

*Anthony Carson*

## *Off to Sicily*

THE trip actually started from somewhere on the Chelsea Embankment, I'm not quite sure where, and it was about twenty-to-twelve when I drew up in a taxi and saw the faded blue Dormobile van outside the house. Everyone was more or less ready but there wasn't a drink in the house, and the nearest pub was about half a mile away. Although it was an exhibition January morning with a cocktail sherry gleaming in a gold frame, I had the trembles, an unwashed and unbelonging feeling from staying suddenly in a centrally-heated house, with the moisture and the hope tapped out of me by invisible pipes. I should start by naming the people. There was North whom I had known some time, a sort of mythological figure, half-faun, half-camel, who lived with a charming wife in a tiny historic house, like a jewel, in the moors of Yorkshire, and who disguised the gamble of his nature with a parade of prams and a talk of business. ("This is a business trip," he had shouted to me in the warm white house.) There was Lady Betty Cress, whom I had also known on and off for years, a pretty girl who converted her grandmother's dressing-gowns into touching overcoats, constantly shoeless, a tinker's princess as much behind the counter of bargain basements as in the cocktail drawing-rooms of an oblique Chelsea. Victor Latimer, a young pianist and composer with the white set face of the perfect comedian, with the terrible precise anger of a moralist, a man furnished with a huge series of self-viewing mirrors. These three, North, Betty, and Victor, were old friends, connected by secret

telegrams, coloured clubs, university quadrangles, a gossip which, including Madge, Harcourt, or Phillip and Stanislaus in Miami, Paris, and Bath, managed to make the world very small and very English.

Then there was Mrs. Spencer and her daughter, Sarah. They came from Oxford, where Sarah ran a sort of antique shop which sold necklaces, wool, brooches, toy animals, and Spanish earrings. The purpose of such a shop was to be *discovered* by visiting American ladies, who, attracted by the naïveté of the animals and wool, would be hooked and loaded by bargains. Each had been married. On the edge of the party was a thin young man called Reg Saunders, a clerk in some sort of General Trust Company. He had never travelled abroad before, but somewhere in his neat, organised brain was a curiosity about snow, grottoes, and volcanoes. And a Violet Smith, a young girl from South Africa. Finally, there was myself, a middle-aged man still looking for miracles, smaller and neater miracles, experience-resistant and agile with fresh craft and tamed dreams. A man of railways and shabby ships, inconclusive love-affairs in second-class hotels, open, often ashamed of his mobile, unburdened joy under the probe of the classified city. Often, indeed, cowed. We were all off to Sicily. "At least I hope so," said North. I knew that he meant this, that he was uncertain of attaining the objective, because of the assortment of people, engine troubles, avalanches, fights, unequally apportioned money, and the prevalence of casinos. But his handsome bactrian, raptorial face held such dash and

reserve of energy that the risk of the trip not only did not seem to matter, but positively enhanced it to those of us who had paid down some money.

WHEN we reached Dover with little or no event, North took a very long time finding the car embarkation point, the ship, or even the sea. We passed and re-passed an identical succession of pock-marked council houses which should have been the rigs of shipping, crossed and re-crossed bridges, railway lines, waited for trains, and returned to the infernal council houses, asking numbers of people who were invariably angry, because of the snow, or Dover, or hidden problems, and directed back to the bridges, the railway lines, and finally the council houses. Not a sign of the sea. This was a trick of North's, an exaggerated irresponsibility in regard to the approach to or egress from towns, which enabled him to express a contempt for any sort of routine embedded in the passengers' minds. However, we eventually discovered the embarkation point, the car was hoisted aboard, and we walked up the gang-plank and on to the boat. Victor immediately disappeared, and was not seen for the rest of the trip. "Helping with the engines," said North. Nobody was certain, except North, whether Victor liked them, and it was never less certain on ships. We went to the saloon and ordered bottles and bottles of wine, the spectres of want, improvidence, and ultimate starvation were shelved away and the ship vibrated with holiday's reckless geography.

In fact, I discovered, by the second bottle, that we were bound for Ostend. Ostend is not by any means on the quickest or the most pleasant route to Sicily, Belgium is boring and Germany unpleasantly interesting, but by Ostend we certainly had to go because North was unable to proceed through France. To my surprise, although I myself and Betty and Victor knew the reason, he explained it to everyone else somewhere on the trip, between Cologne and Heidelberg. "I'm sorry about France," he said, "but I'd be arrested." Everyone accepted this fact quietly except for Mrs. Spencer, who

eyed him with the omniscient look of the ready-reckoner, the lady who knew what was what. "It's a fact," said North. "But why?" asked Mrs. Spencer, giggling. "Because I deserted from the Foreign Legion," he said. "It's absolutely true," I said, through her common-sense laughter, "and as a matter of fact I met a man called Eddie in Tangiers who knew North in the legion. He had deserted himself. I was sun-bathing on a roof and suddenly found this man beside me." Mrs. Spencer never believed any of this any more than she had believed that North, on arrival in Ostend, had gambled away nearly all his money in an empty casino flanked by croupiers with white winter faces, dogged January vampires, and only had a trunk full of canned stew, baskets of carrots, and a pearl necklace to fall back on. The fact is that the stark poetry of the past can only be shared by a sort of family of friends or occasional wizards, what is inviolably one's own is buried by envy and routine in a box marked "Fantasy." Only a sort of prose remains.

Some kind of routine of behaviour established itself. North and Betty cooked over a spirit stove in the van, Reg ate sliced sausage meat and regional biscuits, Mrs. Spencer and her daughter in restaurants, Victor vanished, and Violet hovered between van and inn. At Liège we drove into a large rococo park to eat picnic-meal, and it turned out to be a cemetery, stacked with the grey bank-statements of past hopes, all scandal and regret stifled under snowy leaves. The car turned around like a trapped animal, skidded, and only just failed to fall into a ditch beneath a menacing memorial, and as it was righted and approached the gates, a uniformed custodian in plum-red with gold lettering issued from a small grim lodge and closed them. There was angry panic in his face, as though it was the weather for werewolves or the Black Mass. "We thought it was a park," I said. The custodian's mottled face peered forward and his finger shook as it pointed to the tombs: there was an utter hatred and incomprehension of us English holiday-makers, tumbling like knock-about comics, behind the curtains of a faded play.

ALL the way to Taormina one was sniffing at towns like a dog, jumping the map like a flea, castles and towers and buried legends flickered by in a blaze of snow, while North and Betty talked about Matthew and his second wife Priscilla, Violet Smith whirred her ciné-camera through the low, frosted windows, and Mrs. Spencer talked about meals in Mediterranean hotels. Each white, sun-baked town from Marseilles to Athens was a good clear soup, an excellent grilled trout, a fine steak with French potatoes. Heidelberg appeared in the night, a scientific glow that could have been Swindon, an atomic establishment, or an airport. We veered in and crammed ourselves into a small, hot hotel, and in the morning I was dragged out of bed by North to continue the implacable voyage. Yet in that short space of time, Mrs. Spencer and her daughter had visited most of the monuments (Mrs. Spencer had even painted a small water-colour), Violet had filmed a duel, and North and Betty had rocked and roared in a night-club, where a number of cropped-haired youths with scarred faces knew not only Matthew and his second wife Priscilla, but his first wife Jean and her second husband Wally. Victor had disappeared.

We were over the frontier into Austria and we arrived in Innsbrück at about seven o'clock in a clear champagne air trembling with rich men's lights, softly illuminated cake pagodas, caged furs, winking jewels, and millionaire leather. After eating, all of us, except Victor, went to the nearest night-club, a huge underground cellar with a Tyrolean band and upside down wine bottles fitted with automatic release taps. We were greeted with roars, slaps on the back, it was like coming home all forgiven, blood is thicker than water. Comradeship went to the head, the band blew like a March wind. "The Austrians are *us*," said Mrs. Spencer. But they weren't Austrians; all the smiling teeth were German, the misty eyes were Grimm. Drowned in *Gemütlichkeit* we danced into the old red river of our blood, emerged and visited a second night-club, smart, low-lighted, dinner-jacketed, and

dotted with Dior. It could have been London after twelve but the men and the girls were better-looking, there was that definite aristocratic touch so lacking in our capital, a weary but captivating charm, an air of high castles, old books, and vampires. All these, too, turned out to be Germans, and one of them, an Oxford-looking man, attached himself to our party. North, who had sold the pearl necklace, bought him brandy, and he stated, with great charm, that the English and Germans were one. One, One, One, with a clinking of glasses, and under his hypnotic castle-glow, I told him that my father had actually been a titled German.

"To your greatest English writer," he said, handing me his card. "Who would that be?" I asked. "Who?" he repeated, "who but Stewart Houston Chamberlain, prophet, martyr, and saint. . . ." He raised his glass solemnly. "You don't mean that," I said smiling. "Don't mean what?" he asked. "That about Chamberlain and the Leader." The stem of his glass snapped suddenly, and he held out his hand for me to grasp. I grasped it, and through the haze of wine I seemed to be walking down the path of a thick, thick forest dripping with the incessant tears of the hunters and the hunted. I rose from the table, a tiny traitor, and danced with Betty on the small floor by the band. It played *Star Dust*. Betty's feet were bare, and the elegant spectators stared down with *schadenfreude* and a hilarious reverence to sensed breeding, secret manorial lawns. When we returned to the table North was ordering the suave German away. "He shouted and shouted for brandy," said North. "His face was completely distorted."

IN THE morning we collected together to drive over the Brenner Pass. "RETURN THE TYROL" cried huge letters in whitewash. I had a longing for Italy, but over the frontier, for miles and miles, extended the long arm from the thick, fierce, and weeping forest. The people and houses were Gothic, the Italian guttural, the soup thick with cabbage. But the change came. It rang through the snow like a Puccini aria, something disorderly yet

harmonious. I was back on the old escape-route of my childhood when I had first feared death by starvation of common beauty, followed by private visits and then extraordinary pilgrimages with Magic Carpets Ltd., herding tourists into cathedrals and catacombs, winking them out of grottoes and bleeding them with cameos. My Italian began to burgeon. Admittedly I wanted to show off, to compete with North's magnificent, epic driving, but the halting flow of my tongue was a genuine impulse, to extend myself beyond the island of the Dormobile with its word-games, the impenetrable ritual of Victor Latimer (who had on one occasion actually disappeared in a snowstorm to visit Beethoven's house in Bonn, then turning up nonchalantly in Heidelberg for rolls and coffee), and Mrs. Spencer's succulent geography.

I was, in fact, hated for this Italian, and North would refer to any group of desperate Latins as "some of your family." Help in hotels, restaurants, or road catastrophes was pushed aside. Some months ago, in Spain, a friend of mine had invented a name for the truly basic international language of Europe, "DESPERANTO," divided up into (1) Whore's Desperanto, (2) Waiter's Desperanto, (3) Tourist Desperanto, (4) Linguist's Desperanto. Every member of the party spoke some form of this language, composed of motto French, Latin tags, and very loudly-shouted English. Mine was (4). I was rather horrified to discover, after many of my own fairly subtle conversations, that their own language was almost completely understood, and I didn't speak another word of Italian until we reached Taormina.

When we arrived in Florence the snow had gone. To no one else but Mrs. Spencer did Florence mean Florence, the rest of us were dilettantes. She forced her daughter, Reg, and me to walk the town by night, shiver by the Arno, and suddenly stand, pierced by the toy-like sublimity of Giotto's Campanile. Then back to the drinking in the secret society of North and Betty. Where was I in the hierarchy? Nowhere, neither here nor there. I am supposed to be a professional in

the dangerous craft of writing, but I do not know the people I know, because I dare not, because boredom or dislike or fear make poor companions. Violet Smith would marry a sturdy man in South Africa, but she wanted a short film-tea with a Roman Prince, to eat octopus, and see Etna erupt. She was a fine, natural, healthy girl, just right for the trip, and everybody liked her. Reg was the most interesting and the most unpredictable of them all. He appeared, and undoubtedly was, a humble man. He asked questions about electricity supplies, vegetation, the height of buildings, and then faded away in a dying titter, like a clown with a brutal audience. He even cleaned my shoes and washed my shirt with Austrian detergent, but frequently he said strange things in a low voice, there was a slightly sinister grouping of words. "What?" I would ask. "Nothing. Nothing," he would answer. "The things I say . . . I'll make myself disliked in the van . . ."—and there he was again, fading away into the Italian night. On viewing Vesuvius, he drew me aside and peered at me through his spectacles. "Just like the picture-postcards," he said, ready to disappear at a moment's notice. Did he mean this? I doubted it, and at the very moment I was struck by his resemblance to photographs I had seen of the young James Joyce. "Just," I said, defensively. "I'm afraid I know nothing of Europe," he said, backing, "I live in my brother's house and study football. Not that I like football so much, but there is nothing else to do, is there?" "No," I answered, putting my hand on his shoulder, although I sensed he was dangerous in some way I couldn't define. For the next four days he studied Italian from a Hugo's phrase-book, and could ask for soap, envelopes, and the time.

Mrs. Spencer's daughter, Sarah, was the one I felt most in sympathy with. North and Betty did not like approaching places or events, they sat down in the middle of them and shouted for waiters and tunes. Sarah and I, on the contrary, did. The past and the future glittered in every new constellation of lights, and both of us longed to stop in Paestum among the temples. I had been there

as a boy, accompanied by my mother, and sharply remembered an afternoon of bees and golden stone far away from the ink and sweat of Anglo-Saxon boys and the grim caw of rooks. We both prevailed on North to stop there. "It'll be a town," said North. "I suppose there's a town," I said, but I couldn't remember. When we arrived, late at night, we found only a few houses, but an elderly man in an old green uniform got into the van and took us to an empty holiday-camp hostel, four to a bed, and bottles of Falernian on the dining-table. Suddenly, hours and hours later, an owl's cry from dawn, I discovered that only Sarah and I were in the room. We both got up from the table and walked into a warm wind-change of the night; we could hear the sea singing in our ears. "We can't see the temples," said Sarah. "No," I said. "We'll see them to-morrow." "To-morrow," she said. We floundered through mud, drawn by the voluptuous cry of the sea, on and on, among old iron and brambles, and returned to the hostel.

An old woman was standing in the dining-room, rocking to and fro on her heels. Her eyes opened, she disappeared, and came back with a bottle of Falernian. She opened it, put two glasses and the bottle in our hands, and silently led us upstairs to an empty room. There was a huge bed covered with a purple quilt. The old woman pointed to the bed and spoke a few words in Desperanto (No. 2). "Not go *in* the bed," she said, and quietly left the room, but she left behind the old sun and the moon and the grapes of Italy. We could hear the imperious hymn of the sea. Early in the morning, just at dawn, we all got in the van and drove south without a glimpse of the temples. "It's better that way," said North at sixty miles an hour. "The idea's the thing."

**S**OUTH to Calabria is all mountains and sudden brushes with cliffs hugged by a lapis lazuli sea of exquisite pagan delight. ("I've painted better blues than that in Cornwall," said Mrs. Spencer.) For lunch we stopped at a hill-top villa-inn with a derelict

orchard of tangerine trees hanging lanterns of fruit, and a shabby Riviera of flowers. There was a small shop selling sausage, cheese, and bread, and behind the counter a furious, shouting boy trying to imitate our awkward, top-heavy accents. Outside in a rocking-chair sat an old man with a beard. He had the face of a man who had killed many people and seemed at great peace, almost immediately discussing New York, in an unfathomable way, with North and Betty. Olives and wine were set on the table by the patron, a bald man who also seemed content, although, a year or two previously, he had had his throat cut, and his voice issued, like a dim oracle, from some tiny cavern in his body. He showed himself particularly friendly to me and laughed, metalically, at every word I said to him.

We crossed on the ferry to Messina. It was night and the lights of the two lands shimmered, re-crossed and doubled themselves in the water, the sirens of pleasure and pain called from the quays. Which Sicily would one have? Victor disappeared to the engines, and we all stood on the top deck watching the manœuvres, and, I was aware, most of us were thinking about money and listening to the rattling of impending spectres. When we reached Messina we stayed at a small hotel near a marshalling yard, and although the town had a cold and forbidding air, the people were very friendly. In the morning, early, we left for Taormina. North and Betty had spent the night in clubs, and hadn't been able to keep away a dangerous-looking man who brought bottles of brandy into the van and finally slept in it. "The clubs in Messina are sinister," said North, "and it is obvious that the town is a sort of clearing-house or main office for the Mafia in New York and Chicago. A sort of recruiting centre. We didn't see a single individual who had ever had a nice, comforting thought in his head, although in the end all were suddenly generous, after they had stabbed our backs for a very long hour with their steely eyes." Victor had also been about in the cold, black town, and he seemed very satisfied. "The best place of all," he said, with a quick, pale smile.

We climbed up to Taormina. Years ago, before the last war, I had visited it with a rich friend of very mixed nationality, intimate with the Vatican, Roman society, and the press. It had been late spring, and the over-publicised townlet and the enormous gleaming sea had glowed with preposterous beauty. Germans on coal-ticket exchange yearned over the views, snapped cameras, an arm around their pregnant ladies. Strauss uncoiled from the restaurants. One of the many photographic shops, *La Rusticana*, had watercolours and landscape photographs in the windows, but was actually the headquarters of the young white slave trade of the region. The Etna district is famed for pure ancient Greek stock, and poor landowners were ready to sell their Athenian-style children to visiting millionaires for "adoption." In a room behind *La Rusticana* photographs could be inspected, introductions and terms arranged. But all this had presumably changed, *La Rusticana* had changed hands and only exhibited rather mediocre paintings of the district which were, however, speedily bought.

We arranged for lodging and food: Victor far away at the edge of the town, North and Betty in the van, and the rest of us in a small, comfortable pension kept by a Swiss lady and her ornamental husband. The nearest bar to the pension was our headquarters, filled with mock-fishermen, photographers, aquarellists, and certain kinds of non-commissioned officers in magnificent uniforms. We drank large quantities of wine, grappa, amara, strega, and totted them up with the patron. The confusion of debts was alarming, and we were, by now, completely conscious that no one had any money at all except Violet Smith and Mrs. Spencer. It was impossible to exploit a young girl like Violet on the edge of her first Mediterranean dream, but Mrs. Spencer was a different sort of victim. Indeed she explained it all herself. "When I decided to embark on this wild sort of trip, at my age, I imagined most of the contingencies. I consider myself lucky in the company, possibly all travellers are nice." So she paid the bills on the bar, and we went to a night-club, and

North taught the band to play *Tip-toe through the tulips with me*.

North was not at all unsophisticated, but he had as Victor said on one occasion, "blinkers on," the world was the garden of a casual upper-class friend where you could leave your half-finished glass on a statue and ignore the views and the roses. He was a sort of unpractical realist, and he should have known better than to choose Taormina for a week's holiday. We were all irritated by it, except for Violet and Reg. I had reached a pitch of nervous explosion, and one night I shouted at Reg over the pension dinner-table, loaded with the regional dishes of Andermatt and Lucerne. I had heard a muttered group of words under his breath which had succeeded in undermining my confidence. His humble features had suddenly hardened into the flat triangle of a snake, pointing at me over the dish of sauerkraut. It is easy to undermine my confidence, any man in the corner can do it, there is something fascinating about all our inadequacy. Suddenly Violet shouted at me, Sarah and Mrs. Spencer left the room, and Reg, picking up a small pile of picture-postcards, flowed quietly out of the room like a successful confidential clerk.

It was conflicting, too, with Sarah. Everybody is equipped with some sort of radar, some kind of extra-sensory perception, but mine is often defective. Together, we made many friends, white teeth open in those un-English, volcanic Sicilian smiles, and I always imagined that the gift of wine, the lift in the car, the free entry to the night-clubs, was slightly due to some ageing charm, my early Sicilian pilgrimage. But it wasn't. The wine poured, the car door slammed, and the voyage climbed into a dizzy, hopeless climb to impending rape. The discreet waiter who ushered us softly into the club, edged passionate Desperanto to Sarah under the star-hung palm tree, and Taormina subsided into the hopeless Mediterranean anti-climax of winter starvation. We ran away. We took the train to the mountain village of Enna, where, after sunsets, the sky is purple as a fallen grape and there is a frame of witches.

WHEN we returned on the bus to Taormina, we walked up the main street and passed the *Rusticana* art gallery. There was an exhibition of new paintings, sky, olives, cosy white villas, nostalgic summer sea. We gazed at them for a minute or two, laughing, and arrived at the bar near the pension. "They're back," cried North. Everybody was there, plunged in deep, silent depression. The next day we were supposed to leave. "There's an enormous bill behind the bar, in the club, God knows where," said

North. "All is lost," said Reg, with a titter, then subsiding. "All was nearly lost," said Mrs. Spencer. "What do you mean?" I asked her. "Did you pass the *Rusticana*?" she said. "Yes," said Sarah. "Did you see the new paintings?" continued Mrs. Spencer. "Certainly," I said. "Well, they were mine," she said.

She rose, undid her handbag, took out a sheaf of notes, and approached the counter. Reg's face edged to mine. "I say," he said softly. "Do you think we've all behaved well?"

### Out of Reach

Heather rusts dry on the hot brow of the cliff—  
 The crested waves skip into the bay  
 Like small birds flocking, claws flicking;  
 Nearby, two inches from my eye,  
 A caterpillar bows a green grass-stem  
 And my eye fumbles with its padded links or at once  
 Sweeps down and up the gorge. It's hot;  
 The land stands paddling in its sweat;  
 And my sweat dries firm. With the cliff solid  
 And the sun solid on my back I am on my own  
 And the wind presses me back, but all around  
 Is sheer evidence of the suicide of the land:  
 Sliced gorges spouting brine. I'm all right

(Except by poring bushes at the very brink  
 Of blackberries, that trip the tongue  
 On cobbled tartness bounding down  
 Or syrups seeping into space).

*Peter Redgrove*

*Richard Lowenthal*

## The Points of the Compass

OUR thinking about world affairs has come more and more to revolve around the relation between the familiar East-West conflict and that other complex of problems which somebody has termed the “North-South struggle:” the pressure of the under-developed have-not nations, with their new pride of independence and their rapidly growing populations, to obtain both more material aid for their own development and more influence on the world stage.

In both cases, we are dealing with the impact of revolutionary social changes and ideologies on the balance of forces in the world and the prospects of peace or war; yet the two movements concerned—totalitarian Communism on one side and revolutionary nationalism on the other—remain distinct in their nature and effect.

Monistic minds, of course, are forever trying to “simplify” the issue by telling us that the one set of conflicts “really” is a part of the other, or at any rate ought to be. To the Communist doctrinaire, the rise of the new nations is just part of the world-wide struggle against capitalist imperialism, and must naturally be carried on under the guidance of the “socialist camp” headed by the Soviet Union. Just so, to some last-ditch defenders of colonial rule and “white supremacy,” all movements for national independence and racial equality among the peoples of Asia and Africa appear as the result of “Communist machinations”—at least when they first manifest themselves. Conversely, we may be told by well-meaning Leftists that all our troubles with Communist Russia and China are just due to the natural desire of these late-comer nations for “a place in the sun,” which is not basically different from the equivalent desire of, say, India; while hopeful conservatives (reported to include President de Gaulle) see the tensions between advanced, increasingly comfortable,

Russia and lean and hungry China as part of the world-wide “North-South” pattern, and look to a re-alignment of Russia with the old industrial nations of the West in a common effort to control and civilise the have-not upsurge.

The common error of all these attempts to reduce all the world’s troubles to a single formula, to group all the conflicts along a single East-West or North-South axis, is that they underestimate the effectiveness and persistence of human beliefs fanatically held, and hence the crucial importance of the presence or absence of totalitarian Communist ideology for the nature of any particular conflict. But besides the error, there is in all these simplified ideas of the contemporary world also the perception—now dim, now more distinct—of an important truth: that the Communist and Nationalist revolutions of our time, however different in their nature and impact, originate from broadly similar historical and social situations—that they are, in a sense, alternative responses to these situations.

In fact, all those Communist movements which have conquered power wholly or chiefly by their own efforts—those of Russia, Yugoslavia, China, and Vietnam—have done so in societies which were faced with unsolved development problems in various stages. All of them have conceived Communism not merely as a means to achieve an earthly paradise of social justice, but to catch up with the advanced industrial countries and overtake them; and it is now generally recognised that their methods have proved remarkably successful in approaching the latter, though not the former objective. It is, above all, as an engine for the forced modernisation of an underdeveloped society that Communism is to-day admired by large sections of the intelligentsia of the new nations, while it is the peculiar price of using that engine—