

Isabel and Lambert at Sea

Allen Stein

*There were some things that had to come in time
if they were to come at all*

—The Ambassadors

I

By the third day out, they'd noticed each other,
and noticed each other noticing.
Each knew the other was at last, after the long years,
one on whom nothing was lost.
She saw the deep pinch-marks at the bridge of his fine
 thin nose,
saw the eyes straining to be wry
in the face of privation,
heard him at next table warn a young stranger
of the folly of failing to live all one can,
and watched with him
while the young man stared back stupidly
with all the blankness of youth.
Two ravaged pairs of eyes had met at that moment,
then turned quickly away.

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II

Out on deck, in a suit of deep brown,
 he stood at the rail and stared eastward,
 back toward all he had left,
 back toward moments:
 eating an *omelette aux tomates* with straw-colored Chablis
 in sunshine across the Seine from Notre Dame,
 no tomato ever as red, no sun ever as gold,
 no flowing river ever as poignant;
 scenting in fragrant evening the blooms
 and the faint tigerish waft, so perilous, so alluring,
 there in the mingled lamplight and shadow,
 there in the garden of the formidable Gloriani;
 gazing in the dim luster of Marie
 de Vionnet's drawing-room
 at fine *boiseries*, medallions, mouldings, mirrors,
 small treasures not numerous but
 hereditary, cherished, charming,
 and at Marie in the midst of them;
 touching her shoulder so tentatively, weeks later,
 in the same room, dimmer now, less lustrous,
 listening to her weep
 for Chad, who had told him in listless irritation
 that he wasn't tired of her, not a bit, really.
 His rarest moments these—never
 before such glistening promise,
 never such defeats,
 never such life.
 To turn and face west and Woollett just yet
 was a bit more than poor Strether could manage,
 far harder to face, in fact, than even the memory
 of that moment at the country inn,
 when the shifting of a parasol in a rowboat
 had told all that he had needed and feared to know
 of the pair who had made him think himself
 so belatedly and blessedly young.

III

From her deck chair, she would look up from her book
and watch him stare fixedly astern.

Now and again she would turn to the west,
toward the land she had left

more than twenty years before,
a place that knew neither Gardencourt nor Roccanera,
that knew neither the grace of sad

half-humorous acceptance
nor the vacuity of dreams.

Widowed in essence from the

earliest days of her marriage,
she was now, finally, widowed in fact,
the pallor in her thin face, the streaks
of gray in her dark hair,

heightened by the deep black of her dress.

She had reached, so hesitantly, for Gilbert's hand
as in his last moments he had looked fixedly
toward his bedroom's frescoed ceiling,
done two centuries before, as he had once told her,
"by some palely-talented dolt with pretensions,
but not done quite so dreadfully as to
keep me awake of a night."

The slightest twist of his dry lips and
merest flinch at his wrist

as her hand drew near

had told her that even now what

he preferred still to grip
was his eternal sense of grievance.

America, he knew, had no patience for what ailed him.

In Rome, remnants of grandeur,

lovely accretions of ancient loss
made failure itself a thing of unassailable grace.

Why, then, sail west to all the glare and blare of doing
and leave the satisfactions of silence and shadow?

So, over the stale decades, Gilbert

had stayed, and she with him.
 Oh, yes, she'd often thought of home,
 and often thought of it in fear,
 dreading to find there, around every corner,
 the girl who had read so many books
 and had dreamed so many dreams of Europe and glory.
 Now she was at last ready to face that girl,
 to stare at her as fixedly as one might stare at the embers
 of a failing fire in a large chilled house,
 and muse on the general sadness of things.

IV

It rained all their last day at sea,
 but shortly before dark, it eased to drizzle,
 and each came out alone and stood at the rail,
 staring into the shifting mist and
 the slow churning below.
 Not ten feet separated them, that and the silence.
 They stood there in the chill and in their thoughts,
 all the rest inside in the warm clatter of table chat.
 After a time, the two turned to each other,
 as if by common need.
 Some words of the weather, the
 pleasantness of the voyage,
 the likely hour of arrival,
 while their eyes met and held.
 Their smiles, at first hesitant, grew warmer
 in mutual understanding.
 They knew and knew.
 They might have walked the deck together
 through the long evening, exchanged addresses
 and sincere promises to meet in their homeland
 and see what they could make of it together.
 After all, he was but fifty-seven,
 and she just in her forties,
 and both knowledgeable of possibilities.

POETRY

But they didn't—for, after all,
each had seen too much of what comes of possibilities,
and there they were.

So, after they watched the sun sink wanly
through drizzle and mist, they
 merely smiled once more,
wished each other a not uncomfortable night
and a not unhappy return.