## The Greek

W. Somerset Maugham

Ashenden arrived in Naples and having taken a room at the hotel, wrote its number on a sheet of paper in block letters and posted it to the Hairless Mexican. He went to the British Consulate where R. had arranged to send any instructions he might have for him and found that they knew about him and everything was in order. Then he put aside these matters and made up his mind to amuse himself. Here in the South the spring was well advanced and in the busy streets the sun was hot. Ashenden knew Naples pretty well. The Piazza di San Ferdinando, with its bustle, the Piazza del Plebiscito, with its handsome church, stirred in his heart pleasant recollections. The Strada di Chiaia was as noisy as ever. He stood at corners and looked up the narrow alleys that climbed the hill precipitously, those alleys of high houses with the washing set out to dry on lines across the street like pennants flying to mark a feast-day; and he sauntered along the shore, looking at the burnished sea with Capri faintly outlined against the day, till he came to Posilippo, where there was an old, rambling and bedraggled palazzo in which in his youth he had spent many a romantic hour. He observed the curious little pain with which the memories of the past wrung his heart-strings. Then he took a fly drawn by a small and scraggy pony and rattled back over the stones to the Galleria, where he sat in the cool and drank an americano and looked at the people who loitered there, talking, for ever talking with vivacious gestures, and, exercising his fancy, sought from their appearance to divine their reality.

For three days Ashenden led the idle life that fitted so well the fantastical, untidy and genial city. He did nothing from morning till night but wander at random, looking, not with the eye of the tourist who seeks for what ought to be seen, nor with the eye of the writer who looks for his own (seeing in a sunset a melodious phrase or in a face the inkling of a character), but with that of the tramp to whom whatever happens is absolute. He went to the museum to look at the statue of Agrippina the Younger, which he had particular reasons for remembering with affection, and took the opportunity to see once more the Titian and the Brueghel in the picture gallery. But he always came back to the church of Santa Chiara. Its grace, its gaiety, the airy persiflage with which it seemed to treat religion and at the back of this its sensual emotion; its extravagance, its elegance of line; to Ashenden it seemed to express, as it were in one absurd and grandiloquent metaphor, the sunny, dusty, lovely city and its bustling inhabitants. It said that life was charming and sad; it’s a pity one hadn’t any money, but money wasn’t everything, and anyway why bother when we are here to-day and gone to-morrow, and it was all very exciting and amusing, and after all we must make the best of things: facciamo una piccola combinazione.

But on the fourth morning when Ashenden, having just stepped out of his bath, was trying to dry himself on a towel that absorbed no moisture, his door was quickly opened and a man slipped into his room.

‘What d’you want?’ cried Ashenden.

‘It’s all right. Don’t you know me?’

‘Good Lord, it’s the Mexican. What have you done to yourself?’

He had changed his wig and wore now a black one, close-cropped, that fitted on his head like a cap. It entirely altered the look of him and though this was still odd enough, it was quite different from that which he had borne before. He wore a shabby grey suit.

‘I can only stop a minute. He’s getting shaved.’

Ashenden felt his cheeks suddenly redden.

‘You found him then?’

‘That wasn’t difficult. He was the only Greek passenger on the ship. I went on board when she got in and asked for a friend who had sailed from the Piraeus. I said I had come to meet a Mr. George Diogenidis. I pretended to be much puzzled at his not coming, and I got into conversation with Andreadi. He’s travelling under a false name. He calls himself Lombardos. I followed him when he landed and do you know the first thing he did? He went into a barber’s and had his beard shaved. What do you think of that?’

‘Nothing. Anyone might have his beard shaved.’

‘That is not what I think. He wanted to change his appearance. Oh, he’s cunning. I admire the Germans, they leave nothing to chance, he’s got his whole story pat, but I’ll tell you that in a minute.’

‘By the way, you’ve changed your appearance too.’

‘Ah, yes, this is a wig I’m wearing; it makes a difference, doesn’t it?’

‘I should never have known you.’

‘One has to take precautions. We are bosom friends. We had to spend the day in Brindisi and he cannot speak Italian. He was glad to have me help him and we travelled up together. I have brought him to this hotel. He says he is going to Rome to-morrow, but I shall not let him out of my sight; I do not want him to give me the slip. He says that he wants to see Naples and I have offered to show him everything there is to see.’

‘Why isn’t he going to Rome to-day?’

‘That is part of the story. He pretends he is a Greek business man who has made money during the war. He says he was the owner of two coasting steamers and has just sold them. Now he means to go to Paris and have his fling. He says he has wanted to go to Paris all his life and at last has the chance. He is close. I tried to get him to talk. I told him I was a Spaniard and had been to Brindisi to arrange communications with Turkey about war material. He listened to me and I saw he was interested, but he told me nothing and of course I did not think it wise to press him. He has the papers on his person.’

‘How do you know?’

‘He is not anxious about his grip, but he feels every now and then round his middle, they’re either in a belt or in the lining of his vest.’

‘Why the devil did you bring him to this hotel?’

‘I thought it would be more convenient. We may want to search his luggage.’

‘Are you staying here too?’

‘No, I am not such a fool as that. I told him I was going to Rome by the night train and would not take a room. But I must go, I promised to meet him outside the barber’s in fifteen minutes.’

‘All right.’

‘Where shall I find you to-night if I want you?’

Ashenden for an instant eyed the Hairless Mexican, then with a slight frown looked away.

‘I shall spend the evening in my room.’

‘Very well. Will you just see that there’s nobody in the passage?’

Ashenden opened the door and looked out. He saw no one. The hotel in point of fact at that season was nearly empty. There were few foreigners in Naples and trade was bad.

‘It’s all right,’ said Ashenden.

The Hairless Mexican walked boldly out. Ashenden closed the door behind him. He shaved and slowly dressed. The sun was shining as brightly as usual on the square and the people who passed, the shabby little carriages with their scrawny horses, had the same air as before, but they did not any longer fill Ashenden with gaiety. He was not comfortable. He went out and called as was his habit at the Consulate to ask if there was a telegram for him. Nothing. Then he went to Cook’s and looked out the trains to Rome: there was one soon after midnight and another at five in the morning. He wished he could catch the first. He did not know what were the Mexican’s plans; if he really wanted to get to Cuba he would do well to make his way to Spain, and, glancing at the notices in the office, Ashenden saw that next day there was a ship sailing from Naples to Barcelona.

Ashenden was bored with Naples. The glare in the streets tired his eyes, the dust was intolerable, the noise was deafening. He went to the Galleria and had a drink. In the afternoon he went to a cinema. Then, going back to his hotel, he told the clerk that since he was starting so early in the morning he preferred to pay his bill at once, and he took his luggage to the station, leaving in his room only a dispatch-case in which were the printed part of his code and a book or two. He dined. Then returning to the hotel, he sat down to wait for the Hairless Mexican. He could not conceal from himself the fact that he was exceedingly nervous. He began to read, but the book was tiresome, and he tried another; his attention wandered and he glanced at his watch. It was desperately early; he took up his book again, making up his mind that he would not look at his watch till he had read thirty pages, but though he ran his eyes conscientiously down one page after another he could not tell more than vaguely what it was he read. He looked at the time again. Good God, it was only half-past ten. He wondered where the Hairless Mexican was, and what he was doing; he was afraid he would make a mess of things. It was a horrible business. Then it struck him that he had better shut the window and draw the curtains. He smoked innumerable cigarettes. He looked at his watch and it was a quarter past eleven. A thought struck him and his heart began to beat against his chest; out of curiosity he counted his pulse and was surprised to find that it was normal. Though it was a warm night and the room was stuffy his hands and feet were icy. What a nuisance it was, he reflected irritably, to have an imagination that conjured up pictures of things that you didn’t in the least want to see! From his standpoint as a writer he had often considered murder and his mind went to that fearful description of one in Crime and Punishment. He did not want to think of this topic, but it forced itself upon him; his book dropped to his knees and staring at the wall in front of him (it had a brown wall-paper with a pattern of dingy roses) he asked himself how, if one had to, one would commit a murder in Naples. Of course there was the Villa, the great leafy garden facing the bay in which stood the aquarium; that was deserted at night and very dark; things happened there that did not bear the light of day and prudent persons after dusk avoided its sinister paths. Beyond Posilippo the road was very solitary and there were byways that led up the hill in which by night you would never meet a soul, but how would you induce a man who had any nerves to go there? You might suggest a row in the bay, but the boatman who hired the boat would see you; it was doubtful indeed if he would let you go on the water alone; there were disreputable hotels down by the harbour where no questions were asked of persons who arrived late at night without luggage; but here again the waiter who showed you your room had the chance of a good look at you and you had on entering to sign an elaborate questionnaire.

Ashenden looked once more at the time. He was very tired. He sat now not even trying to read, his mind a blank.

Then the door opened softly and he sprang to his feet. His flesh crept. The Hairless Mexican stood before him.

‘Did I startle you?’ he asked smiling. ‘I thought you would prefer me not to knock.’

‘Did anyone see you come in?’

‘I was let in by the night-watchman; he was asleep when I rang and didn’t even look at me. I’m sorry I’m so late, but I had to change.’

The Hairless Mexican wore now the clothes he had travelled down in and his fair wig. It was extraordinary how different he looked. He was bigger and more flamboyant; the very shape of his face was altered. His eyes were shining and he seemed in excellent spirits. He gave Ashenden a glance.

‘How white you are, my friend! Surely you’re not nervous?’

‘Have you got the documents?’

‘No. He hadn’t got them on him. This is all he had.’

He put down on the table a bulky pocket-book and a passport.

‘I don’t want them,’ said Ashenden quickly. ‘Take them.’

With a shrug of the shoulders the Hairless Mexican put the things back in his pocket.

‘What was in his belt? You said he kept feeling round his middle.’

‘Only money. I’ve looked through the pocket-book. It contains nothing but private letters and photographs of women. He must have locked the documents in his grip before coming out with me this evening.’

‘Damn,’ said Ashenden.

‘I’ve got the key of his room. We’d better go and look through his luggage.’

Ashenden felt a sensation of sickness in the pit of his stomach. He hesitated. The Mexican smiled not unkindly.

‘There’s no risk, amigo,’ he said, as though he were reassuring a small boy, ‘but if you don’t feel happy, I’ll go alone.’

‘No, I’ll come with you,’ said Ashenden.

‘There’s no one awake in the hotel and Mr. Andreadi won’t disturb us. Take off your shoes if you like.’

Ashenden did not answer. He frowned because he noticed that his hands were slightly trembling. He unlaced his shoes and slipped them off. The Mexican did the same.

‘You’d better go first,’ he said. ‘Turn to the left and go straight along the corridor. It’s number thirty-eight.’

Ashenden opened the door and stepped out. The passage was dimly lit. It exasperated him to feel so nervous when he could not but be aware that his companion was perfectly at ease. When they reached the door the Hairless Mexican inserted the key, turned the lock and went in. He switched on the light. Ashenden followed him and closed the door. He noticed that the shutters were shut.

‘Now we’re all right. We can take our time.’

He took a bunch of keys out of his pocket, tried one or two and at last hit upon the right one. The suit-case was filled with clothes.

‘Cheap clothes,’ said the Mexican contemptuously as he took them out. ‘My own principle is that it’s always cheaper in the end to buy the best. After all one is a gentleman or one isn’t a gentleman.’

‘Are you obliged to talk?’ asked Ashenden.

‘A spice of danger affects people in different ways. It only excites me, but it puts you in a bad temper, amigo.’

‘You see I’m scared and you’re not,’ replied Ashenden with candour.

‘It’s merely a matter of nerves.’

Meanwhile he felt the clothes, rapidly but with care, as he took them out. There were no papers of any sort in the suitcase. Then he took out his knife and slit the lining. It was a cheap piece and the lining was gummed to the material of which the suitcase was made. There was no possibility of anything being concealed in it.

‘They’re not here. They must be hidden in the room.’

‘Are you sure he didn’t deposit them in some office? At one of the consulates, for example?’

‘He was never out of my sight for a moment except when he was getting shaved.’

The Hairless Mexican opened the drawers and the cupboard. There was no carpet on the floor. He looked under the bed, in it, and under the mattress. His dark eyes shot up and down the room, looking for a hiding-place, and Ashenden felt that nothing escaped him.

‘Perhaps he left them in charge of the clerk downstairs?’

‘I should have known it. And he wouldn’t dare. They’re not here. I can’t understand it.’

He looked about the room irresolutely. He frowned in the attempt to guess at a solution of the mystery.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said Ashenden.

‘In a minute.’

The Mexican went down on his knees, quickly and neatly folded the clothes, and packed them up again. He locked the bag and stood up. Then, putting out the light, he slowly opened the door and looked out. He beckoned to Ashenden and slipped into the passage. When Ashenden had followed him he stopped and locked the door, put the key in his pocket and walked with Ashenden to his room. When they were inside it and the bolt drawn Ashenden wiped his clammy hands and his forehead.

‘Thank God, we’re out of that!’

‘There wasn’t really the smallest danger. But what are we to do now? The Colonel will be angry that the papers haven’t been found.’

‘I’m taking the five o’clock train to Rome. I shall wire for instructions there.’

‘Very well, I will come with you.’

‘I should have thought it would suit you better to get out of the country more quickly. There’s a boat to-morrow that goes to Barcelona. Why don’t you take that and if necessary I can come to see you there?’

The Hairless Mexican gave a little smile.

‘I see that you are anxious to be rid of me. Well, I won’t thwart a wish that your inexperience in these matters excuses. I will go to Barcelona. I have a visa for Spain.’

Ashenden looked at his watch. It was a little after two. He had nearly three hours to wait. His companion comfortably rolled himself a cigarette.

‘What do you say to a little supper?’ he asked. ‘I’m as hungry as a wolf.’

The thought of food sickened Ashenden, but he was terribly thirsty. He did not want to go out with the Hairless Mexican, but neither did he want to stay in that hotel by himself.

‘Where could one go at this hour?’

‘Come along with me. I’ll find you a place.’

Ashenden put on his hat and took his dispatch-case in his hand. They went downstairs. In the hall the porter was sleeping soundly on a mattress on the floor. As they passed the desk, walking softly in order not to wake him, Ashenden noticed in the pigeon-hole belonging to his room a letter. He took it out and saw that it was addressed to him. They tiptoed out of the hotel and shut the door behind them. Then they walked quickly away. Stopping after a hundred yards or so under a lamp-post Ashenden took the letter out of his pocket and read it; it came from the Consulate and said: The enclosed telegram arrived to-night and in case it is urgent I am sending it round to your hotel by messenger. It had apparently been left some time before midnight while Ashenden was sitting in his room. He opened the telegram and saw that it was in code.

‘Well, it’ll have to wait,’ he said, putting it back in his pocket.

The Hairless Mexican walked as though he knew his way through the deserted streets and Ashenden walked by his side. At last they came to a tavern in a blind alley, noisome and evil, and this the Mexican entered.

‘It’s not the Ritz,’ he said, ‘but at this hour of the night it’s only in a place like this that we stand a chance of getting something to eat.’

Ashenden found himself in a long sordid room at one end of which a wizened young man sat at a piano; there were tables standing out from the wall on each side and against them benches. A number of persons, men and women, were sitting about. They were drinking beer and wine. The women were old, painted, and hideous; and their harsh gaiety was at once noisy and lifeless. When Ashenden and the Hairless Mexican came in they all stared and when they sat down at one of the tables Ashenden looked away in order not to meet the leering eyes, just ready to break into a smile, that sought his insinuatingly. The wizened pianist strummed a tune and several couples got up and began to dance. Since there were not enough men to go round some of the women danced together. The General ordered two plates of spaghetti and a bottle of Capri wine. When the wine was brought he drank a glassful greedily and then waiting for the pasta eyed the women who were sitting at the other tables.

‘Do you dance?’ he asked Ashenden. ‘I’m going to ask one of these girls to have a turn with me.’

He got up and Ashenden watched him go up to one who had at least flashing eyes and white teeth to recommend her; she rose and he put his arm round her. He danced well. Ashenden saw him begin talking; the woman laughed and presently the look of indifference with which she had accepted his offer changed to one of interest. Soon they were chatting gaily. The dance came to an end and putting her back at her table he returned to Ashenden and drank another glass of wine.

‘What do you think of my girl?’ he asked. ‘Not bad is she? It does one good to dance. Why don’t you ask one of them? This is a nice place, is it not? You can always trust me to find anything like this. I have an instinct.’

The pianist started again. The woman looked at the Hairless Mexican and when with his thumb he pointed to the floor she jumped up with alacrity. He buttoned up his coat, arched his back and standing up by the side of the table waited for her to come to him. He swung her off, talking, smiling, and already he was on familiar terms with everyone in the room. In fluent Italian, with his Spanish accent, he exchanged badinage with one and the other. They laughed at his sallies. Then the waiter brought two heaped platefuls of macaroni and when the Mexican saw them he stopped dancing without ceremony and, allowing his partner to get back to her table as she chose, hurried to his meal.

‘I’m ravenous,’ he said. ‘And yet I ate a good dinner. Where did you dine? You’re going to eat some macaroni, aren’t you?’

‘I have no appetite,’ said Ashenden.

But he began to eat and to his surprise found that he was hungry. The Hairless Mexican ate with huge mouthfuls, enjoying himself vastly; his eyes shone and he was loquacious. The woman he had danced with had in that short time told him all about herself and he repeated now to Ashenden what she had said. He stuffed huge pieces of bread into his mouth. He ordered another bottle of wine.

‘Wine?’ he cried scornfully. ‘Wine is not a drink, only champagne; it does not even quench your thirst. Well, amigo, are you feeling better?’

‘I’m bound to say I am,’ smiled Ashenden.

‘Practice, that is all you want, practice.’

He stretched out his hand to pat Ashenden on the arm.

‘What’s that?’ cried Ashenden with a start. ‘What’s that stain on your cuff?’

The Hairless Mexican gave his sleeve a glance.

‘That? Nothing. It’s only blood. I had a little accident and cut myself.’

Ashenden was silent. His eyes sought the clock that hung over the door.

‘Are you anxious about your train? Let me have one more dance and then I’ll accompany you to the station.’

The Mexican got up and with his sublime self-assurance seized in his arms the woman who sat nearest to him and danced away with her. Ashenden watched him moodily. He was a monstrous, terrible figure with that blond wig and his hairless face, but he moved with a matchless grace; his feet were small and seemed to hold the ground like the pads of a cat or a tiger; his rhythm was wonderful and you could not but see that the bedizened creature he danced with was intoxicated by his gestures. There was music in his toes and in the long arms that held her so firmly, and there was music in those long legs that seemed to move strangely from the hips. Sinister and grotesque though he was, there was in him now a feline elegance, even something of beauty, and you felt a secret, shameful fascination. To Ashenden he suggested one of those sculptures of the pre-Aztec hewers of stone, in which there is barbarism and vitality, something terrible and cruel, and yet withal a brooding and significant loveliness. All the same he would gladly have left him to finish the night by himself in that sordid dance-hall, but he knew that he must have a business conversation with him. He did not look forward to it without misgiving. He had been instructed to give Manuel Carmona certain sums in return for certain documents. Well, the documents were not forthcoming, and as for the rest – Ashenden knew nothing about that; it was no business of his. The Hairless Mexican waved gaily as he passed him.

‘I will come the moment the music stops. Pay the bill and then I shall be ready.’

Ashenden wished he could have seen into his mind. He could not even make a guess at its workings. Then the Mexican, with his scented handkerchief wiping the sweat from his brow, came back.

‘Have you had a good time, General?’ Ashenden asked him.

‘I always have a good time. Poor white trash, but what do I care? I like to feel the body of a woman in my arms and see her eyes grow languid and her lips part as her desire for me melts the marrow in her bones like butter in the sun. Poor white trash, but women.’

They sallied forth. The Mexican proposed that they should walk and in that quarter, at that hour, there would have been little chance of finding a cab; but the sky was starry. It was a summer night and the air was still. The silence walked beside them like the ghost of a dead man. When they neared the station the houses seemed on a sudden to take on a greyer, more rigid line, and you felt that the dawn was at hand. A little shiver trembled through the night. It was a moment of apprehension and the soul for an instant was anxious; it was as though, inherited down the years in their countless millions, it felt a witless fear that perhaps another day would not break. But they entered the station and the night once more enwrapped them. One or two porters lolled about like stage-hands after the curtain has rung down and the scene is struck. Two soldiers in dim uniforms stood motionless.

The waiting-room was empty, but Ashenden and the Hairless Mexican went to sit in the most retired part of it.

‘I still have an hour before my train goes. I’ll just see what this cable’s about.’

He took it out of his pocket and from the dispatch-case got his code. He was not then using a very elaborate one. It was in two parts, one contained in a slim book and the other, given him on a sheet of paper and destroyed by him before he left allied territory, committed to memory. Ashenden put on his spectacles and set to work. The Hairless Mexican sat in a corner of the seat, rolling himself cigarettes and smoking; he sat there placidly, taking no notice of what Ashenden did, and enjoyed his well-earned repose. Ashenden deciphered the groups of numbers one by one and as he got it out jotted down each word on a piece of paper. His method was to abstract his mind from the sense till he had finished, since he had discovered that if you took notice of the words as they came along you often jumped to a conclusion and sometimes were led into error. So he translated quite mechanically, without paying attention to the words as he wrote them one after the other. When at last he had done he read the complete message. It ran as follows:

Constantine Andreadi has been detained by illness at Piraeus. He will be unable to sail. Return Geneva and await instructions.

At first Ashenden could not understand. He read it again. He shook from head to foot. Then, for once robbed of his self-possession, he blurted out, in a hoarse, agitated and furious whisper:

‘You bloody fool, you’ve killed the wrong man.’