The Wash Tub

W. Somerset Maugham

POSITANO STANDS on the side of a steep hill, a disarray of huddled white houses, their tiled roofs washed pale by the suns of a hundred years; but unlike many of these Italian towns perched out of harm’s way on a rocky eminence it does not offer you at one delightful glance all it has to give. It has quaint streets that zigzag up the hill, and battered, painted houses in the baroque style, but very late, in which Neapolitan noblemen led for a season lives of penurious grandeur. It is indeed almost excessively picturesque and in winter its two or three modest hotels are crowded with painters, male and female, who in their different ways acknowledge by their daily labours the emotion it has excited in them. Some take infinite pains to place on canvas every window and every tile their peering eyes can discover and doubtless achieve the satisfaction that rewards honest industry. “At all events it’s sincere,” they say modestly when they show you their work. Some, rugged and dashing, in a fine frenzy attack their canvas with a pallet knife charged with a wad of paint, and they say: “You see, what I was trying to bring out was my personality.” They slightly close their eyes and tentatively murmur: “I think it’s rather me, don’t you?” And there are some who give you highly entertaining arrangements of spheres and cubes and utter sombrely: “That’s how I see it!” These for the most part are strong silent men who waste no words.

But Positano looks full south and the chances are that in summer you will have it to yourself. The hotel is clean and cool and there is a terrace, overhung with vines, where you can sit at night and look at the sea bespangled with dim stars. Down at the Marine, on the quay, is a little tavern where you can dine under an archway off anchovies and ham, macaroni and fresh-caught mullet, and drink cold wine. Once a day the steamer from Naples comes in, bringing the mail, and for a quarter of an hour gives the beach (there is no port and the passengers are landed in small boats) an air of animation.

One August, tiring of Capri where I had been staying, I made up my mind to spend a few days at Positano, so I hired a fishing-boat and rowed over. I stopped on the way in a shady cove to bathe and lunch and sleep, and did not arrive till evening. I strolled up the hill, my two bags following me on the heads of two sturdy women, to the hotel, and was surprised to learn that I was not its only guest. The waiter, whose name was Giuseppe, was an old friend of mine, and at that season he was boots, porter, chambermaid, and cook as well. He told me that an American signore had been staying there for three months.

“Is he a painter or writer or something?” I asked.

“No, Signore, he’s a gentleman.”

Odd, I thought. No foreigners came to Positano at that time of year but German Wandervogel, looking hot and dusty, with satchels on their backs, and they only stayed overnight. I could not imagine anyone wishing to spend three months there; unless of course he were hiding. And since all London had been excited by the flight earlier in the year of an eminent, but dishonest, financier, the amusing thought occurred to me that this mysterious stranger was perhaps he. I knew him slightly and trusted that my sudden arrival would not disconcert him.

“You’ll see the Signore at the Marina,” said Giuseppe, as I was setting out to go down again. “He always dines there.”

He was certainly not there when I arrived. I asked what there was for dinner and drank an americano, which is by no means a bad substitute for a cocktail. In a few minutes, however, a man walked in who could be no other than my fellow-guest at the hotel and I had a moment’s disappointment when I saw that it was not the absconding financier. A tall, elderly man, bronzed after his summer on the Mediterranean, with a handsome, thin face. He wore a very neat, even smart, suit of cream-coloured silk and no hat. His grey hair was cut very short, but was still thick. There was ease in his bearing, and elegance. He looked round the half-dozen tables under the archway at which the natives of the place were playing cards or dominoes and his eyes rested on me. They smiled pleasantly. He came up.

“I hear you have just arrived at the hotel. Giuseppe suggested that as he couldn’t come down here to effect an introduction you wouldn’t mind if I introduced myself. Would it bore you to dine with a total stranger?”

“Of course not. Sit down.”

He turned to the maid who was laying a cover for me and in beautiful Italian told her that I would eat with him. He looked at my americano.

“I have got them to stock a little gin and French vermouth for me. Would you allow me to mix you a very dry Martini?”

“Without hesitation.”

“It gives an exotic note to the surroundings which brings out the local colour.”

He certainly made a very good cocktail and with added appetite we ate the ham and anchovies with which our dinner began. My host had a pleasant humour and his fluent conversation was agreeable.

“You must forgive me if I talk too much,” he said presently. “This is the first chance I’ve had to speak English for three months. I don’t suppose you will stay here long and I mean to make the most of it.”

“Three months is a long time to stay at Positano.”

“I’ve hired a boat and I bathe and fish. I read a great deal. I have a good many books here and if there’s anything I can lend you I shall be very glad.”

“I think I have enough reading matter. But I should love to look at what you have. It’s always fun looking at other people’s books.”

He gave me a sharp look and his eyes twinkled.

“It also tells you a good deal about them,” he murmured.

When we finished dinner we went on talking. The stranger was well-read and interested in a diversity of topics. He spoke with so much knowledge of painting that I wondered if he was an art critic or a dealer. But then it appeared that he had been reading Suetonius and I came to the conclusion that he was a college professor. I asked him his name.

“Barnaby,” he answered.

“That’s a name that has recently acquired an amazing celebrity.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Have you never heard of the celebrated Mrs Barnaby? She’s a compatriot of yours.”

“I admit that I’ve seen her name in the papers rather frequently of late. Do you know her?”

“Yes, quite well. She gave the grandest parties all last season and I went to them whenever she asked me. Everyone did. She’s an astounding woman. She came to London to do the season, and, by George, she did it. She just swept everything before her.”

“I understand she’s very rich?”

“Fabulously, I believe, but it’s not that that has made her success. Plenty of American women have money. Mrs Barnaby has got where she has by sheer force of character. She never pretends to be anything but what she is. She’s natural. She’s priceless. You know her history, of course?”

My friend smiled.

“Mrs Barnaby may be a great celebrity in London, but to the best of my belief in America she is almost inconceivably unknown.”

I smiled also, but within me; I could well imagine how shocked this distinguished and cultured man would be by the rollicking humour, the frankness, with its tang of the soil, and the rich and vital experience of the amazing Mrs Barnaby.

“Well, I’ll tell you about her. Her husband appears to be a very rough diamond; he’s a great hulking fellow, she says, who could fell a steer with his fist. He’s known in Arizona as One-Bullet Mike.”

“Good gracious! Why?”

“Well, years ago in the old days he killed two men with a single shot. She says he’s handier with his gun even now than any man West of the Rockies. He’s a miner, but he’s been a cowpuncher, a gun-runner, and God knows what in his day.”

“A thoroughly Western type,” said my professor a trifle acidly, I thought.

“Something of a desperado, I imagine. Mrs Barnaby’s stories about him are a real treat. Of course everyone’s been begging her to let him come over, but she says he’d never leave the wide open spaces. He struck oil a year or two ago and now he’s got all the money in the world. He must be a great character. I’ve heard her keep the whole dinner-table spellbound when she’s talked of the old days when they roughed it together. It gives you quite a thrill when you see this grey-haired woman, not at all pretty, but exquisitely dressed, with the most wonderful pearls, and hear her tell how she washed the miners’ clothes and cooked for the camp. Your American women have an adaptability that’s really stupendous. When you see Mrs Barnaby sitting at the head of her table, perfectly at home with princes of the blood, ambassadors, cabinet ministers, and the duke of this and the duke of that, it seems almost incredible that only a few years ago she was cooking the food of seventy miners.”

“Can she read or write?”

“I suppose her invitations are written by her secretary, but she’s by no means an ignorant woman. She told me she used to make a point of reading for an hour every night after the fellows in camp had gone to bed.”

“Remarkable!”

“On the other hand One-Bullet Mike only learnt to write his name when he suddenly found himself under the necessity of signing cheques.”

We walked up the hill to our hotel and before separating for the night arranged to take our luncheon with us next day and row over to a cove that my friend had discovered. We spent a charming day bathing, reading, eating, sleeping, and talking, and we dined together in the evening. The following morning, after breakfast on the terrace, I reminded Barnaby of his promise to show me his books.

“Come right along.”

I accompanied him to his bedroom, where Giuseppe, the waiter, was making his bed. The first thing I caught sight of was a photograph in a gorgeous frame of the celebrated Mrs Barnaby. My friend caught sight of it too and suddenly turned pale with anger.

“You fool, Giuseppe. Why have you taken that photograph out of my wardrobe? Why the devil did you think I put it away?”

“I didn’t know, Signore. That’s why I put it back on the Signore’s table. I thought he liked to see the portrait of his signora.”

I was staggered.

“Is my Mrs Barnaby your wife?” I cried.

“She is.”

“Good Lord, are you One-Bullet Mike?”

“Do I look it?”

I began to laugh.

“I’m bound to say you don’t.”

I glanced at his hands. He smiled grimly and held them out.

“No, sir. I have never felled a steer with my naked fist.”

For a moment we stared at one another in silence.

“She’ll never forgive me,” he moaned. “She wanted me to take a false name, and when I wouldn’t she was quite vexed with me. She said it wasn’t safe. I said it was bad enough to hide myself in Positano for three months, but I’d be damned if I’d use any other name than my own.” He hesitated. “I throw myself on your mercy. I can do nothing but trust to your generosity not to disclose a secret that you have discovered by the most unlikely chance.”

“I will be as silent as the grave, but honestly I don’t understand. What does it all mean?”

“I am a doctor by profession and for the last thirty years my wife and I have lived in Pennsylvania. I don’t know if I have struck you as a roughneck, but I venture to say that Mrs Barnaby is one of the most cultivated women I have ever known. Then a cousin of hers died and left her a very large fortune. There’s no mistake about that. My wife is a very, very rich woman. She has always read a great deal of English fiction and her one desire was to have a London season and entertain and do all the grand things she had read about in books. It was her money and although the prospect did not particularly tempt me, I was very glad that she should gratify her wish. We sailed last April. The young Duke and Duchess of Hereford happened to be on board.”

“I know. It was they who first launched Mrs Barnaby. They were crazy about her. They’ve boomed her like an army of press-agents.”

“I was ill when we sailed, I had a carbuncle which confined me to my stateroom, and Mrs Barnaby was left to look after herself. Her deck-chair happened to be next the duchess’s, and from a remark she overheard it occurred to her that the English aristocracy were not so wrapped up in our social leaders as one might have expected. My wife is a quick little woman and she remarked to me that if you had an ancestor who signed Magna Carta perhaps you were not excessively impressed because the grandfather of one of your acquaintances sold skunks and the grandfather of another ran ferryboats. My wife has a very keen sense of humour. Getting into conversation with the duchess, she told her a little Western anecdote, and to make it more interesting told it as having happened to herself. Its success was immediate. The duchess begged for another and my wife ventured a little further. Twenty-four hours later she had the duke and duchess eating out of her hand. She used to come down to my stateroom at intervals and tell me of her progress. In the innocence of my heart, I was tickled to death and since I had nothing else to do, I sent to the library for the works of Bret Harte and primed her with effective touches.”

I slapped my forehead.

“We said she was as good as Bret Harte,” I cried.

“I had a grand time thinking of the consternation of my wife’s friends when at the end of the voyage I appeared and we told them the truth. But I reckoned without my wife. The day before we reached Southampton Mrs Barnaby told me that the Herefords were arranging parties for her. The duchess was crazy to introduce her to all sorts of wonderful people. It was a chance in a thousand; but of course I should spoil everything, she admitted that she had been forced by the course of events to represent me as very different from what I was. I did not know that she had already transformed me into One-Bullet Mike, but I had a shrewd suspicion that she had forgotten to mention that I was on board. Well, to make a long story short, she asked me to go to Paris for a week or two till she had consolidated her position. I didn’t mind that. I was much more inclined to do a little work at the Sorbonne than to go to parties in Mayfair, and so leaving her to go on to Southampton, I got off at Cherbourg. But when I had been in Paris ten days she flew over to see me. She told me that her success had exceeded her wildest dreams: it was ten times more wonderful than any of the novels; but my appearance would ruin it all. Very well, I said, I would stay in Paris. She didn’t like the idea of that; she said she’d never have a moment’s peace so long as I was so near and I might run across someone who knew me. I suggested Vienna or Rome. They wouldn’t do either, and at last I came here and here have I been hiding like a criminal for three interminable months.”

“Do you mean to say you never killed the two gamblers, shooting one with your right hand and the other with your left?”

“Sir, I have never fired a pistol in my life.”

“And what about the attack on your log-cabin by the Mexican bandits when your wife loaded your guns for you and you stood the siege for three days till the Federal troops rescued you?”

Mr Barnaby smiled grimly.

“I never heard that one. Isn’t it a trifle crude?”

“Crude! It was as good as any Wild West picture.”

“If I may venture a guess, that is where my wife in all probability got the idea.”

“But the wash-tub. Washing the miners’ clothes and all that. You don’t know how she made us roar with that story. Why, she swam into London Society in her wash-tub.”

I began to laugh.

“She’s made the most gorgeous fools of us all,” I said.

“She’s made a pretty considerable fool of me, I would have you observe,” remarked Mr Barnaby.

“She’s a marvellous woman and you’re right to be proud of her. I always said she was priceless. She realized the passion for romance that beats in every British heart and she’s given us exactly what we wanted. I wouldn’t betray her for worlds.”

“It’s all very fine for you, sir. London may have gained a wonderful hostess, but I’m beginning to think that I have lost a perfectly good wife.”

“The only place for One-Bullet Mike is the great open West. My dear Mr Barnaby, there is only one course open to you now. You must continue to disappear.”

“I’m very much obliged to you.”

I thought he replied with a good deal of acidity.