Introduction

IT WAS A COUNTRY proud of its railways: officials were decorated with enamelled miniatures, extravagant diptyches of patriotic scenes encrusted with gilt and seed pearls. The politics of railwaymen were as important as those of the police or the army. The workers were soft-eyed, arrogant, and they gave directions with intense courtesy and inefficiency: the trains were swift, dangerous, and as intriguing as the artists who decorated and drove them. At the stations, you could buy thirty-year-old postcards, small bottles of warm water, and miniature bananas: foreigners saw little of interest in these familiar details. But they did notice that the stationmasters twirled their ebony batons, and manoeuvred their greasy armies with greater pride and pretension than elsewhere. 'A good railway means a bad government,' sighed old men who went everywhere by car, and who had never been abroad: but the

saying was popular and the railwaymen oiled and scraped with sentimental satisfaction, and the services grew unusually erratic.

The passengers failed to live up to the standard of their servants: there were men who undressed their scabbed, thin children on the seats, slyly smiling with shy pleasure. Old women, who at forty had put themselves into perpetual mourning, sat like intelligent vegetables beside their husbands. As the years went by, they seemed to grow more remote, wiser, less accessible, until they fell like the overripe fruit to be buried in the long grass. Embarrassed peasants who had forgotten the intricate decencies of public life fumbled with their buttons and clumsy parcels: archaic families, used only to journeys in the discomfort and pomp of the Rothschilds' continental coaches, wondered at the bad manners of their companions. Lovers and little girls sucked sweets and gazed dully from the dirty windows.

At night, the small bright boxes, spaced like rare gemstones, were tugged through the desolation of a pagan countryside. Stark trees and rabbits could be seen from the intimate compartments, where men pretended to sleep. A ploughed field in

the dark: wells, winding gear, stretches of somnolent water: the distressed, ravaged, unquiet countryside, in contrast with the domestic confabulations of bored travellers. These men were unremarkable. Among them one night came Torgano. He was of medium height, and hated tall, intelligent women: he was a dealer in common rarities, and though a romantic realist, lost his nerve when he found himself in danger of emotional ambushes. He was travelling with his friend, Pierrina: she suffered from a cosy chronic inertia, going quietly, delicately, like an invalid, to save effort. She liked heat, boredom, and combing her hair. Thus, she was like most women, except that at eighteen she had written an article on Malipiero: however, she could never again bring herself to work: she liked the pure surface of her ignorance.

'Pastoral piety: the two most unpleasantly evocative words I know,' said Torgano. 'Perhaps that is because you were destined to pass from a fleeting insensitive childhood to a permanent neurotic adolescence. You have stored up your little fantasies and associations until you are too old to become anything but a frustrated dream artist.

'For six years you have called me an old

child: since some emotion is indestructible, that can be no reason for treating it as if it is unfeeling: emotion which can be terminated at will is likewise easily hurt, perhaps even more defenceless because it is irresponsible. Not for the first time, I beg you to stop exercising your malign playfulness. Perhaps you say that the prisoner under torture finds his convictions and his defiant formulae beaten and branded on his body as if they were scars, which could only slowly grow livid, then fade. Perhaps you say that your torments strengthen a loving reaction, that the more I am hurt, the more I shall resolve to stand firm against your cruelty.

'Or do you see that I do not shamble and grope along the bright boulevards, that I do not shout and fight myself as I sit aloof over lucent drinks in the expensive cafés, and do you consequently pretend that I simulate my unhappiness? Do you want me to leap about in the squares, screaming to the pigeons like a madman, or a Neapolitan carpet-seller, sending the grunting flocks from one roof to the next over the heads of the angry but mechanically spendthrift German tourists? Do you want me to abandon my antique shop, which you effect to

despise? And if I do leave it, what will you do about the so-rare barber's poles? The poles which make a hazard of the squalid approaches to the unsafe, and equally squalid, landing stage of your so unusual palazzo – these do not come to any antique shop but mine, remember, and this is not Venice!'

'Perhaps I just do not like you very much,' said Pierrina quietly.

Torgano laughed scornfully.

Pierrina relied on his antiques to fill her palace, from which, every day, slipped plaster unicorns into the clear water below. She relied on his recommendation to fill the faded rooms with bored tourists; there could be no reason why these two should not love. One day, the water, overlaid with metallic bars and curtains of shifting blue, green, petrol, and broken stucco, would receive the whole weary palace, as it slipped from its foundations. All this, the two reluctant lovers realised and feared; they travelled miles to find antiques to hang from every irregularly protruding nail, before the walls fell away.

'Private transports in public transport,' silently smiled the girl. 'That is how I shall remember him. He is so afraid to stop talking in case silence bores me, that

he has become a miraculous spring of boredom.'

Torgano stared rude and ashamed at his scandalised neighbours: they would have liked to cover the ears of their aggressively unchaste twelve-year-old daughter. Soon, mother and daughter awaited the station in the corridors, while the man looked at Torgano and Pierrina with an irritating, frosty pity. Then the station: the sudden, breathtaking shock of animation, as officials poured from private coffee-houses on the platforms, to greet passengers, like a partisan band welcoming foreign liberators. The departing passengers leaving a few penitents who had to sit in the waiting rooms all night for absolution, stiff-backed and resigned; Torgano stared at these familiar unfamiliarities with a sleepy carelessness.

The trains would keep him awake all night now; they would throw garlands of trucks round the contortions of the track. They would lob clusters of wagons like bunches of grapes to one another in tired, aimless railway games. He was angry: he knew he could not lose Pierrina, for he guessed that she was quite fond of him, so it became pointless for him to rage at her, since it would only inspire her to reply

with unkind truths.

They parted. Torgano thought, ‘To be without responsibility: to abandon this half-happiness, the fetters of affection, and to go forward in selfish efficiency. But then that is merely to look for years worn smooth, made soft and anonymous by betrayal and sadistic enmities. And in this little town, sadism will always return in a day, a month, as masochism. Much better to see my future through a dissatisfied incomprehension. This is a colourful, if lonely, existence. The other day, says the ironmonger, a woman asked for emerald paper: a charming, if ridiculous alternative.’

Pierrina was not whimsical: a decrepit palace, amateur historians, an ungainly antique dealer who ranted about emerald paper, this did not make her happy with the sophisticated enthusiasms of one who sets out to enjoy the mysterious, the irritating, and the illogical at all costs. She forgot things quickly: another ugly antique animal had fallen from the roof that day: another shattered building would give up its ornaments to replace those of a less ruined home.

One day Pierrina’s animals would be taken in their turn, and stuck on some fresh façade; meanwhile, it did not help to

consider the endless bizarre progresses of the ancient and the elusive. Like one's emotions, plaster animals were things to be considered only after they had sunk in the elastic waters of tidal basins. She liked Torgano because he was always there: he seemed to her like a well-tried metaphor: exciting, but tiresome when used too much in company. She saw that his personality was in danger of disintegrating under her playful torments, but that this was by auto-suggestion, not her unkindness. The palazzo and she would survive anything he could devise: a pity, for she admired men who argued quietly and could convince you of anything, but anything! Thus she lied to herself.

She went out on the balcony and watched large vegetables and small dogs tossing and gesticulating in the water: 'Death is the same as life for those who have never lived,' she thought, then, 'What a tiresome person I am,' angrily.

There were stars: the ghosts of old and incredibly corrupt politicians failed, as usual, to make an appearance. She grew old: a train called to another in the inconsequential cadences of smashed gongs, steam whistles. The dogs still padded on stiff legs towards the wharves

and the palaces: Pierrina realised that she would find nothing in this scene to steady her precise, irresolute mind. She closed the shutters.

Torgano was asleep already: a mile from Pierrina, he carried to his dreams the happy but slightly disgruntled look of one who has predicted falsely a sleepless night. He always had the disagreeable expression of a novelist who remarks to himself that his audience will no doubt be bored, but that his writing has sufficient obvious talent to ensure publication.

It was three o'clock: policemen and cats patrolled the streets or gazed stupidly at dying fires. In two hours, water would be sluiced down the gutters, washing in muddy confusion the bodies of beggars and dead gangsters, wealthy partygoers, and children who would wash in no other way. In four hours' time, the first of the next day's playboys and destitutes would lie once more on the roads: the very small children who played out their fantasies at the expense of the department of hygiene would be replaced by lovers of eleven and twelve. These would walk to school hand in hand, embracing with practised passion: old ladies would scowl and grimace, wishing they had such memories of their education. Workmen would begin

work after breakfasting on brandy and coffee: the waiters in the empty tourist cafés would call knowingly to their comrades in the cheap, crowded bars used by the townspeople.

Torgano and Pierrina forgot their journey of the previous evening: journeys are to be forgotten; they met in the square, where the pigeons awaited their generous visitors.

'Let us buy little paper cones of grain for these birds: that will let you believe we are lovers,' said Pierrina.

Torgano kicked slyly at the creatures: they pecked and shuffled like insects on the glazed tiles which covered, most unsuitably, the square. Generations of dictators had plundered and wheedled: families of masons and robbers had accumulated and coaxed: statues of histrionic generals on soiled horses, screens, towers, poles, these had all been wrought, or stolen, to embellish reputation and public places.

'It is not right to be apart so long,' said Torgano, who constantly embarrassed his companion with sentimental truisms. 'How long can this go on?' he asked her.

'Any situation, however unlikely, can be prolonged indefinitely: that is how novels are written, that is how I have

known you for so many years.'

Pierrina was sad that she should have to speak like this: she was afraid of Torgano, or at least anxious about the impression she thought she made on him, and indeed on everyone. She scarcely dared move hurriedly, or act warmly; she had so little experience that it appeared a technical accomplishment only to be perfected by years of private practice.

'We cannot spend our lives making idiotic wisecracks about life,' she continued. 'There is, or should be, a limit to the permutations of human relationships. You must write your propositions about abstracts on neat cards, type them, perhaps, on that machine which is too big for your hands. You could send them by messenger or small boy to the palazzo in the early morning: I could take them instead of breakfast.'

Pierrina smiled: it was not a bad idea at all. She could even reply with printed notes: 'Pierrina Tarrault thanks you for your attentions, but regrets she will be unable to pretend.' Most people seemed to pretend, certainly seemed to be able to do so: she, however, did not really know what she would have to pretend to be successful.

That is how the two thought, and spoke. Each had friends, but concealed them in mutual respect for their mutual jealousy: they gave time to no others; they felt guilty if one talked to a shopkeeper without the other. It would have been hard to find more complete devotion, and more complete distrust and self-deception.

Torgano said gloomily, ‘I want to talk about the palace and my shop: may we walk under the petrified palms, where red marble spreads out into stone leaves and the flickering signs spark in the restaurant windows? Perhaps you would like an exotic bun, or a gilded biscuit? And a cheap, but local, liqueur, strong and pervasive as perfume? And we shall talk sensibly, do let us be serious?

‘We shall sit in the café of the Benevolent Triumvirs, and watch the beetling pigeons and the hot tourists. Everyone will believe we are quaint and happy: they will tell their friends that in this country, young men are voluble and bulky, that the girls are disdainful and may drink spirits before midday. They may even try to find out who the Benevolent Triumvirs were: certainly they would not suspect that they were conceived by a lame hotelier who used to

keep a collecting box for the Falange behind the exciting football-game table.'

Wearily Pierrina prepared to listen; still she looked at the sacred birds and the visitors who had come so far to admire them.

Torgano grinned and moved about on his chair: 'I have never spoken to you of money before: I have not worried about finance, and I prefer you not to be concerned for it either.' In fact, he had known that confessions of poverty would have meant little to Pierrina, that she might have taken them as admissions of contagious spiritual illnesses, or unrealistic self-pity.

'But you must have realised that I was neither rich nor flourishing: you buy animals, carved wood, striped poles, yes, I am grateful. But I travel a lot, I have to find new stock before I have exhausted the old, because I am an impractical perfectionist. I do not like to see yesterday's mistakes obscuring today's bargains. We may not be friends.'

He paused for the affirmation that they were, indeed, almost lovers, which, as he might by now have expected, did not come.

'Very well, we will not discuss that: but you can surely see what I mean, what I

need? Let me live in the palazzo, with my antiques, let me sell them to your visitors. Nothing improper, but a most profitable arrangement.'

He waited uneasily for the answer he had rehearsed for her. Slowly, disappointingly, she replied, 'I cannot say: it is not a thing I could have thought of. Perhaps you think me tedious and pompous; perhaps you think the matter obvious; perhaps you are right. But I must consult advisers, friends.' Torgano reflected on the sudden emergence of business associates and rivals, now that he had found a question which had to be answered.

'Where would you sleep, would you pay me rent, or would I receive a share of your profits, will I be given a reduction for antiques I want to buy?' The questions stumbled out, confused, even angry. Torgano was slightly shocked by the shrill eagerness with which she demanded concessions he would have slowly given her unasked.

'I suppose we are all like her,' he thought. Then abruptly he asked himself if they were indeed right for one another: years of refuge in fond clichés had accustomed him to asking everything of himself with a patronising sentimentality.

Now, as usual he reassured himself that whatever his unseen counsellors might whisper, he would not relinquish Pierrina. This decision, taken with a sense of religious firmness and penance, made him happy. He realised that Pierrina was not preparing her reply: the pigeons marched and countermarched, and after a brief struggle with the sun, a morning partymaker lay down beside a table, and rested without embarrassment or reticence.

Pierrina sat thinking about her palace: at the moment, she felt like calling Torgano a disgusting little boy; possibly that was what her father had resembled in his last months in expensive disease in the palace. Her brother had died, she thought, in the war: an unsuccessful coward, he had only known the beauty and squalor of his home. She thought he had been shot by his own superiors, but he might have fallen off a lorry, or slept in wet clothes.

Anyway, his was one of the tragedies of which no family boasted: he chose to die as a civilian, disobeying, being careless, wilful or unfortunate. If his death had given her father something to exaggerate, the old man might have lived: her brother had died as he lived, with an ill-defined, immature, casualness. She

had never cared for him: this recurrent dislike bothered her only slightly. Torgano wished he could be in some silent place: he thought of himself as a conductor, able at will to smooth with gesture and grimace the puckered surface of a massive score. Mentally, he stilled the waiters, the adjectives of the domino-players, the machines which made coffee, pigeon-food, and cocktails.

'Give me a week on my own to think out your proposal; it will be good for both of us,' said Pierrina.

Torgano knew how much more she meant than she had said. For once he did not argue.

A foreigner sat near them; to his wife he said, 'If this is another Venice, where is the other St Mark's?'

She searched for references in vain, and Torgano and his girl smiled wearily, as if they had planned the square many centuries ago. On their right, camouflaged with Romanesque obscenities and lives of medieval merchants and devil worshippers in mosaic, was the building which all knew, but none confessed, to be the point of interest in the square. Protected and much tended, little noise escaped the sleek masterpiece: it was the central railway

station.

Pierrina left the antique dealer: he sat and watched the black polluted birds scuffling and kicking at the leaves. A remembrance of the lonely week to come disturbed him.