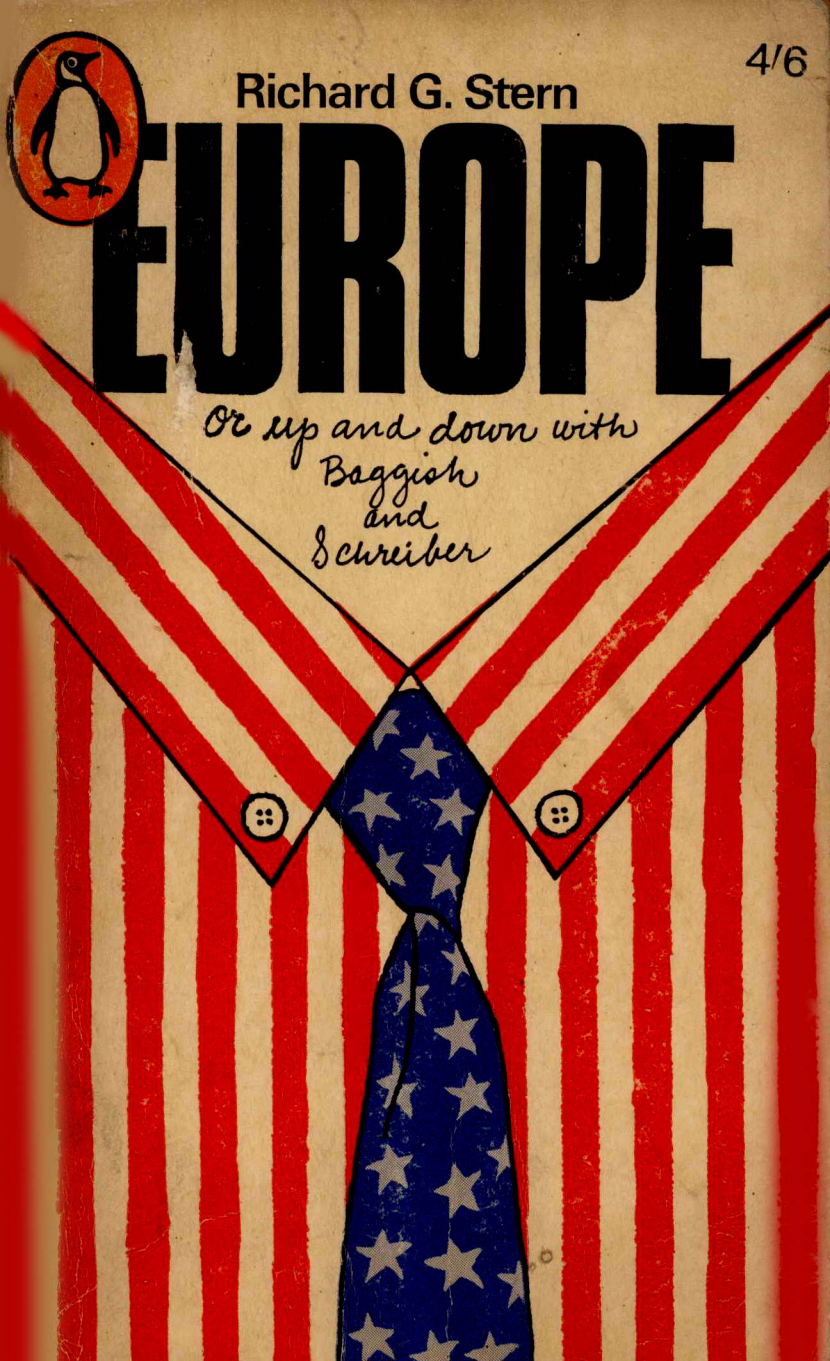
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Richard G. Stern
EUROPE
Or up and down with
Baggish
and
Schreiber

Penguin Book 2478

Europe or Up and Down
with Baggish and Schreiber

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Europe or Up and Down with Baggish and Schreiber

Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Pty Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia

First published in the U.S.A. 1961
Published in Great Britain by
MacGibbon and Kee 1962
Published in Penguin Books 1966

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks
Set in Linotype Pilgrim

For Gay

'Every man of character has a typical
experience which recurs over and over again.'
Nietzsche

Part One

Chapter One

I

Valerie Schreiber ran across the gravel road yelling 'Bucci, Bucci, get over here.' One of the carpenters, sitting on the second floor skeleton of the Peniman house, pointed a hammer at a pile of leaves, where, half-buried, a spine of orange fur that was Bucceroni, the old cat, glistened and shook. Valerie yanked it up and hurled it across the road. 'I'm going to feed you to the crows, you rat you.'

Bucceroni hauled himself off to the house, and there, on the porch, he lapped up a dish of cat meat while his mistress studied the Peniman house and decided that she would begin the evening hostilities by introducing the subject of its progress. It was one of those rare, really valuable subjects which never failed to arouse her mother, to attack, that is, for her mother, like herself, was perpetually aroused by the fat slob who had one day invaded their lives in his captain's uniform, and then, doffing it, had played that other oh-so-cute game of being her father. The invasion had taken place one week before her seventh birthday six years ago, but it wasn't until the actual day of the party that the old war hero exhibited his pure, true self by cavorting around the house with her friends, playing Pin-the-Tail, Blind-Man's-Buff and six or seven other hot-shot games, not only as if he relished them, but as if nobody else could without him. As if the whole world had waited for him to get back from the war before it could continue living. Between him and his greaseball law partner who had tried to sneak his way into her affections by giving her this lousy cat – whom he had prodigally endowed with his own clean-cut name – her life was one scarcely interrupted hell. That legal eagle was chiefly distinguished by smoking, *gumming*, the fattest, foulest cigars in Stamford, Connecticut, and by his sweet habit of pinching her friends, her grown-up friends, on the cheek and announcing in

the reassuring tones, which only liars use, that he was a great friend of their father's. The day she had overheard him called a shyster as she tried on a polo coat down in Best's was one of the days in her life she would not forget nor forgive: that her own father should be the partner of a law-skirting shyster was the equivalent of his having spent fifteen years in prison for armed robbery. Worse, for prison wasn't a part of the discussable world.

When the Mercury wormed up the driveway, and her father called 'Hello' from the wheel, she waved at him.

'How was school, Valerie?' he asked.

'Was none. Teachers' conferences.' She went to the stair well and called up, 'Dad's home, Mother.'

'I'll be right down,' said Florence, but she didn't move from the bed, only turned the pillow over for the fiftieth time in two hours to get some coolness from the other side. This time her arms wrapped it around her ears as if she were squashing a beetle. She listened for the noises her husband made in the kitchen as he drew out ice trays, cracked the ice, and spooned it into the Old-Fashioned glasses, probably before he'd dissolved the sugar and bitters in them. Or he'd forget the bitters. His coat would be off, his collar dirtier than a miner's, and his tie would sport a gob of thousand-island dressing above his tie-pin; as if any civilized man under sixty wore one of those any more. Most and worst of all she saw his fatness, saw, felt, smelled it so sharply that she could detach it from his form and measure the vices it accumulated about itself. Every day he seemed fatter to her; it was as if each pound were trying to bury whatever little they had had together. He ate like a beast, his head sinking into the plates, grunting and sighing like a lover, befouling himself with the stickiest, ugliest components of every dish. He saw nothing that couldn't be crammed into his throat, ate without interrupting to pass a spice or answer a question, the veins romping wickedly in his temples. She held the pillow to drive out all his noises, real and imagined, and then, groaning, slid out of bed into her pumps, made up, and came down to the porch where her Old-Fashioned sat on the tray next to the ring his glass had made.

'Couldn't wait?' she asked, staring at the glass in his hand.

'Good evening,' said Schreiber, handing her the tray and taking a first sip of his own drink. 'Anything new? I see there's no mail of interest.'

'Your aunts are not remarkable letter writers. Prompt but unremarkable.'

'Gretta's the worst. Cheers.'

'What about?' said Florence; then, seeing Valerie drinking Coca-Cola from the bottle she added, as if still speaking to her husband, 'How many times do you have to be told not to drink from a bottle?'

'That's right, Valerie,' said Schreiber, and received a look of filial hatred that made him tremble.

'Did you bring the light bulbs?' asked Florence.

'Sorry, forgot.'

'No wonder you have such a distinguished practice.'

After a while he asked, 'We going to Mother's?'

'It's Wednesday, I believe.'

'You're in a particularly jovial mood, *ce soir*.'

'You always bring out the best in me, Max.'

After a moment he said, 'You ready for another?'

'Thanks.'

In the kitchen, Valerie was drinking another bottle of Coca-Cola behind the ice box. 'You'll make a good spy, Vallie,' he said.

'Mother hates to wash glasses anyway.'

'And a statesman.'

'Why don't you talk so people can understand?' she said, and put the bottle in a paper carton under the sink.

'I'm sorry. It's necessary to talk this way when you're a lawyer.'

'I know. Mr Bucceroni.'

'Don't you think he's always understandable?' said Schreiber quietly, and he cracked ice cubes with the hard rubber spoon Valerie had given him for his last birthday.

They went out to the porch and sat on the red davenport facing the gravel road.

'They finished the second storey today,' said Valerie.

'There'll probably be six other houses up before those trees get put in,' said Florence.

'They've been ordered for two weeks,' he said. 'As it is, we're pretty well screened from them,' and he looked out as if unable to see the white crossbeams of the skeleton.

'Not quite as well as we would be if they didn't own the lot.'

'Please,' he said.

'I've decided to ask Mother to advance us the money to buy one hundred feet on both sides of us.'

'Why not?' he said. 'She might as well protect her investment.'

'You sound as if we pay her rent.'

'We pay through the nose. Tonight for instance.'

'I wish she'd hear you just occasionally. Except she'd kill herself for being taken in.'

'We'd better get dressed if we're going to go,' said Schreiber and he went upstairs leaving behind a pool of detestation which for mother and daughter covered over the issue of the Coca-Cola bottle.

2

They started for Mrs Carroway's house at seven. It was a twenty-five-minute drive along Tokeneke Road to the Post Road, over to the Parkway and Long Ridge Road and finally through a blazing green wood, twelve acres of which belonged to the Carroway house.

It was the house Schreiber loved better than any other, the single by-product of his marriage he would have been sorry to lose. The oldest portion dated from the 1750s and comprised a stone cellar, wine room, and the central part of the first floor. Mr Carroway's grandfather had added a wing and second storey, and he himself had added another wing just after his marriage. This was the New England version of a Queen Anne house, white, rambling but intact, surrounded by wide lawns and gardens, built into and over a long slope which led to a trout stream a half a mile into the woods. Fifty yards from the house was a paddle-tennis court equipped with lights for the night games no-one had played there since Florence's brother had

been killed in the Pacific War. The house of a New England family which had been prosperous and nearly distinguished for two hundred years, it was filled with mementoes of prosperity and distinction, sea chests, models of three-masters, old desks, family portraits, maps. Nonetheless, the house was brightly, rigidly modern. Its relics were distributed in nooks and passageways while the rooms strutted in the blues and greens of thick chairs and sleek lounges, silver and silk.

Mrs Carroway governed it now as she never had in her husband's lifetime. Her father had been a Professor of Modern Languages at Amherst, and she, one of five daughters and three sons. She had married well, better than any of her sisters but the one who had married a Vanderbilt, yet her husband had been a tyrant, a man who nipped at her for thirty years to duplicate the grace of his father's home, as he himself endeavoured to maintain its self-centred stability. After his death, just before that of her son, she had made a clumsy attempt to remarry, but again chose the wrong man, a luxuriating bachelor who had temporarily disguised his sole intention, which was to suck perpetually at the winey comforts of the Carroways, and who lit out at the first hint of marriage. From then on, Mrs Carroway had made her life vivid by indulging a talent for eccentricity. Upon the stupid placidity of her nature, she imposed minor but absorbing erraticisms of dress, opinion, and action. At first, these had been displayed only before her servants as a kind of private theatrical, but in the past year she had begun to lose control of the flamboyance, until it led to isolation from nearly all her friends and relatives but the Schreibers.

Since he had returned from the Army in '45, Schreiber had become an outlet for her self-indulgence. She'd begun to think and speak of him as her son and of Florence as a pushy alien who had married above herself into the Carroway family. The aberration led to incorporating herself in Schreiber's history. If he told an anecdote about his home in Pennsylvania, she would butt in with, 'You were such an intrepid boy for Hazleton. I remember how other boys used to envy the way you climbed trees.' Schreiber thought of such fantasies as part of his mother-in-law's twitting of Florence, but Florence feared them and

hated what she rightly suspected was their origin: her mother's wish to disown her whole cringing past.

'Put her there, partner,' said Mrs Carroway, holding her fingers out to Valerie. Over a gorgeous cocktail dress, she wore a red apron embroidered with silhouettes of Mickey Mouse and Pluto. 'You're looking chipper, Max dear. Good evening, Florence. It's not too chilly to have cocktails on the porch, is it? Vallie, tell Joseph he can bring the martinis out here, will you please, dear? Bella has your dinner ready. Your little gut must be starved.'

Valerie spent all her time at her grandmother's in the kitchen gossiping with the Negro couple who had served the Carroways for almost forty years. (It had been the first place on the list the agency gave them, and they had never looked for another, although they well knew that they could command two or even three times their present salary by simply going to an agency, or, even more simply, by asking Mrs Carroway for more money. They had held, however, to an older conception of service which demanded much more than money. In this view, money was a substitute for other obligations, a means of evasion.) Bella and Joseph preserved the more formal manners of Mr Carroway, and their ambition was to restore Mrs Carroway to the sanity of those manners; indeed, their contracted brows were often enough to pull her out of an absurdity, and into the quiet terror of her old dependence.

Their unexamined love for Florence and Valerie roused a similar, if greedier, affection in the mother and daughter: Joseph and Bella were the richest tokens of their family arrogance, more important than the house and its contents, because Florence and Valerie were more concerned with present commands than with trophies of old commanders. For hours, Valerie would sit in the pantry alcove and cry out 'Bella!' at the baked surprises on the table, and the three of them would talk about Stamford scandals as if neither age nor condition separated them.

The talk on the porch was more constrained. It began after Joseph passed the martinis, drinks for which he had been praised in a twenty-year-old ritual. 'As good as ever, Joseph', and, 'How does the rest of the world get on without them,

Joseph?' the Schreibers said, and Mrs Carroway, with nervous displeasure, watched Joseph smile at the comforting familiarity of the praise.

'I'm afraid I'm angry with you, Max,' she said this evening after Joseph left. She lapped up the olive in her glass, gnawed off the meat and spat the pip back into the liquid, her eyes glistening with this acquisition to her vulgar trove. 'You've not done such a thing to me before.'

Schreiber contrived a questioning look, although he found it difficult to break through the gentle alcoholic contemplation which was already taking control of his evening.

'It's your distinguished partner,' said Mrs Carroway, and made a grimace which glinted in her white face like still whiter bone. 'Your Bucceroni. The first time he's crossed my path directly.'

The gross, if classical apparition of his senior partner dispelled the haze. 'That's surprising. What is it?'

'A small thing to him, perhaps, but not to me. He's representing – and for all I know, you're representing – that family who moved in at the back of the Chadwicks.'

'The Chadwicks?' said Florence.

'Dee and Jarvis. Max knows them,' said Mrs Carroway.

Florence, who had known them all her life, said, 'I didn't know the Longman place was sold.' Her mother had gone on. 'A fearsome clan from Minnesota or some place who took the Longman house on High Ridge Road and proceeded to do everything in this world to drive Dee and Jarvis out. Parties for the whole week-end, rabid poodles running around in Dee's garden and God knows what else. Jarvis went over to speak to this fellow about it, and the very next day, a man came round and started putting up a four-foot stone wall in back of the garden and stringing barbed wire on top of it. Dee says it looks like a concentration camp, and every time she goes out there to putter, she expects to see people caught up in the wire, screaming. Jarvis called them up again last week and suggested doing something less drastic, but this Gabrielson man said the wall was the best solution. So Jarvis called Norris Williams and Norris, on a hunch, had a surveyor take a look, and sure enough, in three or four places the wall touches the Chadwicks'

property. They're taking it to court, and Gabrielson has called in Bucceroni. Now, Max, Bucceroni must know that I've known the Chadwicks since I don't know when. I want you to speak to him about it.'

'That's not the way lawyers operate, Mother,' said Schreiber, just trying to clear away the debris of talk so that he could fade back into haze. 'A case is a case.'

'A hundred-dollar case!'

Schreiber filled his glass from the shaker. 'It's funny, you people who've been around here all your lives. You don't know what it's like, starting up in a town. It's pioneering,' he said. 'With axes. The only person Bucceroni knew when he came into Stamford was his uncle, who's a butcher, and some cousins who were labourers, common labourers.' Mrs Carroway, who disliked speeches, slobbered in her glass. 'Like pioneers,' repeated Schreiber.

'And so he takes you in because you're Mother's son-in-law,' said Florence as if touching a grease spot on his coat.

'And because I know a little something about property law acquired at the expense of more sweat and effort than you've ever mustered for anything. And naturally because he thought I might be an entrée.' He sat down, and then threw in, somewhat over-expressively, 'How little he knew.'

'Max,' said Mrs Carroway, with the well-bred woman's kindly condescension to the intoxicated, 'I'm not angry, and I don't ever want you to think that I don't admire you coming out of the army and taking up with this fellow – doing it all your own way. I know how hard a time you had in Rye, and I know how hard you worked, there and here. I've always tried to let you know what I think of independence. But there are limits to indulging independence and this Gabrielson man exceeds them. What would become of the world if people like this had their way? You know they go to Bucceroni because the Chadwicks are friends of every respectable lawyer in Stamford. All I want you to do is speak to him. He's probably a man of good instincts. Harriet Craigie says his wife is lovely; she was head of Civic Music a few years ago. He'll understand the nature of the case.'

Although this was the first time their evening talks had