Two Novels

Winning Joanne, Bryher

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CHAPTER I

MIRAGE

I

NANCY leaned on the rail, watching the horizon, eager for Syracuse. It was too late for almond-blossom, but there was snow on Etna and the South itself to welcome her—the South, after six years.

The past few months had been a space of disillusion. Childhood had shivered into a thousand pieces that May morning she had entered school, and instead of starting afresh Nancy had wasted time trying to find and fit together the broken pieces. She seemed to have slipped back a whole age. The wonder and imagination she had treasured were gone and knowledge had not come to fill their place. She had lost her early facility of writing verse; become critical, nothing she attempted satisfied her. That she would have had to lose her childhood some time never occurred to Nancy. In the usual way she would have lost it imperceptibly; as it was, she could date it back to the violent shock of school, and had not learnt enough to know that this
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was a period through which it was inevitable for her to pass. At Downwood she had shut herself up in a world of her own, away from taunts and all unpleasant thoughts, and there this refuge of silence had been a necessity, but she could not, with leaving school, revert to infancy, and the friends, the life she had dreamed seemed mythical as ever though the months of bondage had passed. With the growing realisation that to escape from one prison might not mean to have the world at her own disposal, she yielded herself more and more to the true intimacy of books, beyond the limits of childish experience, painfully groping a way to a harder knowledge.

Adventure half forgotten, Nancy had left England with no enthusiasm, nine months after her return from school. She could not care at first, but as the familiar names slipped by, the familiar colours, the hills that she had last seen dusty with almond-blossom; a mirage of her childhood drew perilously close, and as night came, in southern loveliness, in a blue that shamed the waves that curve on delicate curve moved ever towards the shore, her heart beat quicker for even the hint in wind and sea that they were near the home of her early dreams.

II

Amid the rattle of anchor chains, people frantically inquiring if Eryx were a general, or trying to mend
their ignorance of Gylippus by a five minutes’ perusal of the guide-book, noise, shouting, late one April afternoon Nancy landed at Syracuse. To her it was no strange place to stare, to wonder at, and leave; it was home, the haunt of her childhood, to be taken simply and quite naturally. School had robbed her of happiness; the South would give it back to her. Rich with memories she moved forward with the throng towards the centre of the town.

“Of course you could not appreciate or remember the South when you were here before, you were too young.”

The stinging words Nancy was impotent to refute rang in her ears. Appreciate! She had had the South in her heart ever since she was seven. Remember! Why, she could take them to the very corner of the ruined amphitheatre where ten years before she had rebuilt the whole city with a bit of mosaic and a few pieces of marble, while they, for all their guidebooks, could not picture a single building. At every step another impression of a crowded childhood greeted her. She turned from the look in their eyes. “I made you,” the South taunted, “and what have you brought me?” A few lines of verse, dreams—was that all the six years had wrought? Oh, those wasted years at Downwood, the desecration, the shame of school.

She was bitterly homesick for her childhood. She felt sundered from it as though it were whole ages away, as though she could never have been the child
she remembered playing with heroes in a heroic land. There were the familiar orange trees, but the dreams themselves had vanished for ever. Sometimes under the almond boughs one would brush her cheek, but they were hers no longer and there was nothing to take their place. “You were too young to understand,” they told her, while she thought of a far-away figure that had been Carthaginian, Syracusan, and Greek by turn on that very hillside, and raged that she could not bring other children to learn of beauty in the same dream way, instead of being flung into the ignorant atmosphere of school, to ape the narrow thought of a schoolgirl of sixteen.

“How fascinating this atmosphere is,” chattered the girl at her side. “I love those little green shutters and those babies; how typical they are of the South.” (She never looked at children at home.) “Nancy, you don’t realise how wonderfully romantic it all is. I don’t believe you appreciate travelling at all.”

Nancy, lost in dreams, was silent, and suddenly round the curve of the road came a herd of shaggy goats, sweeping her back ten years. To her they had always been a part of Sicily, one of her earliest memories. Her companion shrank back shivering as they passed.

“What a desecration! Get away from them; they spoil the atmosphere.”

“They are the South,” Nancy answered simply.
Childhood had failed her, the South had failed her; what was left? Infancy (unwitting of companionship) school had rendered impossible of recapture, but reality offered only a friendship of harsh chattering, unconsidered mirth. Her hope, her dreams, shaped to a definite longing for something to fill her loneliness, give her knowledge; to a thought that only a book of her own making would admit her to the friendships she desired. She grew each week more desirous of silence, natural, when what to her was joy, a riotous sweetness, became meaningless words, uncomprehended emotions, to the girls about her, for whom Corfu, history, metre, were chaotic obscurity, “interesting,” but out of their way. This indifference of others assured Nancy in her belief she was a poet; expression broke to lines of echoed verse and worse thought.

A poppy sail burned on an umber ship, the golden oars of a Greek rower were birds on a space of silver; pansies, rich with dream and purple, were truant about the shore. In dangerous and defiant ridges visible Albanian hills curved scimitar-wise in the blue May morning. An eager strength breathing about the air brought renewal of her old wish to go to sea. Greece was a tranquillity, an interlude of loveliness, which made her eyes afraid. Poems breathed among the darkness of the cypress trees; the islands drifting
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out to sea were magical as song. For the moment she lost trust in the future; ahead of this present all was obscure. Bewilderment slipped gradually away; childhood was not so poignant in its memories. But glad as her eyes were with beauty, the spirit of the South was fugitive, a mirage that never waited for her soul.

From Corcyra, rich with scarlet poppy, pointed cypress, they came to Delphi, austere and desolate in a precipice above the silver olive trees; to Delos, where in an ivory stillness broken statues kept a pristine splendour above Ionian water, crushed to a blue of porcelain, the porcelain that hid the grass with fragments, quiet as the banded lizards, inscrutable as the sun. Athens was explored and Aegina on the hill where, between the magical leaves, waves were a ragged violet as they climbed the slope. Rhodes was denied her, it was too far south; but before they turned northwards and home the approach of June found them anchored one morning in the bay of Crete.

IV

A noisy throng threatened the silence of the tiny room, one blazoned volume of Minoan centuries. The haft of a broken dagger, the rough pottery of a rounded vase, held no speech intelligible to their eyes. Crete was a place to see, forget, or associate with the warmness of the day, some happening of the journey. One or two would have lingered; travellers, to whom the spirit of
antiquity was not utterly inaudible. They were dragged away by the clamour of the crowd. Happy with a knowledge rent from map and history book, Nancy paused alone before the pictured life of Crete.

Minoan civilisation held her with vivid interest. Had not the islands been the home of sailors? Had not the Cretan ships linked Mycenae and further Greece with Egypt, with the East? Her early knowledge of the Nile, of Phoenician history, helped her to spell from painted vase and moulded weapon the tale of the rise of Knossos, the sack of the palace, conquest, the end of the island dominion. Why had she no friend with full knowledge of the early history of the South? Mycenaean discoveries were not more wonderful than this.

The last straggler vanished. Solitary, before the frescoes of the bull ring and the Cupbearer, Nancy recovered antiquity.

Knossos was not desolate, but vivid with life and heat. Tall scarlet poppies grew by the narrow path. Peasants in mediaeval jerkins flung the umber earth aside with their spades, in warm heaps. An April noon at Carthage had seemed the heart of stillness, but here the place burned. One could see the luminous quiver of the air.

“Let’s hurry and get on board again. I know I shall get sunstroke.” The throng murmured, querulous with heat.

Nancy strode deliberately into the hottest sunlight,
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drinking a life too strong that flamed her soul to wild-
ness, flushed her with dripping gold. Earth was warm,
the air was warm; she was mad with the colour and
the light. The woods called her, and the hills; strength
was abroad in them, and in strength was happiness.
Oh to strip herself free of fear, to escape; to know the
darkness of the boughs, the broken warmth of pop-
pies. Life waited for her in the hills, no mirage, but
truth, eager for her to call, eager to be held. “Come,
Nancy; you are keeping everybody.” Escape—but
could recapture be eluded? The throng clambered into
their carriages. “Come, Nancy.” She turned, an unwill-
ing prisoner to civilisation.

V

Give me freedom in your woods, Knossos of the sea; the loveliness
of flowers, the loveliness of honey.
You were beautiful as snow that lifts, a white narcissus, on Mount
Ida. O frail shell, stained with dawn, you were lovely as the
moon.
Sun wrought you and foam, the crushed hearts of crocuses—
rhythms of gold light across a marble of white lilies.
Watcher of the woods, watcher of the sea, Life, wild as an iris bud,
crusted your jars with dreams.

The youths knew your strength, Knossos of the sea; the hot edges
of hill above the cypress boughs.
The wild goats on the grass slope stiffened with fear, leapt upward.
The bronze head of a javelin smashed on a grey rock. Loose
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stones, scarred earth—was a spear, the wind, as swift as a Cretan? Wild flight, wild limbs—the hunters passed.
Girls loved you for beauty, Crete, heavy with orchards; for the pool of violets, dark as sleep, crushed by their sun-browned limbs.
Noon blossomed in your hands, spilled in cups of gold and onyx; your nights were ivory petals carved of dawn on a white rose.
You were a wild pear amorous of sunrise: were you not afraid to give of your loveliness to the North?

Could you have kept your dreams for the wood cyclamens; could you have lost them in the reeds, Knossos, you had lived.
But the North snapt the agate hilts of your daggers with a touch.
Their eyes hardened with evil as they lifted the gold jars.
While your merchants traded with far isles they cried “To Crete.”
The waves were shrill with the invading oars of darkened ships.
O sea flower, where was the wind that it left their sails unrent?
Surf of Crete, where was your strength that their anchors tore the sand?

For the last time, Knossos, you were beautiful with sleep.
The wood gave no warning: you were abandoned by the moon.
A twig cracked in the darkness. The watchers laughed: “Some hunter has lost his way from the hills.” A torch flashed: “It is a beacon to guide in the fisher ships.”

They poised their spears in the shelter of the orchards. The archers crept forward. A wild goat, stiff with a sudden arrow, Knossos woke.

You shattered under their javelins, Crete of the open water, as under a heavy sandal crush the coral-tinted shells.
Your loveliness was sullied by no fear. Death was swift.
The stem of your beauty snapt. Life wept to watch you perish by the sea.
Torches fired the wood. The spearsmen clutched gold. Sun-
coloured porcelain splintered into dust. Fragments of onyx, fragments of agate, littered the torn earth.
The sharp scent of burning cypresses was sweeter to the archers than reaped grass.
Bough of wild pear, you were smitten by the wind.
You were desolate, as Carthage shall be desolate, and Troy.
In far islands they hung your daggers on the wall; they poured wine from your honey-tinted jars.
In far islands loveliness trembled into leaf, bitter with seed from your dreams.

Give me freedom in your woods, Knossos of the sea; I know Life rests with the wind, not an arrow’s length from your hills.
For here is a wild hive plundered of its honey; here are thin poppies dead with the pressure of his limbs.
I am all wildness: where the shade dusts the hollows with black mulberries, let me thrust my hands in the earth and feel your strength.
Your spirit is not perished from the woodland nor from the parched cliffs.
Knossos of the scarlet poppies, Knossos of the sea, bring me to the ledges where Life rests.