In a Strange Land

W. Somerset Maugham

I AM OF A ROVING DISPOSITION; but I travel not to see imposing monuments, which indeed somewhat bore me, nor beautiful scenery, of which I soon tire; I travel to see men. I avoid the great. I would not cross the road to meet a president or a king; I am content to know the writer in the pages of his book and the painter in his picture; but I have journeyed a hundred leagues to see a missionary of whom I had heard a strange story and I have spent a fortnight in a vile hotel in order to improve my acquaintance with a billiard marker. I should be inclined to say that I am not surprised to meet any sort of person were it not that there is one sort that I am constantly running against and that never fails to give me a little shock of amused astonishment. This is the elderly Englishwoman, generally of adequate means, who is to be found living alone, up and down the world, in unexpected places. You do not wonder when you hear of her living in a villa on a hill outside a small Italian town, the only Englishwoman in the neighbourhood, and you are almost prepared for it when a lonely hacienda is pointed out to you in Andalusia and you are told that there has dwelt for many years an English lady. But it is more surprising when you hear that the only white person in a Chinese city is an Englishwoman, not a missionary, who lives there none knows why; and there is another who inhabits an island in the South Seas and a third who has a bungalow on the outskirts of a large village in the centre of Java. They live solitary lives, these women, without friends, and they do not welcome the stranger. Though they may not have seen one of their own race for months they will pass you on the road as though they did not see you, and if, presuming on your nationality, you should call, as likely as not they will decline to sec you; but if they do, they will give you a cup of tea from a silver teapot and on a plate of Old Worcester you will find Scotch scones. They will talk to you politely, as though they were entertaining you in a Kentish vicarage, but when you take your leave will show no particular desire to continue the acquaintance. One wonders in vain what strange instinct it is that has driven them to separate themselves from their kith and kin and thus to live apart from all their natural interests in an alien land. Is it romance they have sought or freedom?

But of all these Englishwomen whom I have met or perhaps only heard of (for as I have said they are difficult of access) the one who remains most vividly in my memory is an elderly person who lived in Asia Minor. I had arrived after a tedious journey at a little town from which I proposed to make the ascent of a celebrated mountain and I was taken to a rambling hotel that stood at its foot. I arrived late at night and signed my name in the book. I went up to my room. It was cold and I shivered as I undressed, but in a moment there was a knock at the door and the dragoman came in.

“Signora Niccolini’s compliments,” he said.

To my astonishment he handed me a hot-water bottle. I took it with grateful hands.

“Who is Signora Niccolini?” I asked.

“She is the proprietor of this hotel.”

I sent her my thanks and he withdrew. The last thing I expected in a scrubby hotel in Asia Minor kept by an old Italian woman was a beautiful hot-water bottle. There is nothing I like more (if we were not all sick to death of the war I would tell you the story of how six men risked their lives to fetch a hot-water bottle from a château in Flanders that was being bombarded) ; and next morning, so that I might thank her in person, I asked if I might see the Signora Niccolini. While I waited for her I racked my brains to think what hot-water bottle could possibly be in Italian. In a moment she came in. She was a little stout woman, not without dignity, and she wore a black apron trimmed with lace and a small black lace cap. She stood with her hands crossed. I was astonished at her appearance for she looked exactly like a housekeeper in a great English house.

“Did you wish to speak to me, sir?”

She was an Englishwoman and in those few words I surely recognized the trace of a cockney accent.

“I wanted to thank you for the hot-water bottle,” I replied in some confusion.

“I saw by the visitors’ book that you were English, sir, and I always send up a ’ot-water bottle to English gentlemen.”

“Believe me, it was very welcome.”

“I was for many years in the service of the late Lord Ormskirk, sir. He always used to travel with a ’ot-water bottle. Is there anything else, sir?” “Not at the moment, thank you.”

She gave me a polite little nod and withdrew. I wondered how on earth it came about that a funny old Englishwoman like that should be the landlady of a hotel in Asia Minor. It was not easy to make her acquaintance, for she knew her place, as she would herself have put it, and she kept me at a distance. It was not for nothing that she had been in service in a noble English family. But I was persistent and I induced her at last to ask me to have a cup of tea in her own little parlour. I learnt that she had been lady’s maid to a certain Lady Orms-kirk, and Signor Niccolini (for she never alluded to her deceased husband in any other way) had been his lordship’s chef. Signor Niccolini was a very handsome man and for some years there had been an “understanding” between them. When they had both saved a certain amount of money they were married, retired from service, and looked about for a hotel. They had bought this one on an advertisement because Signor Niccolini thought he would like to see something of the world. That was nearly thirty years ago and Signor Niccolini had been dead for fifteen. His widow had not once been back to England. I asked her if she was never homesick.

“I don’t say as I wouldn’t like to go back on a visit, though I expect I’d find many changes. But my family didn’t like the idea of me marrying a foreigner and I ’aven’t spoken to them since. Of course there are many things here that are not the same as what they ’ave at ’ome, but it’s surprising what you get used to. I see a lot of life. I don’t know as I should care to live the ’umdrum life they do in a place like London.”

I smiled. For what she said was strangely incongruous with her manner. She was a pattern of decorum. It was extraordinary that she could have lived for thirty years in this wild, and almost barbaric, country without its having touched her. Though I knew no Turkish and she spoke it with ease I was convinced that she spoke it most incorrectly and with a cockney accent. I suppose she had remained the precise, prim English lady’s maid, knowing her place, through all these vicissitudes because she had no faculty of surprise. She took everything that came as a matter of course. She looked upon everyone who wasn’t English as a foreigner and therefore as someone, almost imbecile, for whom allowances must be made. She ruled her staff despotically—for did she not know how an upper servant in a great house should exercise his authority over the under servants?—and everything about the hotel was clean and neat.

“I do my best,” she said, when I congratulated her on this, standing, as always when she spoke to me, with her hands respectfully crossed. “Of course one can’t expect foreigners to ’ave the same ideas as we ’ave, but as his lordship used to say to me, what we’ve got to do, Parker, he said to me, what we’ve got to do in this life is to make the best of our raw material.”

But she kept her greatest surprise for the eve of my departure.

“I’m glad you’re not going before you’ve seen my two sons, sir.”

“I didn’t know you had any.”

“They’ve been away on business, but they’ve just come back. You’ll be surprised when you’ve seen them. I’ve trained them with me own ’ands so to speak, and when I’m gone they’ll carry on the ’otel between them.”

In a moment two tall, swarthy, strapping young fellows entered the hall. Her eyes lit up with pleasure. They went up to her and took her in their arms and gave her resounding kisses.

“They don’t speak English, sir, but they understand a little, and of course they speak Turkish like natives, and Greek and Italian.”

I shook hands with the pair and then Signora Niccolini said something to them and they went away.

“They’re handsome fellows, signora,” I said. “You must be very proud of them.”

“I am, sir, and they’re good boys, both of them. They’ve never give me a moment’s trouble from the day they was born and they’re the very image of Signor Niccolini.”

“I must say no one would think they had an English mother.”

“I’m not exactly their mother, sir. I’ve just sent them along to say ’ow do you do to ’er.”

I dare say I looked a little confused.

“They’re the sons that Signor Niccolini ’ad by a Greek girl that used to work in the ’otel, and ’aving no children of me own I adopted them."

I sought for some remark to make.

”I ’ope you don’t think there’s any blame attaches to Signor Niccolini,” she said, drawing herself up a little. “I shouldn’t like you to think that, sir.” She folded her hands again and with a mixture of pride, primness and satisfaction added the final word: “Signor Niccolini was a very full-blooded man.”