

# TO THE NORTH

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HARMONDSWORTH MIDDLESEX ENGLAND

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# I

TOWARDS the end of April a breath from the north blew cold down Milan platforms to meet the returning traveller. Uncertain thoughts of home filled the station restaurant where the English sat lunching uneasily, facing the clock. The Anglo-Italian express—Chiasso, Lucerne, Basle and Boulogne—leaves at 2.15 : it is not a *train de luxe*. To the north there were still the plains, the lakes, the gorges of the Ticino, but, as the glass brass-barred doors of the restaurant flashed and swung, that bright circular park outside with its rushing girdle of trams was the last of Italy.

Cecilia Summers, a young widow returning to London, was among the first to board the express. She had neglected to book a place and must be certain of comfort. She dropped her fur coat into a corner seat, watched the porter heave her dressing-case into the rack, sighed, got out again and for a few minutes more paced the platform. By the time she was seated finally, apathy had set in ; when two more women entered she shut her eyes. Getting up steam, the express clanked out through the bleached and echoing Milan suburbs that with washing strung over the streets sustained like an affliction the sunless afternoon glare. . . . As they approached Como, Cecilia and her companions spread wraps and papers over the empty places ; but an English general got in with his wife, creating a stir of annoyance. The general took one long look at Cecilia, then put up *The Times* between them.

At Chiasso they stopped dead, it appeared for ever. Rain fell darkly against the walls of the sheds ; Cecilia began to feel she was in a cattle truck shunted into a siding. English voices rang down the corridor ; Swiss officials stumped up and down the train. She thought how in Umbria the world had visibly hung in light, and a bird sang in the window of a deserted palace : tears



of quick sensibility pricked her eyelids. As the wait prolonged itself and a kind of dull tension became apparent, she sent one wild comprehensive glance round her fellow travellers, as though less happy than cattle, conscious, they were all going to execution.

The St. Gothard, like other catastrophes, becomes unbearable slowly and seems to be never over. For some time they blinked in and out of minor tunnels ; suffocation and boredom came to their climax and lessened ; one was in Switzerland, where dusk fell in sheets of rain. Unwilling, Cecilia could not avert her eyes from all that magnificence in wet cardboard : ravines, profuse torrents, crag, pine and snow-smear'd precipice, chalets upon their brackets of hanging meadow. Feeling a gassy vacancy of the spirit and stomach she booked a place eagerly for the first service of dinner. She had lunched in Milan too early and eaten little. She pulled a novel out of her dressing-case, picked up her fur coat and ran down-train behind the attendant. The general sighed ; he was romantic, it pained him to see a beautiful woman bolt for the dining-car.

In the dining-car it was hot ; the earliest vapours of soup dimmed the windows ; Cecilia unwound her scarf. She watched fellow passengers shoot through the door and stagger unhappily her way between the tables, not knowing where to settle. The train at this point rocks with particular fury. It seemed possible she might remain alone ; this first service, with its suggestion of the immoderate, does not commend itself to the English ; also, Cecilia by spreading out gloves, furs and novel, occupied her own table completely, and had the expression, at once alert and forbidding, of a woman expecting a friend.

She was not, however, unwilling to dine in company. Looking up once more, she met the eyes of a young man who, balancing stockily, paused to survey the car. A gleam of interest and half-recognition, mutually flattering, passed between them. They retracted the glance, glanced again :

the train lurched, the young man shot into the place opposite Cecilia.

Unnerved by the accident, or his precipitancy, she rather severely withdrew her gloves, handbag and novel from his side of the table. The young man touched his tie, glanced at his nails and looked out of the window. Cecilia picked up the menu and studied it; the young man with careful politeness just did not study Cecilia. When the waiter planked down two blue cups her companion looked at the soup; she just heard him sigh. He was in no way pathetic and not remarkably young: about thirty-three. She was to say later she had looked first—and regretted now she had done so—at his Old Harrovian tie: the only tie, for some reason, she ever recognised. He picked up his spoon and she noted his hands: well-kept, not distinguished-looking. By the end of five minutes he had composed himself for Cecilia, from a succession of these half-glances, as being square and stocky, clean shaven, thickish about the neck and jaw, with a capable, slightly-receding forehead, mobile, greedy, intelligent mouth and the impassive bright quick-lidded eyes of an agreeable reptile. Presentable, he might even be found attractive—but not by Cecilia.

The wine-waiter took their two orders, came back and put down the bottles. The train flung itself sideways; the bottles, clashing together, reeled; Cecilia's and his hands flew out to catch them. Their fingers collided; they had to smile.

'Terrible,' said the young man.

She agreed.

With his napkin he polished a hole on the steamy window and looked through. 'Where are we?' he said.

Cecilia, doing the same, said: 'It looks like a lake.'

'Yes, doesn't it: terribly.'

'Don't you like lakes?' said Cecilia, with irrepressible curiosity.

'No,' he said briefly, and lakes disappeared.

'This must be Lucerne.'



‘Do you think so?’ the young man said, impressed, and looked through again. Woolly white mists covered the lake: through rifts in the mist the dark inky water appeared, forbidding: they ran along an embankment. Malevolence sharpened his features; he seemed pleased to catch Switzerland *en déshabille*—some old grudge, perhaps, from a childish holiday. ‘Why,’ thought Cecilia, ‘can I never travel without picking someone up?’ His manner and smile were, however, engaging. She looked sideways; torn darkening mists streamed past her eyes; above, on the toppling rocks where the hotels were still empty showed a few faint lights. It all looked distraught but perpetual, like an after-world. And in an after-world, she might deserve just such a companion: too close, glancing at her—if any shreds of the form still clung to the spirit—without sympathy, with just such a cold material knowingness.

For his part, he considered her broad pretty hands with their pointed fingers and narrow platinum wedding-ring, her smooth throat with the faint *collier de Venus* and gleam of dark pearls inside the unknotted scarf, her shoulders, the not quite unconscious turn-away of her head. She had charming dark eyes, at once sparkling and shadowy, fine nostrils, a pretty impetuous over-expressivemouth. A touch of naïvety in her manner contrasted amusingly with the assurance and finish of her appearance; she was charmingly dressed. One glance at her book—in the austere white covers of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*—made him fear she might turn out pretentious, even a bore. The very thought of an intellectual talk as they writhed through Switzerland over a muggy dinner made him sweat with discomfort and put a finger inside his collar. Looking again, however, he saw that the pages were uncut. He supposed she had borrowed the book from someone she wished to impress. In this he wronged Cecilia, who had chosen the book this morning, to please herself only, in the arcades at Milan.

‘I hope,’ he said, with engaging deference, ‘you weren’t keeping this table for anyone?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Cecilia enquired, returning her eyes from the lake.

‘I said, I hoped you weren’t keeping this table?’

‘Oh no. . . . One could hardly expect to.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I suppose not.’

She found his way of not smiling a shade equivocal.

‘With the train so full,’ she said coldly.

‘Here comes the fish : sole, they say—— Do you know I thought for a moment . . .’

‘What?’ said Cecilia, who could not help smiling.

‘I thought for a moment we’d met.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

She saw no reason why he should be amused. It amused him that a woman with such command of a look—for never (he thought) had he been more clearly invited to dine in company—should keep such an odd little flutter behind her manner. She remarked rather nervously : ‘Last time I came back from Italy someone thought I was a Russian. . . . A Russian,’ she said, and looked sideways into the window—for they now ran through a cutting—where a reflected faint shadow under the cheek bones, with a sparkling petulant vagueness, accounted for the mistake.

‘It would depend,’ he said gravely, ‘what Russians one knew.’

Cecilia complained that she did not care for the fish. The indifferent wine set a pretty flush under her eyes ; though she told herself she did not like him her manner animated and warmed. If she did not like *him*, she loved strangers, strangeness : for the moment he had the whole bloom of that irreplaceable quality. Dim with her ignorance, lit by her fancy, any stranger went straight to her head—she had little heart. She could enjoy in a first glance all the deceptions of intimacy. With one dear exception, she never cared much for anyone she knew well.

His name was Mark Linkwater. From the casualness



with which he had let this appear in their talk, she took him to be a young man of importance, in his own eyes if not in the world's. It would seem likely the world shared his view of himself; he would be far too shrewd to admit what he could not impose. If, therefore, she had not heard of him, the omission must be concealed. She felt round and discovered that he was a barrister. The ground cleared, they went nicely ahead.

As a companion for dinner, she suited him admirably. It is pleasant to be attracted just up to a point; he had asked, so far, no more of women than that they should be, on varying planes, affable. Touchy and difficult in his relations with men, the idea of personal intimacy with a woman was shocking to him. The train fled away from the lakes, up the valley from Brunnen, with a shriek on past Zug to Lucerne through the muffling rain, dashing light on wet rocks and walls, lashing about its passengers as though they were bound to a dragon's tail. With a hand put out now and then to steady glass or bottle, Mr. Linkwater gave Cecilia his view of Rome.

He had come from Rome. 'Oh, Rome?' she exclaimed. 'How lovely!'

He shrugged: 'Too many nice people.'

She was surprised. He reflected on Roman society, but had enjoyed himself. Though not, evidently, a son of the Church, he was on the warmest of terms with it; prelates and colleges flashed through his talk, he spoke with affection of two or three cardinals; she was left with a clear impression that he had lunched at the Vatican. As he talked, antiquity became brittle, Imperial columns and arches like so much canvas. Mark's Rome was late Renaissance, with a touch of the slick mondanity of *Vogue*. The sky above Rome, like the arch of an ornate altar-piece, became dark and flapping with draperies and august conversational figures. Cecilia—whose personal Rome was confined to one mildish Bostonian princess and her circle, who spent innocent days in the Forum displacing always a little hopefully a little more dust with the point

of her parasol, who sighed her way into churches and bought pink ink-tinted freezias at the foot of the Spanish steps—could not but be impressed.

Mr. Linkwater, eyebrows alone expressive in the fleshy mask of his face, talked very fast with a rattling fire of comment. It was dry talk of a certain quality; Cecilia found it amusing. Though no doubt all London would hear this later, she had to be flattered.

He liked talking and was amused by himself, but did not put up this barrage for no other reason. The fact was, he had caught once or twice while he talked a rather strange look from her, gloomy, dreamy, exalted, and feared that given an opening she might begin talking about herself. She might tell him life was difficult, or how terribly things upset her. Married and so communicative: he dreaded to be involved with her.—His fears were groundless, she was only wanting to tell him about Umbria—— More probably she was a widow, for the unhappy decisiveness with which she had ordered her wine bespoke the woman obliged for years to do things for herself and who did not enjoy doing them.

Neither Cecilia nor Mark had nice characters; all the same, this encounter presents them in an unfair light. On a long journey, the heart hangs dull in the shaken body, nerves ache, senses quicken, the brain like a horrified cat leaps clawing from object to object, the earth whisked by at such speed looks ephemeral, trashy: if one is not sad one is bored. Recollect that this was a journey begun after lunch, through a blighted fag-end of Italy, through Switzerland in the rain. At the moment, also, both their personal backgrounds were inauspicious. A quarrel had precipitated Mark's departure from Rome: anger shot red through his present mist of depression. Cecilia, a widow of twenty-nine, was wondering why she had let frail cords of sentiment and predilection draw her back from Italy to the cold island where, in St. John's Wood, the daffodils might not be out. She had spent too much money and got too few letters while she was abroad; she wondered if she were ruined,



if friends had forgotten her. Mistrustful, tentative, uncertain whether to marry again, she was quite happy only in one relationship: with her young sister-in-law, Emmeline.

Mistrust, in fact, underlay the whole of the interlude, which finished with brandy for Mark and a green Chartreuse for Cecilia. Still, they got on well enough, each determined to please while closing the heart against pleasure. They were both left with curiosity, some little piqued self-regard, and promised to meet in London, if not again on the journey: he made certain she was in the telephone-book. Back in her carriage, Cecilia blew out her air-cushion, wrapped her fur coat round her knees and, with a murmured apology, put up her feet by the hip of the general's wife. She could not afford a sleeper. She read for a little, took two aspirins, then nodding, decided that Markie's manner (for Markie was what his friends called him) had been impertinent: she would avoid him to-morrow.

Returning next morning from breakfast Cecilia saw from the corridor Mr. Linkwater humped at the far end of a carriage, on a flying background of battle-fields under new culture, unsuccessfully shaved and looking distinctly cross. Avoiding his eye she passed hurriedly on down the train. At Boulogne the day was windless, the boat slipped from shore to shore like a pat of butter over a hot plate. Markie discovered Cecilia; for some time they paced the deck. Folkestone appeared, the flags on the Leas lifeless, hotels staring out at nothing: England showed a blank face. Nodding inland Markie said: 'Are you staying here long?'

'I have no idea,' said Cecilia.

## II

‘WHAT is the matter, Emmeline?’ said Lady Waters.

Nothing was the matter, but Emmeline found this too difficult to explain, so she looked mildly at Lady Waters out of the corners of her shell-rimmed spectacles, and said nothing.

Lady Waters was quick to detect situations that did not exist. Living comfortably in Rutland Gate with her second husband, Sir Robert, she enlarged her own life into ripples of apprehension on everybody’s behalf. Upon meeting, her very remarkable eyes sought one’s own for those first intimations of crisis she was all tuned up to receive; she entered one’s house on a current that set the furniture bobbing; at Rutland Gate destiny shadowed her tea-table. Her smallest clock struck portentously, her telephone trilled from the heart, her dinner-gong boomed a warning. When she performed introductions, drama’s whole precedent made the encounter momentous. . . . Only Sir Robert, who spent much of his time at his club, remained unaware of this atmosphere.

Lady Waters had had no children by either marriage. Her first had made her Cecilia’s aunt-in-law, her second, Emmeline’s first cousin once removed. Cecilia had met Henry Summers (Emmeline’s brother) for the first time dining at Rutland Gate. One was not a connection of Lady Waters’ for nothing; Cecilia had heard a good deal of Henry and Emmeline Summers, while they had had frequent occasion to smile at the name of their Cousin Robert’s new wife’s hypothetical niece, who was always abroad or had just left London. Then Cecilia and Henry, both bidden to dinner, had met; unconscious, chattering amiably while their relative’s large premonition darkened and spread above them, they became friends, intimates, lovers and quite soon afterwards married. That dangerous marriage was after Georgina Waters’ own heart: when, within less



than a year, Henry died of pneumonia, she had to conceal her relief that, given Henry's nervous make-up and Cecilia's temperament, there had been no time for worse to come of it.

That marriage so brief as hardly to lose its character of an event had transformed Cecilia from a young girl at once vehement and mysterious into a bewildered widow. She did not know where to turn. Incredulity, with which she had entered upon her happiness, remained the note of her grief. Emmeline Summers' suggestion that they should set up a house together had worked out well. At that time both young women had found themselves solitary: Cecilia's mother, never very affectionate, her whole heart given to her two sons killed in the war, had re-married soon after Cecilia met Henry and gone to live in America; Henry and Emmeline Summers had been orphans from childhood, with no relatives nearer, few friends more trusted, than Sir Robert Waters, their father's cousin. They brought themselves up side by side, Henry some years ahead; very much alike, as though the same tree had divided. During the year of her brother's marriage Emmeline, perhaps a little forlorn, had been much abroad; one might say that she and Cecilia had had hardly time to take stock of each other before their eyes met across a grave.

Their views of life and their incomes combined comfortably; they did not ask too much of each other and from one happy point of departure both went their own ways. Emmeline had put some of her capital into a business, in connection with which she left home for most of the day; while many acquaintances and a quick succession of interests soon kept Cecilia once more amused and alert: she went out a good deal. Lady Waters, however, still viewed the arrangement with an unshaken mistrust. Women could not live together, sisters-in-law especially. How much did they speak of Henry, how lively a bond was their loss? While Lady Waters considered that unreserve, in other company than her own, must be debilitating, reticence could only be morbid. Painful expectancy brought

her frequently to their house; as they did not come to her with their troubles she came to them, and was their constant visitor. This they could think of no way to prevent.

They had gone to live in St. John's Wood, that airy uphill neighbourhood where the white and buff-coloured houses, pilastered or gothic, seem to have been built in a grove. A fragrant, faint impropriety, orris-dust of a century, still hangs over part of this neighbourhood; glass passages lead in from high green gates, garden walls are mysterious, laburnums falling between the windows and walls have their own secrets. Acacias whisper at nights round airy, ornate little houses in which pretty women lived singly but were not always alone. In the unreal late moonlight you might hear a ghostly hansom click up the empty road, or see on a pale wall the shadow of an opera cloak. . . . Nowadays things are much tamer: Lady Waters could put up no reasoned objection to St. John's Wood.

Cecilia's and Emmeline's house was in Oudenarde Road, which runs quietly down into Abbey Road, funnel of traffic and buses. It had big windows, arched stairs and wrought-iron steps at the back leading down to a small green garden. Cecilia, hesitant over the agent's order, looking about at the temptingly sunny spaces of floor, had remarked: 'It's a long way from everybody we know . . .' But Emmeline said: 'We never know whom we are going to meet.' From the first glance the house had smiled at them and was their own. So here they had settled.

This afternoon of Cecilia's return, when, unannounced at her own request, Lady Waters swept her furs and draperies through the narrow hall into the drawing-room, Emmeline had been doing the flowers. She did not often do flowers and was uncertain of the effect. Tulips spun and flopped at her in the wide-mouthed vases: how did Cecilia ever make tulips stand up? Lady Waters begged Emmeline to go on with what she was doing, saying she also loved tulips, but presently asked Emmeline why she was so restless.



The simple arrangement of tulips could not account for this pausing and stepping about—Lady Waters had never done flowers. Emmeline wished she had told the maid she was not at home : as she was generally out at this hour it had not occurred to her. It would, however, have taken more than a formula to turn Lady Waters away : if one were out she came in and waited. Unfamiliar afternoon light in the drawing-room and Emmeline's thoughtful solitude had been precious. . . . Emmeline's manners were perfect, but when she was very much bored she seemed to contract physically and took on an air of mild distress.

When Emmeline had nothing to say, or could not trouble to think, she would turn her head sideways, appearing thoughtful. She paused gently before she spoke, as though fearing she must disappoint you. She was tall, with slight narrow figure and hands ; her movements were leisurely and inconsequent. At twenty-five she looked very young, or perhaps rather ageless. Her red-bronze hair, not cut very short, sprang from a centre parting to fall in loose waves each side of her narrow oval face. The spring of her hair, the arch of her eyebrows, her air between serenity and preoccupation made her look rather like an angel. She was not quite angelic ; though she was seldom exactly difficult Cecilia sometimes found her a shade perverse : she mistook theory for principle. Her spectacles, which from an independence that would rather blunder than be directed she seldom wore, had frail tortoiseshell rims the same tone as her hair, and made her look very much more serious and intelligent. She had put on her spectacles now to look at the tulips, for she was very short-sighted : they discomfited Lady Waters.

Vaguely trailing a tulip, Emmeline stood by the tall-boy smiling in silence at Lady Waters. It was hard to believe that her manner could mean nothing. Lady Waters, who had apparently come to stay, loosened her furs impressively and settled among the cushions. She had a fine, massive figure and dressed with expensive disregard of the fashions.