

Where Angels Fear to Tread

E.M.Forster

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I used to read some of Forster's novels when I was a teenager. 'The Longest Journey' I recall in particular, as rather dreary. I may also have read 'A Room with a View' and 'Howard's End' from that time ('Maurice' was later, in the late 70's and 'A Passage to India' in the early 90's), and possibly this book too as well way back. In fact when reading it I was reminded of the fact that the English thought of Italian dentists as being low on the social scale. And sure enough the connection to a dentist appears in the short novel, which should constitute 'proof' of the fact that I had indeed read it. It is strange what you remember, not only in life but from novels, plots seem to be rather secondary as to what makes impressions.

The plot is easy enough to summarize. A young widow Lilia starts to act up and she is sent to Italy together with a companion - a Miss Abbott - by her disapproving in-laws (her own mother lives far away in York and is entering dotage). The son in the house loves Italy and recommends her to also visit smaller towns, a sample of which he supplies her with, in order really to savor the country and its ways, not only the paintings and the ruins, but also the simple people. The set-up is rather transparent, as in so many Forster novels, English tourists encountering Italy as an exotic land, marked not only by Roman remains, and later day cultural treasures in churches and pallazi, but also by a strange landscape and picturesque towns, and with a native population of indeed simpletons. To go to Italy was to step back in time, with the option of returning back to civilization, whether better or worse for the wear. The widow falls in love with a young boy in one of those charming towns her brother-in-law had recommended. This causes a consternation among her in-laws and the son Philip is sent to stop the ill-conceived match, but too late, as he appears on the scene they are already married. Their worst forebodings are being confirmed, the young man, a cad, a son of a mere local dentist, has indeed married her for her money, of which she has a fair amount by Italian standards. Her in-laws cut off contacts with her, advising her henceforth only to communicate with their solicitor, and grudgingly they allow her some contact by letter with her daughter Irma, but of course the letters are censored by them. The marriage is predictably a failure, what do they really have in common except possible carnal pleasure? Socially she is out of it, his friends are off-limits, and the women of the small-town society are sequestered into their own small worlds. An English woman, walking alone, is an anomaly. She wants to escape, but fails, soon thereafter she gives birth to a son, and conveniently dies in childbirth. End of story?

Not quite. It is revived again. The companion - Miss Abbott - feels responsibility for the situation, as she had encouraged the match with Gino, as she thought it would be good for Lilia to break out of the conventional and constraining circle consisting of her in-laws, and 'live life'. Her bad conscience propels her to look for the well-fare of the poor son. This is not a concern of Lilia's in-laws, he is in fact of no blood-relation to them, unlike Irma, but nevertheless the mother is shamed into action. Thus she sends her son

and spinster daughter - Harriet - to Italy in order to rescue the child, thinking it would be just a matter of bargaining, the Gino character having earlier been tempted by the offer of a mere thousand lire to give up his catch, had it not been for the fact that it was too late. Concomitantly Miss Abbott acts on her own initiative. And what ensues cannot be described as anything else than farce. Miss Abbott is totally charmed by Gino's love for his son, that even the supposedly wicked are capable of great love, and changes sides. It is better that the child will be badly brought up by people who love it, than well brought up by people who do not, but see it more as a conventional duty intended to impress themselves with their charity and capacity for self-sacrifice. The author paints a scene, in which the brother-in-law comes up on Gino and Miss Abbott with the newly washed child between them as in a painting of the Holy Family by some Italian medieval painter. Philip dithers as what to do and being unable really to take sides (to be honest he could not care less), he characteristically only goes through the motion of trying to ostensibly rescue the child, charmed as he is by the Gino character after all. And here the author lies it on thick, contrasting the stiff cold manners of the well brought up and clever, with the elemental forces of the primitive, with their great capacity for joy and friendship, But Harriet is dead set on her mission, and as they leave for the evening train (the station being situated at some distance from the town) she arrives late with a bundle. Her brother takes for granted that she has bought off the father after all, but then there is an accident, the carriage carrying them, overturns and they are thrown on the ground, and the baby slips off. It is later found in the mud, dead. And then it transpires that the Harriet had simply stolen it. A clear case of kidnapping, showing at least, a capacity to act. Some rather awkward scenes follow, and then at the end, Philip having fallen in love with Miss Abbott, or at least to so thinking, only to find out that she in fact is in love with Gino, but at least friendship is assured, and given the temperament of Philip this might have been for the best.

A melodramatic story-line, filled with ethnic stereotypes, nowadays condemned as being racist, but at the time seen as ironic. The most interesting aspect is of course the depiction of Italy at the turn of the century and the various mores. As character building and conversational brilliance it leaves much to be desired, although the opening scene is skillfully done, where the darker forces behind a merry and conventional leave-taking is only gradually revealed. The book is easily done in a day and leaves not too much of a residue as testified by a previous reading, although at that time I was not able to fully appreciate the subtleties involved. One wonders though what a Henry James might have done with the material. His brush would have been finer, and the canvas more densely covered.

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