

HOMAGE TO SWITZERLAND

PART I

PORTRAIT OF MR. WHEELER IN MONTREUX

INSIDE the station café it was warm and light. The wood of the tables shone from wiping and there were baskets of pretzels in glazed paper sacks. The chairs were carved, but the seats were worn and comfortable. There was a carved wooden clock on the wall and a bar at the far end of the room. Outside the window it was snowing.

Two of the station porters sat drinking new wine at the table under the clock. Another porter came in and said the Simplon-Orient Express was an hour late at Saint-Maurice. He went out. The waitress came over to Mr. Wheeler's table.

'The Express is an hour late, sir,' she said. 'Can I bring you some coffee?'

'If you think it won't keep me awake.'

'Please?' asked the waitress.

'Bring me some,' said Mr. Wheeler.

'Thank you.'

She brought the coffee from the kitchen and Mr. Wheeler looked out the window at the snow falling in the light from the station platform.

'Do you speak other languages besides English?' he asked the waitress.

'Oh, yes, sir. I speak German and French and the dialects.'

'Would you like a drink of something?'

'Oh, no, sir. It is not permitted to drink in the café with the clients.'

'You won't take a cigar?'

'Oh, no, sir. I don't smoke, sir.'

'That is all right,' said Mr. Wheeler. He looked out of the window again, drank the coffee, and lit a cigarette.

'Fräulein,' he called. The waitress came over.

'What would you like, sir?'

'You,' he said.

'You must not joke me like that.'

'I'm not joking.'

'Then you must not say it.'

'I haven't time to argue,' Mr. Wheeler said. 'The train comes in forty minutes. If you'll go upstairs with me I'll give you a hundred francs.'

'You should not say such things, sir. I will ask the porter to speak with you.'

'I don't want a porter,' Mr. Wheeler said. 'Nor a policeman, nor one of those boys that sell cigarettes. I want you.'

'If you talk like that you must go out. You cannot stay here and talk like that.'

'Why don't you go away then? If you go away I can't talk to you.'

The waitress went away. Mr. Wheeler watched to see if she spoke to the porters. She did not.

'Mademoiselle!' he called. The waitress came over. 'Bring me a bottle of Sion, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr. Wheeler watched her go out, then come in with the wine and bring it to his table. He looked toward the clock.

'I'll give you two hundred francs,' he said.

'Please do not say such things.'

'Two hundred francs is a great deal of money.'

'You will not say such things!' the waitress said. She was losing her English. Mr. Wheeler looked at her interestedly.

'Two hundred francs.'

'You are hateful.'

'Why don't you go away then? I can't talk to you if you're not here.'

The waitress left the table and went over to the bar. Mr. Wheeler drank the wine and smiled to himself for some time.

'Mademoiselle,' he called. The waitress pretended not to hear him. 'Mademoiselle,' he called again. The waitress came over.

'You wish something?'

'Very much. I'll give you three hundred francs.'

'You are hateful.'

'Three hundred francs Swiss.'

She went away and Mr. Wheeler looked after her. A porter opened the door. He was the one who had Mr. Wheeler's bags in his charge.

'The train is coming, sir,' he said in French. Mr. Wheeler stood up.

'Mademoiselle,' he called. The waitress came toward the table. 'How much is the wine?'

'Seven francs.'

Mr. Wheeler counted out eight francs and left them on the table. He put on his coat and followed the porter onto the platform where the snow was falling.

'Au revoir, Mademoiselle,' he said. The waitress watched him go. He's ugly, she thought, ugly and hateful. Three hundred francs for a thing that is nothing to do. How many times have I done that for nothing. And no place to go here. If he had sense he would know there was no place. No time and no place to go. Three hundred francs to do that. What people those Americans.

Standing on the cement platform beside his bags, looking down the rails toward the headlight of the train coming through the snow, Mr. Wheeler was thinking that it was very inexpensive sport. He had only spent, actually, aside from the dinner, seven francs for a bottle of wine and a franc for the tip. Seventy-five centimes would have been better. He would have felt better now if the tip had been seventy-five centimes. One franc Swiss is five francs French. Mr. Wheeler was headed for Paris. He was very careful about

money and did not care for women. He had been in that station before and he knew there was no upstairs to go to. Mr. Wheeler never took chances.

PART II

MR. JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT IT AT VEVEY

Inside the station café it was warm and light; the tables were shiny from wiping and on some there were red and white striped tablecloths; and there were blue and white striped tablecloths on the others and on all of them baskets with pretzels in glazed paper sacks. The chairs were carved but the wood seats were worn and comfortable. There was a clock on the wall, a zinc bar at the far end of the room, and outside the window it was snowing. Two of the station porters sat drinking new wine at the table under the clock.

Another porter came in and said the Simplon-Orient Express was an hour late at Saint-Maurice. The waitress came over to Mr. Johnson's table.

'The Express is an hour late, sir,' she said. 'Can I bring you some coffee?'

'If it's not too much trouble.'

'Please?' asked the waitress.

'I'll take some.'

'Thank you.'

She brought the coffee from the kitchen and Mr. Johnson looked out the window at the snow falling in the light from the station platform.

'Do you speak other languages besides English?' he asked the waitress.

'Oh, yes, I speak German and French and the dialects.'

'Would you like a drink of something?'

'Oh, no, sir, it is not permitted to drink in the café with the clients.'

'Have a cigar?'

'Oh, no, sir,' she laughed. 'I don't smoke, sir.'

'Neither do I,' said Johnson. 'It's a dirty habit.'

The waitress went away and Johnson lit a cigarette and drank the coffee. The clock on the wall marked a quarter to ten. His watch was a little fast. The train was due at ten-thirty — an hour late meant eleven-thirty. Johnson called to the waitress.

'Signorina!'

'What would you like, sir?'

'You wouldn't like to play with me?' Johnson asked. The waitress blushed.

'No, sir.'

'I don't mean anything violent. You wouldn't like to make up a party and see the night life of Vevey? Bring a girl friend if you like.'

'I must work,' the waitress said. 'I have my duty here.'

'I know,' said Johnson. 'But couldn't you get a substitute? They used to do that in the Civil War.'

'Oh, no, sir. I must be here myself in the person.'

'Where did you learn your English?'

'At the Berlitz school, sir.'

'Tell me about it,' Johnson said. 'Were the Berlitz undergraduates a wild lot? What about all this necking and petting? Were there many smoothies? Did you ever run into Scott Fitzgerald?'

'Please?'

'I mean were your college days the happiest days of your life? What sort of team did Berlitz have last fall?'

'You are joking, sir?'

'Only feebly,' said Johnson. 'You're an awfully good girl. And you don't want to play with me?'

'Oh, no, sir,' said the waitress. 'Would you like me to bring you something?'

'Yes,' said Johnson. 'Would you bring me the wine list?'

'Yes, sir.'

Johnson walked over with the wine list to the table where the three porters sat. They looked up at him. They were old men.

'Wollen Sie trinken?' he asked. One of them nodded and smiled.

'Oui, monsieur.'

'You speak French?'

'Oui, monsieur.'

'What shall we drink? Connais vous des champagnes?'

'Non, monsieur.'

'Faut les connaître,' said Johnson. 'Fräulein,' he called the waitress. 'We will drink champagne.'

'Which champagne would you prefer, sir?'

'The best,' said Johnson. 'Laquelle est le best?' he asked the porters.

'Le meilleur?' asked the porter who had spoken first.

'By all means.'

The porter took out a pair of gold-rimmed glasses from his coat pocket and looked over the list. He ran his finger down the four typewritten names and prices.

'Sportsman,' he said. 'Sportsman is the best.'

'You agree, gentlemen?' Johnson asked the other porters. The one porter nodded. The other said in French, 'I don't know them personally but I've often heard speak of Sportsman. It's good.'

'A bottle of Sportsman,' Johnson said to the waitress. He looked at the price on the wine card: eleven francs Swiss. 'Make it two Sportsmen. Do you mind if I sit here with you?' he asked the porter who had suggested Sportsman.

'Sit down. Put yourself here, please.' The porter smiled at him. He was folding his spectacles and putting them away in their case. 'Is it the gentleman's birthday?'

'No,' said Johnson. 'It's not a fête. My wife has decided to divorce me.'

'So,' said the porter. 'I hope not.' The other porter shook his head. The third porter seemed a little deaf.

'It is doubtless a common experience,' said Johnson, 'like the first visit to the dentist or the first time a girl is unwell, but I have been upset.'

'It is understandable,' said the oldest porter. 'I understand it.'

'None of you gentlemen is divorced?' Johnson asked. He had stopped clowning with the language and was speaking good French now and had been for some time.

'No,' said the porter who had ordered Sportsman. 'They don't divorce much here. There are gentlemen who are divorced but not many.'

'With us,' said Johnson, 'it's different. Practically everyone is divorced.'

'That's true,' the porter confirmed. 'I've read it in the paper.'

'I myself am somewhat in retard,' Johnson went on. 'This is the first time I have been divorced. I am thirty-five.'

'Mais vous êtes encore jeune,' said the porter. He explained to the two others. 'Monsieur n'a que trente-cinq ans.' The other porters nodded. 'He's very young,' said one.

'And it is really the first time you've been divorced?' asked the porter.

'Absolutely,' said Johnson. 'Please open the wine, mademoiselle.'

'And it is very expensive?'

'Ten thousand francs.'

'Swiss money?'

'No, French money.'

'Oh, yes. Two thousand francs Swiss. All the same it's not cheap.'

'No.'

'And why does one do it?'

'One is asked to.'

'But why do they ask that?'

'To marry someone else.'

'But it's idiotic.'

'I agree with you,' said Johnson. The waitress filled the four glasses. They all raised them.

'Prosit,' said Johnson.

'A votre santé, monsieur,' said the porter. The other two porters said 'Salut'. The champagne tasted like sweet pink cider.

'Is it a system always to respond in a different language in Switzerland?' Johnson asked.

'No,' said the porter. 'French is more cultivated. Besides, this is la Suisse Romande.'

'But you speak German?'

'Yes. Where I come from they speak German.'

'I see,' said Johnson, 'and you say you have never been divorced?'

'No. It would be too expensive. Besides, I have never married.'

'Ah,' said Johnson. 'And these other gentlemen?'

'They are married.'

'You like being married?' Johnson asked one of the porters.

'What?'

'You like the married state?'

'Oui. C'est normale.'

'Exactly,' said Johnson. 'Et vous, monsieur?'

'Ça va,' said the other porter.

'Pour moi,' said Johnson, 'ça ne va pas.'

'Monsieur is going to divorce,' the first porter explained.

'Oh,' said the second porter.

'Ah ha,' the third porter said.

'Well,' said Johnson, 'the subject seems to be exhausted. You're not interested in my troubles,' he addressed the first porter.

'But, yes,' said the porter.

'Well, let's talk about something else.'

'As you wish.'

'What can we talk about?'

'You do the sport?'

'No,' said Johnson. 'My wife does, though.'

'What do you do for amusement?'

'I am a writer.'

'Does that make much money?'

'No. But later on when you get known it does.'

'It is interesting?'

'No,' said Johnson, 'it is not interesting. I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have to leave you. Will you please drink the other bottle?'

'But the train does not come for three-quarters of an hour.'

'I know,' said Johnson. The waitress came and he paid for the wine and his dinner.

'You going out, sir?' she asked.

'Yes,' said Johnson, 'just for a little walk. I'll leave my bags here.'

He put on his muffler, his coat, and his hat. Outside the snow was falling heavily. He looked back through the window at the three porters sitting at the table. The waitress was filling their glasses from the last wine of the opened bottle. She took the unopened bottle back to the bar. That makes them three francs something apiece, Johnson thought. He turned and walked down the platform. Inside the café he had thought that talking about it would blunt it; but it had not blunted it; it had only made him feel nasty.

PART III

THE SON OF A FELLOW MEMBER AT TERRITET

In the station café at Territet it was a little too warm; the lights were bright and the tables shiny from polishing. There were baskets with pretzels in glazed paper sacks on the tables and cardboard pads for beer glasses in order that the moist glasses would not make rings on the wood. The chairs were carved but the wooden seats were worn and quite comfortable. There was a clock on the wall, a bar at the far end

of the room, and outside the window it was snowing. There was an old man drinking coffee at a table under the clock and reading the evening paper. A porter came in and said the Simplon-Orient Express was an hour late at Saint-Maurice. The waitress came over to Mr. Harris's table. Mr. Harris had just finished dinner.

'The Express is an hour late, sir. Can I bring you some coffee?'

'If you like.'

'Please?' asked the waitress.

'All right,' said Mr. Harris.

'Thank you, sir,' said the waitress.

She brought the coffee from the kitchen and Mr. Harris put sugar in it, crunched the lumps with his spoon, and looked out the window at the snow falling in the light from the station platform.

'Do you speak other languages besides English?' he asked the waitress.

'Oh, yes, sir. I speak German and French and the dialects.'

'Which do you like best?'

'They are all very much the same, sir. I can't say I like one better than another.'

'Would you like a drink of something or a coffee?'

'Oh, no, sir, it is not permitted to drink in the café with the clients.'

'You wouldn't take a cigar?'

'Oh, no, sir,' she laughed. 'I don't smoke, sir.'

'Neither do I,' said Harris. 'I don't agree with David Belasco.'

'Please?'

'Belasco. David Belasco. You can always tell him because he has his collar on backwards. But I don't agree with him. Then, too, he's dead now.'

'Will you excuse me, sir?' asked the waitress.

'Absolutely,' said Harris. He sat forward in the chair and looked out of the window. Across the room the old man

had folded his paper. He looked at Mr. Harris and then picked up his coffee cup and saucer and walked to Harris's table.

'I beg your pardon if I intrude,' he said in English, 'but it has just occurred to me that you might be a member of the National Geographic Society.'

'Please sit down,' Harris said. The gentleman sat down.

'Won't you have another coffee or a liqueur?'

'Thank you,' said the gentleman.

'Won't you have a kirsch with me?'

'Perhaps. But you must have it with me.'

'No, I insist.' Harris called the waitress. The old gentleman took out from an inside pocket of his coat a leather pocket-book. He took off a wide rubber band and drew out several papers, selected one, and handed it to Harris.

'That is my certificate of membership,' he said. 'Do you know Frederick J. Roussel in America?'

'I'm afraid I don't.'

'I believe he is very prominent.'

'Where does he come from? Do you know what part of the States?'

'From Washington, of course. Isn't that the headquarters of the Society?'

'I believe it is.'

'You believe it is. Aren't you sure?'

'I've been away a long time,' Harris said.

'You're not a member, then?'

'No. But my father is. He's been a member for a great many years.'

'Then he would know Frederick J. Roussel. He is one of the officers of the Society. You will observe that it is by Mr. Roussel that I was nominated for membership.'

'I'm awfully glad.'

'I am sorry you are not a member. But you could obtain nomination through your father?'

'I think so,' said Harris. 'I must when I go back.'

'I would advise you to,' said the gentleman. 'You see the magazine, of course?'

'Absolutely.'

'Have you seen the number with the coloured plates of the North American fauna?'

'Yes. I have it in Paris.'

'And the number containing the panorama of the volcanoes of Alaska?'

'That was a wonder.'

'I enjoyed very much, too, the wild animal photographs of George Shiras three.'

'They were damned fine.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'They were excellent. That fellow Shiras —'

'You call him that fellow?'

'We're old friends,' said Harris.

'I see. You know George Shiras three. He must be very interesting.'

'He is. He's about the most interesting man I know.'

'And do you know George Shiras two? Is he interesting too?'

'Oh, he's not so interesting.'

'I should imagine he would be very interesting.'

'You know, a funny thing. He's not so interesting. I've often wondered why.'

'H'm,' said the gentleman. 'I should have thought anyone in that family would be interesting.'

'Do you remember the panorama of the Sahara Desert?' Harris asked.

'The Sahara Desert? That was nearly fifteen years ago.'

'That's right. That was one of my father's favourites.'

'He doesn't prefer the newer numbers?'

'He probably does. But he was very fond of the Sahara panorama.'

'It was excellent. But to me its artistic value far exceeded its scientific interest.'

'I don't know,' said Harris. 'The wind blowing all that sand and that Arab with his camel kneeling toward Mecca.'

'As I recall, the Arab was standing holding the camel.'

'You're quite right,' said Harris. 'I was thinking of Colonel Lawrence's book.'

'Lawrence's book deals with Arabia, I believe.'

'Absolutely,' said Harris. 'It was the Arab reminded me of it.'

'He must be a very interesting young man.'

'I believe he is.'

'Do you know what he is doing now?'

'He's in the Royal Air Force.'

'And why does he do that?'

'He likes it.'

'Do you know if he belongs to the National Geographic Society?'

'I wonder if he does.'

'He would make a very good member. He is the sort of person they want as a member. I would be very happy to nominate him if you think they would like to have him.'

'I think they would.'

'I have nominated a scientist from Vevey and a colleague of mine from Lauzanne and they were both elected. I believe they would be very pleased if I nominated Colonel Lawrence.'

'It's a splendid idea,' said Harris. 'Do you come here to the café often?'

'I come here for coffee after dinner.'

'Are you in the University?'

'I am not active any longer.'

'I'm just waiting for the train,' said Harris. 'I'm going up to Paris and sail from Havre for the States.'

'I have never been to America. But I would like to go very much. Perhaps I shall attend a meeting of the society some time. I would be very happy to meet your father.'

'I'm sure he would have liked to meet you but he died last year. Shot himself, oddly enough.'

'I am very truly sorry. I am sure his loss was a blow to science as well as to his family.'

'Science took it awfully well.'

'This is my card,' Harris said. 'His initials were E. J. instead of E. D. I know he would have liked to know you.'

'It would have been a great pleasure.' The gentleman took out a card from the pocket-book and gave it to Harris. It read:

DR. SIGISMUND WYER, PH.D.

Member of the National Geographic
Society, Washington, D C., U S A

'I will keep it very carefully,' Harris said.