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BESTRE

by Wyndham Lewis

As I walked along the quay at Kermanac, there was a pretty footfall in my rear. Turning my head, I found an athletic Frenchwoman, of the bourgeois class, looking at me.

The crocket-like floral postiches on the ridges of her head-gear looked crisped down in a threatening way: her nodular pink veil was an apoplectic gristle round her stormy brow; steam came out of her lips upon the harsh white atmosphere. Her eyes were dark, and the contiguous colour of her cheeks of a redness quasi-venetian, with something like the feminine colouring of battle. This was surely a feline battle-mask, then; but in such a pacific and slumbrous spot I thought it an anomalous ornament.

My dented *bidon* of a hat—cantankerous beard—hungarian boots, the soles like the rind of a thin melon slice, the uppers in stark calcinous segments; my cassock-like blue broadcloth coat (why was I like this?—the habits of needy travel grew this composite shell), this uncouthness might have raised in her the question of defiance and offence. I glided swiftly along on my centipedal boots, dragging my eye upon the rough walls of the houses to my right like a listless cane. Low houses faced the small vasey port. It was there I saw Bestre.

This is how I became aware of Bestre.

The detritus of some weeks' hurried experience was being dealt with in my mind, on this crystalline, extremely cold walk through Kermanac to Braspartz, and was being established in orderly heaps. At work in my untidy hive, I was alone: the atmosphere of the workshop dammed me in. That I moved forward was no more strange than if a carpenter's shop or chemist's laboratory, installed in a boat, should move forward on the tide of a stream. Now, what seemed to happen was that, as I bent over my work, an odiously grinning face peered in at my window. The impression of an intrusion was so strong, that I did not even realize at first that it was I who was the intruder. That the window was not my window, and that the face was not peering in but out: that, in fact, it was I myself who was guilty of peering into somebody else's window: this was hidden from me in the first moment of consciousness about the odious brown person of Bestre. It is a wonder that the curse did not at once fall from me on this detestable inquisitive head. What I did do was to pull up in my automatic progress, and, instead of passing on, to continue to stare in at Bestre's kitchen window, and scowl at Bestre's sienna-coloured gourd of a head.

Bestre in his turn was nonplussed. He knew that some one was looking in at his kitchen window, all right: he had expected some one to do so, some one who in fact had contracted the habit of doing that. But he had mistaken my steps for this other person's; and the appearance of my face was in a measure as disturbing to him as his had been to me. My information on these points afterwards became complete. With a flexible imbrication reminiscent of a shutter-lipped ape, a bud of tongue still showing, he shot the latch of his upper lip down in front of the nether one, and depressed the interior extremities of his eyebrows sharply from their quizzing perch—only this monkey-on-a-stick mechanical pull—down the face's centre. At the same time, his arms still folded like bulky lizards, blue tattoo on brown ground, upon the escarpment of his vesicular middle, not a hair or muscle moving, he made a quick, slight motion to me with one hand to get out of the picture without speaking—to efface myself. It was the suggestion of a theatrical sportsman. I was in the line of fire. I moved on: a couple of steps did it. That lady was twenty yards distant: but nowhere was there anything in sight evidently related to Bestre's gestures. 'Pension de Famille?' What prices?—and how charmingly placed! I remarked the vine: the building, of one storey, was exceedingly long, it took some time to pass along it. I reached the principal door. I concluded this entrance was really disused, although more imposing. So emerging on the quay once more, and turning along the front of the house, I again discovered myself in contact with Bestre. He was facing towards me, and down the quay, immobile as before, and the attitude so much a replica as to make it seem a plagiarism of his kitchen piece. Only now his head was on one side, a verminous grin had dispersed the equally unpleasant entity of his shut mouth. The new facial arrangement and angle for the head imposed on what seemed his stock pose for the body, must mean: 'Am I not rather smart? Not just a little bit smart? Don't you think? A little, you will concede? You did not expect that, did you? That was a nasty jar for you, was it not? Ha! my lapin, that was unexpected, that is plain! Did you think you would find Bestre asleep? He is always awake! He watched you being born, and has watched you ever since. Don't be too sure that

he did not play some part in planting the little seed from which you grew into such a big, fine (many withering exclamation marks) boy (or girl). He will be in at your finish too. But he is in no hurry about that. He is never in a hurry! He bides his time. Meanwhile he laughs at you. He finds you a little funny. That's right! Yes! I am still looking!

His very large eyeballs, the small saffron ocellation in their centre, the tiny spot through which light entered the obese wilderness of his body; his bronzed bovine arms, swollen handles for a variety of indolent little ingenuities; his inflated digestive case, lent their combined expressiveness to say these things; with every tart and biting condiment that eye-fluid, flaunting of fatness (the well-filled), the insult of the comic, implications of indecency, could provide. Every variety of bottom-tapping resounded from his dumb bulk. His tongue stuck out, his lips eructated with the incredible indecorum that appears to be the monopoly of liquids, his brown arms were for the moment genitals, snakes in one massive twist beneath his mammillary slabs, gently riding on a pancreatic swell, each hair on his oil-bearing skin contributing its message of porcine affront.

Taken fairly in the chest by this magnetic attack, I wavered. Turning the house corner it was like confronting a hard meaty gust. But I perceived that the central gyroduct passed a few feet clear of me. Turning my back, arching it a little, perhaps, I was just in time to receive on the boko a parting volley from the female figure of the obscure encounter, before she disappeared behind a rock which brought Kermanac to a close on this side of the port. She was evidently replying to Bestre. It was the rash grating philippic of a battered cat, limping into safety. At the moment that she vanished behind the boulder, Bestre must have vanished too, for a moment later the quay was empty. On reaching the door into which he had sunk, plump and slick as into a stage trap, there he was inside—this grease-bred old mammifer—his tufted vertex charging about the plank ceiling—generally ricochetting like a dripping sturgeon in a boat's bottom—arms warm brown, ju-jitsu of his guts, tan canvas shoes and trousers rippling in ribbed planes as he darted about—with a filthy snicker for the scuttling female, and a stark cock of the eye for an unknown figure miles to his right: he filled this short tunnel with clever parabolas and vortices, little neat stutterings of triumph, goggle-eyed hypnotisms, in retrospect, for his hearers.

'T'as vu? T'as vu? Je l'ai fichu c'es' qu'elle n'attendait pas! Ah, la rosse! Qu'elle aille raconter ça à sa crapule de mari. Si, si, s'il vient ici, tu sais——'

His head nodded up and down in batches of blood-curdling affirmations; his hand, pudgy hieratic disc, tapped the air gently, then sawed tenderly up and down.

Bestre, on catching sight of me, hailed me as a witness. 'Tiens! Ce monsieur peut vous le dire: il était là. Il m'a vu là-dedans qui l'attendais!'

I bore witness to the subtleties of his warlike ambush. I told his sister and two boarders that I had seldom been privy to such a rich encounter. They squinted at me, and at each other, dragging their eyes off with slow tosses of the head. I took a room in this house immediately—the stage-box in fact, just above the kitchen. For a week I was perpetually entertained.

Before attempting to discover the significance of Bestre's proceedings when I clattered into the silken zone of his hostilities, I settled down in his house; watched him idly from both my windows—from that looking on to the back—(cleaning his gun in the yard, killing chickens, examining the peas), from the front one—rather shyly sucking up to a fisherman upon the quay. I went into his kitchen and his shed and watched him. I realized as little as he did that I was patting and prodding a subject of these stories. There was no intention in these stoppages on my zigzag course across Western France of taking a human species, as an entomologist would take a *Distoma* or a *Narbonne Lycosa*, to study. Later, at the time of my Spanish adventure (which was separated by two years from Bestre), I had grown more professional. Also, I had become more conscious of myself and of my powers of personally provoking a series of typhoons in tea-cups. But with my Bretons I was very new to my resources, and was living in a mild and early millennium of mirth. It was at the end of a few months' roaming in the country that I saw I had been a good deal in contact with a tribe, some more and some less generic. And it is only now that it has seemed to me an amusing labour to gather some of these individuals in retrospect and group them under their function, to which all in some diverting way were attached.

So my stoppage at Kermanac, for example, was because Bestre was a little excitement. I had never seen brown flesh put to those uses. And the situation of his boarding-house would allow of unlimited pocourantism, idling and eating,

sunning myself in one of my windows, with Berkeley or Cudworth in my hand, and a staring eye that lost itself in reveries that suddenly took on flesh and acted some obstinate little part or other, the phases of whose dramatic life I would follow stealthily from window to window, a book still in my hand, shaking with the most innocent laughter. I was never for a minute unoccupied. Fête followed fête, fêtes of the mind. Then, as well, the small cliffs of the scurfy little port, its desertion and queer train of life, reached a system of very early dreams I had considered effaced. But all the same, although not self-conscious, I went laughing after Bestre, tapping him, setting traps for the game that he decidedly contained for my curiosity. So it was almost as though Fabre could have established himself within the masonries of the bee, and lived on its honey, while investigating for the human species: or stretched himself on a bed of raphia and pebbles at the bottom of the Lycosa's pit, and lived on flies and locusts. I lay on Bestre's billowy beds, drank his ambrosial cider, fished from his boat; he brought me birds and beasts that he had chased and killed. It was an idyllic life of the calmest adventure. We were the best of friends: he thought I slapped him because contact with his fat gladdened me, and to establish contact with the feminine vein in his brown-coated ducts and muscles. Also he was Bestre, and it must be nice to pat and buffet him as it would be to do that with a dreadful lion.

He offered himself, sometimes wincing coquettishly, occasionally rolling his eyes a little, as the lion might do to remind you of your natural dread, and heighten the luxurious privilege.

Bestre's boarding-house is only open from June to October: the winter months he passes in hunting and trapping. He is a stranger to Kermanac, a Boulonnais, and at constant feud with the natives. For some generations his family have been strangers where they lived; and he carries on his face the mark of an origin even more distant than Picardy. His great-grandfather came into France from the Peninsula, with the armies of Napoleon. Possibly his alertness, combativeness and timidity are the result of these exilings and difficult adjustments to new surroundings, working in his blood, and in his own history.

He is a large, tall man, corpulent and ox-like: you can see by his movements that the slow aggrandisement of his stomach has hardly been noticed by him. It is still compact with the rest of his body, and he is as nimble as a flea. It has been for him like the peculations of a minister, enriching himself under the nose of the caliph; Bestre's kingly indifference can be accounted for by the many delights and benefits procured through this subtle misappropriation of the general resources of the body. Sunburnt, with large yellow-white moustache, little eyes protruding with the cute strenuousness already noticed, when he meets any one for the first time his mouth stops open, a cigarette end adhering to the lower lip. He will assume an expression of expectancy and repressed amusement, like a man accustomed to nonplussing: the expression the company wears in those games of divination when they have made the choice of an object, and he whose task it is to guess its nature is called in, and commences the cross-examination. Bestre is jocose; he will beset you with mocking thoughts as the blindfold man is danced round in a game of blind man's buff. He may have regarded my taps as a myopic clutch at his illusive person. He gazes at a new acquaintance as though this poor man, without guessing it, were entering a world of astonishing things! A would-be boarder arrives and asks him if he has a room with two beds. Bestre fixes him steadily for twenty seconds with an amused yellow eye. Without uttering a word, he then leads the way to a neighbouring door, lets the visitor pass into the room, stands watching him with the expression of a conjurer who has just drawn a curtain aside and revealed to the stupefied audience a horse and cart, or a life-size portrait of the Shah of Persia, where a moment ago there was nothing.

Suppose the following thing happened. A madman, who believes himself a hen, escapes from Charenton, and gets, somehow or other, as far as Finistère. He turns up at Kermanac, knocks at Bestre's door and asks him with a perfect stereotyped courtesy for a large, airy room, with a comfortable perch to roost on, and a little straw in the corner where he might sit. Bestre a few days before has been visited by the very idea of arranging such a room: all is ready. He conducts his demented client to it. Now his manner with his everyday client would be thoroughly appropriate under these circumstances. They are carefully suited to a very weak-minded and whimsical visitor indeed.

Bestre has another group of tricks, pertaining directly to the commerce of his hospitable trade. When a customer is confessing in the fullest way his paraesthesias, allowing this new host an engaging glimpse of his nastiest propriums and kinks, Bestre behaves, with unconscious logic, as though a secret of the most disreputable nature were being imparted to him. Were, in fact, the requirements of a vice being enumerated, he could not display more plainly the qualms caused by his rôle of accessory. He will lower his voice, whisper in the client's ear; before doing so glance over his shoulder apprehensively two or three times, and push his guest roughly into the darkest corner of the passage or kitchen. It is his

perfect understanding—is he not the only man who does, at once, forestall your eager whim: there is something of the fortune-teller in him—that produces the air of mystery. For his information is not always of the nicest, is it? He must know more about you than I daresay you would like many people to know. And Bestre will in his turn mention certain little delicacies that he, Bestre, will see that you have, and that the other guests will not share with you. So there you are committed at the start to a subtle collusion. But Bestre means it. Every one he sees for the first time he is thrilled about, until they have got used to him. He would give you anything while he is still strange to you. But you see the interest die down in his eyes, at the end of twenty-four hours, whether you have assimilated him or not. He only gives you about a day for your meal. He then assumes that you have finished him, and he feels chilled by your scheduled disillusion. A fresh face and an enemy he depends on for that 'new' feeling—or what can we call this firework that he sends up for the stranger, that he enjoys so much himself—or this rare bottle he can only open when hospitality compels—his own blood?

I had arrived at the master-moment of one of Bestre's campaigns. These were long and bitter affairs. But they consisted almost entirely of dumb show. The few words that passed were generally misleading. A vast deal of talking went on in the different camps. But a dead and pulverizing silence reigned on the field of battle, with few exceptions.

It was a matter of who could be most silent and move least: it was a stark stand-up fight between one personality and another, unaided by adventitious muscle or tongue. It was more like phases of a combat or courtship in the insect-world. The Eye was really Bestre's weapon: the ammunition with which he loaded it was drawn from all the most skunk-like provender, the most ugly mucins, fungoid glands, of his physique. Excrement as well as sputum would be shot from this luminous hole, with the same certainty in its unsavoury appulsion. Every resource of metonymy, bloody mind transfusion or irony were also his. What he selected as an arm in his duels, then, was the Eye. As he was always the offended party, he considered that he had this choice. I traced the predilection for this weapon and method to a very fiery source—to the land of his ancestry—Spain. How had the knife dropped out of his outfit? Who can tell? But he retained the *mirada* whole and entire enough to please any one, all the more active for the absence of the dagger. I pretend that Bestre behaved as he did directly because his sweet forebears had to rely so much on the furious languishing and jolly conversational properties of their eyes to secure their ends at all. The spanish beauty imprisoned behind her casement can only roll her eyes at her lover in the street below. The result of these and similar Eastern restraints develops the eye almost out of recognition. Bestre in his kitchen, behind his casement, was unconsciously employing this gift from his semi-arabian past. And it is not even the unsupported female side of Bestre. For the lover in the street as well must keep his eye in constant training to bear out the furibund jugular drops, the mettlesome stamping, of the guitar. And all the haughty chevaleresque habits of this bellicose race have substituted the eye for the mouth in a hundred ways. The Grandee's eye is terrible, and at his best is he not speechless with pride? Eyes, eyes: for defiance, for shrivelling subordinates, for courtesy, for love. A 'spanish eye' might be used as we say, 'Toledo blade.' There, anyway, is my argument; I place on the one side Bestre's eye; on the other I isolate the iberian eye. Bestre's grandfather, we know, was a Castilian. To show how he was beholden to this extraction, and again how the blood clung to him, Bestre was in no way grasping. It went so far that he was noticeably careless about money. This, in France, could not be accounted for in any other way.

Bestre's quarrels turned up as regularly as work for a good shoemaker or dentist. Antagonism after antagonism flashed forth: became more acute through several weeks: detonated in the dumb pyrotechnic I have described; then wore itself out with its very exhausting and exacting violence.—At the passing of an enemy Bestre will pull up his blind with a snap. There he is, with his insult stewing lusciously in his yellow sweat. The eyes fix on the enemy, on his weakest spot, and do their work. He has the anatomical instinct of the hymenopter for his prey's most morbid spot; for an old wound; for a lurking vanity. He goes into the other's eye, seeks it, and strikes. On a physical blemish he turns a scornful and careless rain like a garden hose. If the deep vanity is on the wearer's back, or in his walk or gaze, he sluices it with an abundance you would not expect his small eyes to be capable of delivering.

But the *mise en scène* for his successes is always the same. Bestre is *discovered* somewhere, behind a blind, in a doorway, beside a rock, when least expected. He regards the material world as so many ambushes for his body.

Then the key principle of his strategy is provocation. The enemy must be exasperated to the point at which it is difficult for him to keep his hands off his aggressor. The desire to administer the blow is as painful as a blow received. That the blow should be taken back into the enemy's own bosom, and that he should be stifled by his own oath—that Bestre

regards as so many blows, and so much abuse, of *his*, Bestre's, although he has never so much as taken his hands out of his pockets, or opened his mouth.

I learnt a great deal from Bestre. He is one of my masters. When the moment came for me to discover myself—a thing I believe few people have done so thoroughly, so early in life and so quickly—I recognized more and more the beauty of Bestre. I was only prevented from turning my eye upon myself even at that primitive period of speculative adolescence by that one-sidedness that only the most daring tamper with.

The immediate quay-side neighbours of Bestre afford him a constant war-food. I have seen him slipping out in the evening and depositing refuse in front of his neighbour's house. I have seen a woman screeching at him in pidgin french from a window of the *débit* two doors off, while he pared his nails a yard from his own front door. This was to show his endurance. The subtle notoriety, too, of his person is dear to him. But local functionaries and fishermen are not his only fare. During summer, time hangs heavy with the visitor from Paris. When the first ennui comes upon him, he wanders about desperately, and his eye in due course falls on Bestre.

It depends how busy Bestre is at the moment. But often enough he will take on the visitor at once in his canine way. The visitor shivers, opens his eyes, bristles at the quizzing pursuit of Bestre's *oeillade*; the remainder of his holiday flies in a round of singular plots, passionate conversations and prodigious encounters with this born broiler.

Now, a well-known painter and his family, who rented a house in the neighbourhood, were, it seemed, particularly responsive to Bestre. I could not—arrived, with some perseverance, at the bottom of it—find any cause for his quarrel. The most insignificant pretext was absent. The pretentious peppery Paris Salon artist, and this Boulogne-bred Breton inhabited the same village, and they grew larger and larger in each other's eyes at a certain moment, in this armorican wilderness. As Bestre swelled and swelled for the painter, he was seen to be the possessor of some insult incarnate, that was an intolerable factor in the life of so lonely a place. War was inevitable. Bestre saw himself growing and growing, with the glee of battle in his heart, and the flicker of budding affront in his little eye. He did nothing to arrest this alarming aggrandizement. Pretexts could have been found: but they were dispensed with, by mutual consent. This is how I reconstructed the obscure and early phases of that history. What is certain, is that there had been much eye-play on the quay between Monsieur Rivière and Monsieur Bestre. And the scene that I had taken part in was the culmination of a rather humiliating phase in the annals of Bestre's campaigns.

The distinguished painter's wife, I learnt, had contracted the habit of passing Bestre's kitchen window of a morning when Mademoiselle Marie was alone there—gazing glassily in, but never looking at Mademoiselle Marie. This had such a depressing effect on Bestre's old sister, that it reduced her vitality considerably, and in the end brought on diarrhoea. Why did Bestre permit the war to be brought into his own camp with such impunity? The only reason that I could discover for this was, that the attacks were of very irregular timing. He had been out fishing in one or two cases, employed in his garden or elsewhere. But on the penultimate occasion Madame Rivière had practically finished off the last surviving female of Bestre's notable stock. As usual, the wife of the parisian Salon master had looked into the kitchen; but this time she had looked *at* Mademoiselle Marie, and in such a way as practically to curl her up on the floor. Bestre's sister had none of her brother's ferocity, and in every way departed considerably from his type, except in a mild and sentimental imitation of his colouring. The distinguished painter's wife, on the other hand, had a touch of Bestre about her. Bestre did not have it all his own way. Because of this, recognizing the redoubtable and Bestre-like quality of his enemy, he had resorted no doubt to such extreme measures as I suspect him of employing. She had chosen her own ground—his kitchen. That was a vast mistake. On that ground, I am satisfied, Bestre was invincible. It was even surprising that there any trump should have been lavished.

On that morning when I drifted into the picture what happened to induce such a disarray in his opponent? What superlative shaft, with deadly aim, did he direct against her vitals? She would take only a few seconds to pass the kitchen window. He had brought her down with a stupendous rush. In principle, as I have said, Bestre sacrifices the claims any individual portion of his anatomy might have to independent expressiveness to a tyrannical appropriation of all this varied battery of bestial significance by his *eye*. The eye was his chosen weapon. Had he any theory, however, that certain occasions warranted, or required, the auxiliary offices of some unit of the otherwise subordinated mass? Can the sex of his assailant give us a clue? I am convinced in my own mind that another agent was called in on this occasion. I am certain that he struck the death-blow with another engine than his eye. I believe that the most savage and obnoxious

means of affront were employed to cope with the distinguished painter's wife. His rejoinder would perhaps be of that unanswerable description, that it would be stamped on the spot, for an adversary, as an authentic last word. No further appeal to arms of that sort would be rational: it must have been right up against litigation and physical assault.

Monsieur Rivière, with his painting-pack and campstool, came along the quay shortly afterwards, going in the same direction as his wife. Bestre was at his door; and he came in later, and let us know how he had behaved.

'I wasn't such a fool as to insult him: there were witnesses; let him do that. But if I come upon him in one of those lanes at the back there, you know . . . I was standing at my door; he came along and looked at my house and scanned my windows' (this is equivalent in Bestre-warfare to a bombardment). 'As he passed I did not move. I thought to myself, "Hurry home, old fellow, and ask Madame what she has seen during her little walk!" *I looked him in the white of the eyes.* He thought I'd lower mine; he doesn't know me. And, after all, what is he, though he's got the Riband of the Legion of Honour? I don't carry my decorations on my coat! I have mine marked on my body. Did I ever show you what I've got here? No; I'm going to show you.' He had shown all this before, but my presence encouraged a repetition of former successes. So while he was speaking he jumped up quickly, undid his shirt, bared his chest and stomach, and pointed to something beneath his arm. Then, rapidly rolling up his sleeves, he pointed to a cicatrice rather like a vaccination mark, but larger. While showing his scars he slaps his body, with a sort of sneering rattle or chuckle between his words, his eyes protruding more than usual. His customary wooden expression is disintegrated: this compound of a constant foreboded reflection of the expression of astonishment your face will acquire when you learn of his wisdom, valour, or wit: the slightest shade of sneering triumph, and a touch of calm relish at your wonder. Or he seems teaching you by his staring grimace the amazement you should feel: and his grimace gathers force and blooms as the full sense of what you are witnessing, hearing, bursts upon you, while your gaping face conforms more and more to Bestre's prefiguring mask.

As to his battles, Bestre is profoundly unaware of what strange category he has got himself into. The principles of his strategy are possibly the possession of his libido, but most certainly not that of the bulky and surface citizen, Bestre. On the contrary, he considers himself on the verge of a death struggle at any moment when in the presence of one of his enemies.

Like all people who spend their lives talking about their deeds, he presents a very particular aspect in the moment of action. When discovered in the thick of one of his dumb battles, he has the air of a fine company promoter, concerned, trying to corrupt some sombre fact into shielding for an hour his unwieldy fiction, until some fresh wangle can retrieve it. Or he will display a great empirical expertness in reality, without being altogether at home in it.

Bestre in the moment of action feels as though he were already talking. His action has the exaggerated character of his speech, only oddly curbed by the exigencies of reality. In his moments of most violent action he retains something of his dumb passivity. He never seems quite entering into reality, but observing it. He is looking at the reality with a professional eye, so to speak: with a professional liar's.

I have noticed that the more cramped and meagre his action has been, the more exuberant his account of the affair is afterwards. The more restrictions reality has put on him, the more unbridled is his gusto as historian of his deeds, immediately afterwards. Then he has the common impulse to avenge that self that has been perishing under the famine and knout of a bad reality, by glorifying and surfeiting it on its return to the imagination.



TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *Bestre*, by Wyndham Lewis]