call professor Tilbert. I can not be certain, of course, that that was indeed his name, although professor in the nearby university he certainly had been, until drink and despair - though not of necessity in that order - had led him to abandon the distinction and rewards of that great vocation. Neither of us ever presumed to effect a formal introduction to the other, however, and it is for that reason that I can not be certain of his name.

But once, in the course of one of our prolonged sessions in the company of - I think - turbo-vodkas, he sent me as his runner to the nearest bookmaker's shop (as he was by that point in the squalid afternoon barely able to walk much further than the nearest end of the gantry). And it was there in that shop, collecting some winnings from a sinister creature in a slit window, that I saw the slip to be, incontrovertibly, signed quite openly in the name of Tilbert. It was, therefore, as Tilbert that I was henceforth to know him: and in that bar that I was so often to meet him, in the weeks preceding what we must all now suppose to have been his untimely and unfortunate death.

At this point, a short word on the bar itself may not be out of place. It was a single-storey establishment on the ground floor of a block of tenemental residences, almost on a street-corner and little more than the width of a road from the ornamental gates to a spacious public gardens with splendid trees. As for its interior: the

bar was strictly functional, with plastic seating and plastic tables in the public part, and rather richer accommodations for the wealthier classes, who were catered for in the adjoining lounge bar, which boasted seats in dark red plush and wood-effect tables polished to a high degree.

Downstairs, meanwhile, was a storage cellar for the exclusive use of the management, and public washrooms for the use of all-day drinkers and the plain-clothes policemen who would sometimes conduct surprise body-searches there, in what they always claimed to be a search for illegal stimulants. To the best of my knowledge, they never found any of these stimulants: but as nobody ever complained, and perceived these searches to be little more than a transitory inconvenience associated with their patronage of the bar, no more need be said about it.

As for the customers themselves: they were a mixed bunch, from respectable criminal lawyers to fighting drunks and reputed drug-dealers (who always made their discreet escape through the lounge whenever the conspicuously civilian policemen made their entrance), to literary types in stern haircuts and crew-neck jumpers quite obviously bought for them by their wives, daughters and lady admirers in general. But from them all - and from the literary types in particular - Tilbert always (or almost always) kept himself strictly apart.

That is why I took so long to fall into conversation with him: for we had each patronised the place for some months, in full view of the other, without exchanging so much as a single word. And then, during one Sunday-afternoon lock-in (for in those days, public houses closed in law on Sundays at half-past two and did not open

again until half-past six) our momentous meeting came in the shape of an exchange of some harmless and formulaic salutations appropriate to our immediate surroundings. Quite out of the blue, Tilbert observed that the drink wasn't as powerful as it used to be; I said that one couldn't really complain given the favoured circumstance of our lock-in; he agreed; and no more, at that point, was said. (Much later, I discovered that for a long time Tilbert had suspected me of being a plain-clothes agent of the authorities!) Drinking continued until the evening opening time, after which - and quite legally - it continued until closing time at eleven o' clock. There was no fighting that night, nor any vicious disputations among the literary people, nor any raids on the downstairs toilets: it was, apart from the introductory exchange of remarks with the man I would soon come to know as Tilbert, a day of no significant consequence whatsoever.

A fortnight later, however, I fell into deeper conversation with Tilbert. It was the middle of the afternoon. With the exception of Tilbert's table and chair, all seats in the public bar were stacked on their tables, for a scullion was scrubbing the floor with a barn-brush and a bucket of disinfectant. Through this forest of upturned legs, I could see Tilbert at the far end of the room, sitting with a certain style of invincibility at his usual table - as if, somehow, he was not prepared to concede occupancy of it under any circumstances. I got a drink at the bar, on an impulse collected an upturned chair for my use, and joined Tilbert at his table. We fell into conversation.

I discovered that when he had enjoyed his former professorship, it had been in the field of linguistics or literature; or perhaps it was both. He had been specially interested in what he

called registers of autochthony and the translation of cultures, and the literatures of post-coloniality. (Of course, I didn't really understand this literary sort of talk. But Tilbert certainly had a wide and deep knowledge of many strange tongues from strange parts of the world, for sometimes he could be heard to speak - sing, even, though mainly to himself - in one or other of these tongues). But he had given it all up for drink, which he found, he said with great conviction, to be a far more creative activity than anything he had ever come across in his former professorial existence.

None of this information was offered with any sort of enthusiasm whatsoever, and our conversation was desultory in the extreme.

Then Tilbert asked - quite unexpectedly, it might be thought - whether I knew if whisky, when stored in a dungheap, developed properties which rendered it inimical (these were Tilbert's exact words) to a persistency of psychotropic vision? Or was it the case that whisky actually developed psychotropic properties when so stored? Or was it, rather, the case that such visionary properties could more accurately be said to reside in the very nature of whisky itself, without recourse to any sort of heap at all?

And was it conceivable - Tilbert asked in addition - was it conceivable that such psychotropic properties, whithersoever they might derive, could - in a condition of fully-developed autochthony - lay likely claim to what he called an avian application?

There was little I could reply with regard to these questions, for I am an engineer, and I did not think that such a vocation would be of any interest to a literary type such as Tilbert: but when he learned, as he very shortly did, of my developed interest and experience in

the realm of offshore oilfield operations, he became extremely excited.

What was a spider-deck, he wanted at once to know? And what was a crown-block? What did a semi-sub look like? How many legs could one of these installations be expected to have? And then he asked a very strange question indeed: to how many legs could such a structure be reduced before the integrity of its spatial orientation (its proprioception, Tilbert called it, in rather a clever fusion of a concept elementary to both corrective neurology and deep-water oilfield technology) was irreversibly challenged and it - quite simply - fell over?

I answered these enquiries to the best of my ability - of course I was entirely unaware of their significance - and the conversation moved on.

I was out of town for the next fortnight or so, and did not see Tilbert. But on my return, I found him full of the greatest enthusiasm for life. He was drinking twice as fast and twice as much as he previously had, and was showing all the signs of that agitation historically associated with a sustained burst of creative energy (or that, at least, is what he told me). Once again, he had many questions - questions which, in the circumstances, certainly seemed a little odd in themselves, and which appeared not to bear any relationship of one to the other.

Was I familiar (for he knew by now that my background was very much of the scientific-technical rather than the literary intelligentsia, and that I had nothing whatsoever to do with the drugs-squad) - was I familiar with the aerodynamics of the crab-claw schooner rig? How large was a very large open-cast bucket-wheel

excavator, and what might its tactical potential be in counter-colonial theatres of drug-crazed asymmetric combat? What about the essential principles of materials science and the properties of buttered silk? What about lace of the sort said to be associated with young ladies' underwear: and the resistance of such lace to explosive impact?

Was it credible that a standard shallow-water jack-up could be erected ashore and equipped with high-speed service and passenger elevators, along with an executive diner and board-level C-suite peacock lounge? What exactly happened when a crawler digger threw a track? How quickly could a young person - a very pretty girl, let us say - learn welding? Would it make any difference if this young person were - let us say again - an undercover agent of the police?

Clearly, something was going on here, though it was not yet evident to me precisely what. In any case, a fight had just broken out among the literary sorts at the far end of the bar, and it soon swept towards Tilbert and I in a perilous fashion. We quickly prepared to defend our table - by this stage in our relationship it was quite common for us to share a table - but luckily the sturdy warriors rolled clear and Tilbert and I were able to return to the standards of civility so characteristic of our normal discourse. But we did not, at this stage, return to the matter of his strange enquiries.

The breakthrough was to come a month later. It must have been late spring by then, or early summer, for nobody would think of taking a common bus to the countryside in the middle of winter. But it was a custom of the bar that, once a year, a bus was chartered and all those customers keen to escape the city for an afternoon

were invited to board it, in the cause of a Sunday afternoon in the darkest and deepest parts of the national landscape. Tilbert and I decided to take part, and though this was a first time for me, it transpired that Tilbert had been on many similar outings over the previous years.

The procedure, Tilbert said, was always the same. Everyone gathered at the bar as early as possible, and remained there until the last possible moment. At exactly half-past two, the bar stopped serving drink (for the usual lock-in was abolished for the day). Everyone piled onto the bus with their provisions and packages, and the bus proceeded swiftly off and away towards the national landscape in general, and a licensed premises in particular, of the sort legally empowered to serve drink to bona fide travellers throughout the course of a Sunday afternoon. On arrival at such a premises, some people walked outside with cries of amazement, horror and delight - but most of us, intimidated by the grotesque and perfectly un-necessary shapes and spaces of our surroundings, took immediate refuge in the hotel bar: for each of us, in our different ways, was perfectly accustomed to the countryside and had no pressing need to see any more of it for the meantime at least. And it was then, just after we had got drinks at the bar and found seats by the fire, that Tilbert told me something of the great work that he had in hand. It was only now that I began to make something of the increasingly strange questions that he had been asking of me in the previous weeks.

He was, he now told me, in alternating phases of submission and aggression, engaged on a work of translation: had, indeed, just finished a first draft of it. I asked him if it was a story he had been

translating, or was it something boring? He replied - rather briskly, I thought - that it was a story. I at once asked him what the story was about; but at this he became strangely shifty, and mumbled that perhaps I would be able to read it for myself some day. But he promised me that it would be a good one, even for an engineer and scientist such as me.

Then, in common with the rest of our party, we dedicated ourselves to the principal business in hand: and continued to do so, until it was time for the bus to return us all to the accustomed climes and styles of the great city. No more was said of Tilbert's work: the bus returned us at the exact moment of opening time, at half-past six, and the evening went on as Sunday evenings in that bar always did go on.

By now the professor was in very good form indeed. At one point, even, he began to quaver a little of what he called Major Gweene's victory song. Then he began to belt out strongly a song which he called the Concubines' Dance of the Diggers: but I did not catch any of the words, or tune - which may even have been of Tilbert's own composition - as a raid was under way in the downstairs toilet, and fighting had broken-out among the criminal lawyers upstairs as a consequence: and, perhaps, as a diversion.

Almost at once Tilbert disappeared - for some time I feared that he had been arrested by mistake, or had been involved in something he should not have been involved in - but within an hour he had returned with a package wrapped in paper of the sort one associates with children and Christmas. It was the translation on which he had been working, and which he had now finished! And he had decided to grant me the great favour of being its very first

reader! Tilbert wanted me to read the story and tell him what I thought of it!

‘Why?’, I cried in my scientific-technical sort of way, ‘It surely isn’t a boring one? You promised it wasn’t!’

Tilbert looked very shifty for a moment, and mumbled - he was not, in general, a mumblor - that he was afraid the story was incomplete: for the manuscript material from which he had drawn it was itself at times incomplete.

‘But that’s not your problem’, I cried again. ‘You can’t just make things up or it wouldn’t be translation, would it?’

I reminded him of something I had once seen in a newspaper at the end of the bar, to the effect that translation was a creative art in its own right, and added that the best anyone could expect him to do was to remain faithful to the spirit and letter of the original. (Perhaps, of course, it was not for me to say such things; but they did seem in the circumstances to be kindly and, even, constructive).

In any case Tilbert brightened considerably at all this. He said he had drafted (he insisted it was only a first draft) a translator’s afterword. This would illuminate the whole story for any reader too stupid to understand the thing for himself - and he remained in that brightened condition until we were, along with everyone else, thrown out at eleven o’clock onto the cold, uncaring pavement.

And that was the last time that I was to see Tilbert. The following morning I was called away. When I returned in two or three weeks, I had of course read Tilbert’s translation with much interest. There were, however, a number of things I wished to ask about the story - for what nation would allow itself to be invaded by a neighbouring great power? And what sort of leadership of what sort

of nation would welcome such an invasion, on the grounds that any other response would at best be unconstitutional, and at worst inflammatory - if not quite positively dangerous to public order in particular, and the public good in general?

Perhaps, even, I wished to make some suggestions with regard to Tilbert's next version of the text. But this, sadly, was not to be possible.

For Tilbert, it seemed, had died. At least he had disappeared, and he was never to be seen again. So it seems likely that he had indeed died. Someone at the bar said that Tilbert had expired the day after the outing to the country, perhaps from stress occasioned by the journey, or the vast and aggressive spaces of our rural landscape, and had probably been buried by the municipal authorities at a location of the sort known to scholars in this specialised field, but few others. Certainly, no more was ever heard of him: or perhaps I should say, almost no more of him.

For, some weeks after his presumed death, six large boxes were delivered to the bar in which we had drunk, and addressed for my attention. Indeed, I still have them, in a cupboard under the stairs: but they are full of nothing but papers, and I have not yet had the time - or, to be honest, the inclination - to explore them any further. It may be that they comprise some of the original Hussarian Manuscripts: or they may comprise further translations by Tilbert from them. Tilbert's afterword does hint at this: but I do not know.

As for the title of this translation: Tilbert always said that his work should be called *A Girl Called Jake* - and so it is. He also insisted (always with a nasty chuckle) that the work should be subtitled a post-colonial novella - and that too is the case. Of course, I

didn't put Tilbert's name on the cover for he is dead, and even I know (for Tilbert told me so) that it grossly offends the canon of literary propriety for a translator, even a deceased one, to claim authorship of a text from a greater, or at least on this occasion more original, hand. So I have put my own name on the front - although only as author, of course, of this introduction. I think Tilbert would have wanted it that way.

And for the meantime then, the translation which follows - the one Tilbert brought me that night in the bar wrapped in Christmas paper - is the only one that we have in a condition fit for presentation to a respectable public. It must, therefore, serve (unless, of course, he should, like dear, dear Adeline, return unexpectedly from the dead) as Tilbert's monument.

And to his memory, then, and in memory of the many remarkable drinking sessions enjoyed in his company, this simple introduction and this modest publication are most respectfully dedicated.

I.F.G.

