Appointment in Samarra

O'HARA

APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA

BY JOHN O'HARA

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR

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APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA

DEATH SPEAKS

THERE WAS a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

to

F. P. A.

FOREWORD

BY JOHN O'HARA

THIS NOVEL was written on a new portable typewriter with an all-black ribbon during September, October, November, December, 1933, and January, February, and March, 1934. Except for three weeks when I was working as editor of the ship's paper on a Caribbean cruise, the writing was done in a small room at the Pickwick Arms Hotel, East Fifty-first Street, New York City. I did not make carbon copies, and only the single typescript exists. The typescript is owned by a friend who has left it to the Yale library.

After I had written the first 25,000 words I submitted the manuscript (a word which I prefer; it's a more graceful word, and after all the hand is used in typing) to Alfred Harcourt, of Harcourt, Brace & Company, and he asked me only one question: "Young man, do you know where you're going?" (Meaning did I know how the novel was going to end.) I said I did, and he thereupon subsidized me at $50 a week until the novel was finished.

The subsidy was just about right. I had recently been divorced and had no alimony to pay, and I was on the wagon. I was able to live decently; I got asked out fairly often, and indeed every Thursday I would put on my dancing pumps and take a lady to the Algonquin Supper Club. (The lady later crucified me in a novel, but she so thoroughly misunderstood me that only a few mutual friends recognized the caricature.) The point I am making here is that this novel was not written in a garret, on crusts of bread and Chianti. I went through the flea-bag phase before I wrote the novel and, to a certain extent, later, but not

During. When I started the writing I was twenty-eight years old and a reasonably happy man. The divorcing was about as painless as those things can ever be, and my former wife and I remained on amicable terms.

The whole novel was written at night. That was simply a matter of conditioning. Beginning in 1924, when I first went into the newspaper business, I had had a lot of night assignments, which I wrote, whenever possible, at night. I love a newspaper office at night, and the later the better. (Although I never worked the lobster trick as such.) Consequently, I followed this schedule in writing this novel: I would sit around saloons until midnight or so, then go to my hotel room and write until I got a warning pain in my back. Sometimes that would be in two or three hours, sometimes I would not have to quit before eight A.M. But I learned never to write after the warning pain. The places where I have ex-ed out lines in the original manuscript were a result of trying to force the writing when I was tired.

I would quit and go to bed and get ten hours' sleep, then have a big breakfast, go to a movie, or pursue my social activities. I usually worked every night but Thursday and Sunday.

I am putting this down because it answers the kind of questions young writers always ask, and because I like to read this kind of stuff myself.

The history of the creation of this novel is simple but not, I believe, typical. I had intended to write four long stories with nothing in common but the time and the locale, then bring the principal characters together in a final, fifth story. But after I had done some work that way I said to myself: "O'Hara, you're cheating. If you're going to write a novel, write a novel." So I gave up for a couple of months and started all over again.

How much of this novel is true? It's all true, a rather pompous remark that needs extending. It's all true, for example, in this sense: there is a minor incident of a girl climbing a flagpole at a

country club. At the time I wrote that it was my invention, but after the book was published I learned that a girl had climbed the flagpole at a country club in North Carolina, and another girl had climbed the flagpole at a country club in Ohio. So Dayton people and Charlotte people thought I was writing under a phony name and was a former resident of Dayton and Charlotte. Well, in 1933 I had never been to Charlotte, and, believe me, when I was in Dayton in 1927 I wasn't seeing any of the country club crowd. The fact is I wasn't eating so good.

It's all true in that several names I carefully made up were not only real names, which happens to authors all the time, but in one case the name of an in-law was the same *and* the in-law was a member of the same Greek-letter fraternity I gave him.

But what I really mean when I say it's all true is that the psychological patterns were real. Just as in several other novels of mine (notably *A Rage to Live*) the quick reader thought he had identified my characters from real life, and he always guessed wrong. Nobody ever guessed Julian English right. The quick readers thought they knew because of superficial resemblances between Julian English and some living men (me included), such as financial and social backgrounds, drinking habits, clothes. The truth is that the basic Julian English was from the wrong side of the tracks and never wore a buttoned-down collar in his tragic life. Under cumulative and finally unbearable pressure he killed himself. That's all I'll say about that.

A word about the title. One of my social activities was to have tea, literally tea, several afternoons a week with Dorothy Parker at her flat a few blocks from my hotel. I had written about 50,000 words of this novel, which I was calling *The Infernal Grove*, and one day Mrs. Parker handed me a copy of the play *Sheppey* by W. Somerset Maugham, with the book open at the Samarra legend. I read the thing and said: "There's the title for my book."

"Where?" said Mrs. Parker.

" 'Appointment in Samarra,' " I said.

"Oh, I don't think so, Mr. O'Hara. Do you?"

Dorothy didn't like the title, Alfred Harcourt didn't like the title, his editors didn't like it, nobody liked it but me. But I bulled it through. I tell this to make it clear that the novel is not based on the Samarra legend, and Maugham would be the first to tell you that he didn't invent the legend. It's thousands of years old; Maugham happened to put it gracefully, and his way of putting it fitted nicely into the inevitability of Julian English's death.

In the matter of influences, here they are: Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Galsworthy, Tarkington, Owen Johnson, but chiefly Fitzgerald and Lewis. If Hemingway influenced me the influence is not apparent to me, and I *can* see countless instances of the effect of my reading Fitzgerald and Lewis. (I am speaking now of the novel: my short stories, the early ones, did owe something to Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, and Lardner, until, as Wolcott Gibbs has pointed out, I got going on my own. What the stories owed Hemingway was form; what they owed Mrs. Parker was point of view, and what they owed Lardner was my discovery from him that if you wrote down speech as it is spoken truly, you produce true characters, and the opposite is also true: if your characters don't talk like people they aren't good characters. It's a point, or rather two points, that most critics do not appreciate when they speak so airily of the Good Ear, the Rhythms of American Speech. Sometimes I almost feel that I ought to apologize for having the ability to write good dialog, and yet it's the attribute most lacking in American writers and almost totally lacking in the British.)

This novel, first published in August, 1934, became a best-seller right away. It was not, I am compelled to report, the overwhelming critical success a lot of people would like to remember

it as. It got some very bad notices indeed, some of them by reviewers who later changed their minds—and forgot the original reviews. Hemingway praised the book, Lewis gave it and me hell, and Fitzgerald's first judgment was yes-yes-but-also-no. My opinion, for what that's worth, is that it ties for second among my novels, and that's all I'll say about *that*.

The novel did not get the Pulitzer (or any other) Prize or get me into any of the learned societies, but now after eighteen years it is appearing in this edition.

I am pleased that the novel is now in this edition.

Princeton, New Jersey, 1952

APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA

1

Our story opens in the mind of Luther L. (L for LeRoy) Fliegler, who is lying in his bed, not thinking of anything, but just aware of sounds, conscious of his own breathing, and sensitive to his own heartbeats. Lying beside him is his wife, lying on her right side and enjoying her sleep. She has earned her sleep, for it is Christmas morning, strictly speaking, and all the day before she has worked like a dog, cleaning the turkey and baking things, and, until a few hours ago, trimming the tree. The awful proximity of his heartbeats makes Luther Fliegler begin to want his wife a little, but Irma can say no when she is tired. It is too much trouble, she says when she is tired, and she won't take any chances. Three children is enough; three children in ten years. So Luther Fliegler does not reach out for her. It is Christmas morning, and he will do her the favor of letting her enjoy her sleep; a favor which she will never know he did for her. And it is a favor, all right, because Irma likes Christmas too, and on this one morning she might not mind the trouble, might be willing to take a chance. Luther Fliegler more actively stifled the little temptation and thought the hell with it, and then turned and put his hands around his

wife's waist and caressed the little rubber tire of flesh across her diaphragm. She began to stir and then she opened her eyes and said: "My God, Lute, what are you doing?"

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Don't, will you please?" she said, but she smiled happily and put her arms around his big back. "God, you're crazy," she said. "Oh, but I love you." And for a little while Gibbsville knew no happier people than Luther Fliegler and his wife, Irma. Then Luther went to sleep, and Irma got up and then came back to the bedroom, stopping to look out the window before she got into bed again.

Lantenengo Street had a sort of cottony silence to it. The snow was piled high in the gutters, and the street was open only to the width of two cars. It was too dark for the street to look cottony, and there was an illusion even about the silence. Irma thought she could yell her loudest and not be heard, so puffily silent did it look, but she also knew that if she wanted to (which she didn't) she could carry on a conversation with Mrs. Bromberg across the way, without either of them raising her voice. Irma chided herself for thinking this way about Mrs. Bromberg on Christmas morning, but immediately she defended herself: Jews do not observe Christmas, except to make more money out of Christians, so you do not have to treat Jews any different on Christmas than on any other day of the year. Besides, having the Brombergs on Lantenengo Street hurt real estate values. Everybody said so. The Brombergs, Lute had it on good authority, had paid thirty thousand for the Price property, which was twelve thousand five

hundred more than Will Price had been asking; but if the Brombergs wanted to live on Lantenengo Street, they could pay for it. Irma wondered if it was true that Sylvia Bromberg's sister and brother-in-law were dickering for the McAdams property next door. She wouldn't be surprised. Pretty soon there would be a whole colony of Jews in the neighborhood, and the Fliegler children and all the other nice children in the neighborhood would grow up with Jewish accents.

Irma Fliegler had hated Sylvia Bromberg since the summer before, when Sylvia was having a baby and screamed all through a summer evening. She could have gone to the Catholic hospital; she knew she was having a baby, and it was awful to have those screams and have to make up stories to tell the nice children why Mrs. Bromberg was screaming. It was disgusting.

Irma turned away from the window and went back to bed, praying that she would not get caught, and hating the Brombergs for moving into the neighborhood. Lute was sleeping peacefully and Irma was glad of the warmth of his big body and the heavy smell of him. She reached over and rubbed her fingers across his shoulder, where there were four navel-like scars, shrapnel scars. Lute belonged on Lantenengo Street, and she as his wife belonged on Lantenengo Street. And not only as his wife. Her family had been in Gibbsville a lot longer than the great majority of the people who lived on Lantenengo Street. She was a Doane, and Grandfather Doane had been a drummer boy in the Mexican War and had a Congres-

sional Medal of Honor from the Civil War. Grandfather Doane had been a member of the School Board for close to thirty years, before he died, and he was the only man in this part of the State who had the Congressional Medal of Honor. Lute had the French Croix de Guerre with palm for something he said he did when he was drunk, and there were a couple of men who got Distinguished Service Crosses and Distinguished Service Medals during the War, but Grandfather Doane had the only Congressional Medal of Honor. Irma still thought she was entitled to the medal, because she had been Grandfather Doane's favorite; everyone knew that. But her brother Willard and his wife, they got it because Willard was carrying on the name. Well, they could have it. It was Christmas, and Irma did not begrudge it to them as long as they took care of it and appreciated it.

Irma lay there, fully awake, and heard a sound: cack, thock, cack, thock, cack, thock. A car with a loose cross-chain banging against the fender, coming slowly up or down Lantenengo Street, she could not make out which. Then it came a little faster and the sound changed to cack, cack, cack, cack-cack-cack-cack. It passed her house and she could tell it was an open car, because she heard the flapping of the side curtains. It probably was a company car, a Dodge. Probably an accident at one of the mines and one of the bosses was being called out in the middle of the night, the night before Christmas, to take charge of the accident. Awful. She was glad Lute did not work for the Coal & Iron Company. You had to be a college graduate, Penn

State or Lehigh, which Lute was not, to get any kind of a decent job with the Coal & Iron, and when you did get a job you had to wait for someone to die before you got a decent promotion. And called out at all hours of the day and night, like a doctor, when the pumps didn't work or something else happened. And even your ordinary work on the engineering corps, you came home dirty, looking like an ordinary miner in short rubber boots and cap and lunch can. A college graduate, and you had to undress in the cellar when you came home. Lute was right: he figured if you sell two Cadillacs a month, you make expenses, and anything over that is so much gravy, and meanwhile you look like a decent human being and you're not taking chances of being crushed to death under a fall of top rock, or blown to hell in an explosion of black damp. Inside the mines was no place for a married man, Lute always said; not if he gave a damn about his wife and children.

And Lute was a real family man. Irma shifted in bed until her back was against Lute's back. She held her hand in back of her, gently clasping Lute's forearm. Next year, according to Hoover, things would be much better all around, and they would be able to do a lot of things they had planned to do, but had had to postpone because of this slump. Irma heard the sound of another loose cross-chain, fast when she first heard it, and then slow and finally stopping. The car was getting a new start, in low gear. Irma recognized it: Dr. Newton's Buick coach. Newton, the dentist, and his wife Lillian who had the house two doors below. They would be getting home from the