

Miss Reid's Way

J.B. JONES

“And that of course is what Miss Reid was. She was a crashing, she was a stupendous, she was an excruciating bore.”

W. S. Maugham

The short story, “Winter Cruise” is one of Maugham’s funniest ; it is also one of his most profound. It concerns Miss Reid, a middle-aged spinster from Cornwall, where she owns a tea shop on the coast. Because her business is seasonal, she takes a cruise somewhere every winter ; she believes that travel should be an educational experience. With this in mind, she books passage on the *Friedrich Weber*, a freighter bound for Catagena, Colombia from Hamburg, Germany. The ship also calls at Plymouth, where Miss Reid boards, and at Port-au-Prince, Haiti. So, though she carries freight like lumber, cattle, mules, or potatoes, the freighter also carries a few passengers.

There are a number of interesting themes in this short story ; cultural miscommunication is one of the most obvious : it is a German ship and Miss Reid is an English passenger. She practices a form of linguistic imperialism at mealtimes and at other points in the story, whenever in fact she interacts with the crew. She assumes that the captain and his officers will want to speak English at every opportunity. Her presence is a stroke of good luck for them. She reprovably says, “Now I won’t have you saying things I don’t understand. You ought all to make the most of your good luck in having me all to yourselves to practice your English” (WC ; 243). From Port-au Prince onward, she is the only passenger.

Another theme is good intentions gone wrong. The problem with Miss Reid is that she means well. She only wants to “interest and amuse” the crew because she is “determined to bring a little gaiety into their dull lives” (ibid.). One of the most amusing scenes involves the ship’s doctor. He is “a man of sixty with thin grey hair, a grey moustache, and small bright blue eyes. He was a silent, bitter man, and however hard Miss Reid tried to bring him into the conversation it was almost impossible to get a word out of him” (ibid.). One morning she sees him sitting on deck with a book, so she finds a chair and places it next to his.

“Are you fond of reading, Doctor?” she said brightly.

“Yes.”

“So am I. And I suppose like all Germans you’re musical.”

“I’m fond of music.”

“So am I. The moment I saw you I thought you looked clever.”

He gave her a brief look and pursing his lips went on reading. Miss Reid was not disconcerted.

“But of course one can always read. I always prefer a good talk to a good book. Don’t you?”

“No.”

“How very interesting. Now do tell me why?”

“I can’t give you a reason.”

“That’s very strange, isn’t it? But then I always think human nature is strange. I’m terribly interested in people, you know. I always like doctors, they know so much about human nature, but I could tell you some things that would surprise even you. You learn a great deal about people if you run a tea shop like I do, that’s to say if you keep your eyes open.”

The doctor got up.

(WC ; 243-44)

Notice Miss Reid’s use of a cultural stereotype, “... like all Germans you’re musical” and her reliance on platitudes. She thinks in very simple and safe terms. To the German crew, especially the captain, she is a “tedious woman” (ibid.) who speaks in “truisms” (WC ; 249); he complains that at a typical gathering onboard there was not “a commonplace that she forbore to express” (ibid.). Some examples of her platitudes, or perhaps they are “words of wisdom” :

“After all, human nature is more important than literature.”

“... I think if you’re interested in everyone, everyone will be interested in you.”

“Practice makes perfect”

“... if a lady is a lady a gentlemen will be a gentlemen.”

“I’m never bored...so, I’m never boring.”

“... one has to take things as they come.”

of special importance is :

“Kind hearts are more than coronets and simple faith than Norman Blood ...”

and of course :

“There’s no doubt that travel is a wonderful education.”

However much of a bore she is, there is also a deep kindness in Miss Reid ; she senses the doctor is a lonely rather sad man and she is determined to make friends with him, even if he is not interested. Maugham has given us the abovementioned scene between the doctor and Miss Reid with a specific intention : this is a prelude to a later scene between the two, one of the most powerful in the story.

A day or two after the scene on deck, the doctor is not feeling at all well. When he has one of his “attacks” of what he describes as an internal malady, he only wants to be left alone. Because his cabin is small and stuffy, he settles himself on a deck chair outside. His heart sinks when he sees Miss Reid taking her daily exercise, but he feels that if he pretends to be asleep, she will leave him alone. How wrong he is :

But when she had passed him half a dozen times she stopped in front of him and stood quite still. Though he kept his eyes closed he knew that she was looking at him.

“Is there anything I can do, Doctor?” she said.

He started.

“Why, what should there be?”

He gave her a glance and saw that her eyes were deeply troubled.

“You look dreadfully ill,” she said.

“I’m in great pain.”

“I know. I can see that. Can’t something be done?”

“No, it’ll pass off presently.”

She hesitated a moment then went away. Presently she returned.

“You look so uncomfortable with no cushions or anything. I’ve brought you my own pillow that I always travel with. Do let me put it behind your head.”

He felt at that moment too ill to remonstrate. She lifted his head gently and put the soft pillow behind it. It really did make him feel more comfortable. She passed her hand across his forehead and it was cool and soft.

“Poor dear,” she said. “I know what doctors are. They haven’t the first idea how to take care of themselves.”

She left him, but in a minute or two returned with a chair and a bag. The doctor when he saw her gave a twitch of anguish.

“Now I’m not going to let you talk, I’m just going to sit beside you and knit. I always think it’s a comfort when one isn’t feeling well to have someone near.”

She sat down and taking an unfinished muffler out of her bag began busily to ply her needles. She said never a word. And strangely enough the doctor found her

company a solace. No one else on board had even noticed that he was ill, he had felt lonely, and the sympathy of that crashing bore was grateful to him. It soothed him to see her silently working and presently he fell asleep. When he awoke she was still working. She gave him a little smile, but did not speak. His pain had left him and he felt much better.

(WC ; 244-45)

Miss Reid is a crashing bore who genuinely cares about her fellow creatures. And because she is well-meaning and English, she takes action to help others and to cheer those around her. She may not realize how dull she is socially, but she fully recognizes suffering, probably because she has experienced it herself. Maugham seems to suggest that her innate goodness is what really matters ; socially, she may be a failure, culturally she may be insensitive, but finally, she is kindness personified. She may believe various stereotypes of the Germans, and they of her, but underneath these mistaken attitudes lies a reservoir of good will on both sides, for at the end of the story, some of crew are in tears as they wave her goodbye at the dock.

Even though she has been kind to him, the doctor suggests that the reason Miss Reid is so meddling and such a bore is that she needs a man. He is led to this suggestion when the captain complains, “At dinner today Miss Reid was more talkative than ever. Hans and I have decided that something must be done about it” (WC ; 245). The doctor’s comment: “She’s not a bad old soul; all she wants is a lover” (WC ; 246). The doctor feels “a lover would bring her peace” (ibid.). A comic scene follows where each officer suggests another for the job of Miss Reid’s lover; each finds an excuse (the doctor claims he’s too old; the mate that he has just married) until someone suggests the young, blond radio operator. He is told to report to Captain Erdmann. The young man is:

... above the middle height, with square shoulders and narrow hips, erect and slender, his tanned, smooth skin looked as though a razor had never touched it, he had large eyes of a startling blue and a mane of curling golden hair. He was a perfect specimen of Teutonic manhood. He was so, so vigorous, so much alive that even when he stood some way from you, you felt the glow of his vitality.

(WC ; 247)

This is in contrast to Miss Reid, who is “drab and dull” (ibid.). She has a “long, stupid face” (ibid.); she looks about forty. This unlikely pair is brought together in the fevered mind of the captain, who explains to the radio operator that he must become her lover because “It

appears to be an old English custom for unmarried women of exalted rank to submit themselves to the embraces of a lover at this time of year. The company is anxious that Miss Reid should be treated exactly as she would be on an English ship, and we trust that if she is satisfied, with her aristocratic connexions she will be able to persuade many of her friends to take cruises in the line's ships" (WC ; 248). This absurd explanation fails to convince even this callow boy and he asks to be excused from this "duty." The captain informs him refusal is not an option. He asks what he should do when he gets to her cabin, and the captain replies, "Act naturally" (WC ; 249); so, being a radio operator, when he gets to her cabin at eleven that night, he asks her if she wants to send a radio message. He explains later to the captain, "Sir, you told me to act naturally. I'm a radio operator. I thought it natural to ask her if she wanted to send a radio. I didn't know what else to say" (WC ; 251). The captain tells him the honor of Germany is in his hands. He must do his duty. That evening, he knocks at her door again and tells her he has a message ; she tells him to slip it under the door. She opens the envelope and reads : "Happy New Year. Stop. Peace and goodwill to all men. Stop. You are very beautiful. Stop. I love you. Stop. I must speak to you. Stop. Signed : Radio Operator" (ibid.). Miss Reid "read this through twice. Then she slowly took off her spectacles and hid them under a scarf. She opened the door. 'Come in,' she said" (ibid.). The scene ends here.

A change has indeed taken place in Miss Reid. The next day is New Year's Eve and at dinner, Miss Reid enters later than usual and when the officers greet her, she merely bows silently. The silence is what they notice. "She ate a good dinner, but uttered never a word. Her silence was uncanny" (ibid.). After dinner, the Captain congratulates the doctor on the change in Miss Reid.

At the celebrations that evening, they sing, pull crackers and drink champagne. The doctor notices Miss Reid looking at the radio operator :

"He's a good-looking fellow, isn't he?" said the doctor.

Miss Reid turned round and looked at the doctor coolly.

"Who?"

"The radio operator. I thought you were looking at him."

"Which is he?"

(WC : 252)

The doctor thinks of the duplicity of women and points out the radio operator. "Oh, of course, I recognize him now. You know, I never think it matters what a man looks like. I'm so much more interested in a man's brains than in his looks" (ibid.). That evening they all get a little drunk, and though Miss Reid drinks just as much as the men, she does not lose her dignity.

The following evening at dinner each crewmember finds a small gift at his place at the table. Each parcel is tied with a pink ribbon and a note saying "Happy New Year." Miss Reid, who is already seated, replies to their questioning glances: "You've all been so very kind to me I thought I'd like to give each of you a little present. There wasn't much choice at Port au Prince, so you mustn't expect too much" (WC ; 253). There are briar pipes for the captain, silk handkerchiefs for the doctor, a cigar-case for the mate and some ties for the chief engineer. After dinner, Miss Reid retires to her cabin to rest. The officers feel guilty about the way they have behaved toward her :

"I'm a little ashamed of myself," he (the mate) said at last.

The captain was pensive and it was plain that he too was a trifle uneasy.

"I wonder if we ought to have played that trick on Miss Reid," he said. "She's a good old soul and she's not rich; she's a woman who earns her own living. She must have spent the best part of a hundred marks on these presents. I almost wish we'd left her alone."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"You wanted her silenced and I've silenced her."

"When all's said and done, it wouldn't have hurt us to listen to her chatter for three weeks more," said the mate.

(WC ; 253)

Now they become concerned. They remember at dinner that she "had spoken hardly a word during the meal" and the captain feels "there's something ominous in her quietness" (ibid.). So for the remainder of the cruise "those men spoilt Miss Reid outrageously. They treated her with the consideration they would have shown to someone who was convalescent after a long and dangerous illness ... they played dominoes with her. They played chess with her. They played bridge with her. They engaged her in conversation" (WC ; 254). However, Miss Reid has indeed changed, for she "seemed to regard them with something very like distain ; you might almost have thought that she looked upon those men and their efforts to be amiable as pleasantly ridiculous. She seldom spoke unless spoken to. She read detective stories and at night sat on deck looking at the stars. She lived a life of her own" (ibid.).

As the story and the journey come to a close, one feels both the German crew and the English lady have learned something about each other. They all come to say goodbye to her at the gangway. She says, "You've been very kind to me, you've all been very kind to me, I don't know what I've done to deserve it. I've been very happy with you. I shall never forget you" (ibid.). As she speaks, tears run down her cheeks. The captain asks if he may kiss her, and

though “she was taller by half a head” she “bent down and he planted a fat kiss on one wet cheek and a fat kiss on the other. She turned to the mate and the doctor. They both kissed her” (ibid.). The captain has tears in his eyes too as he watches her walk down the companionway. When she reaches the quay, she “looked up and waved to someone on the boat deck” (ibid.). The captain asks to whom she is waving, “The radio operator” comes the answer from the doctor.

Miss Reid’s friend, Miss Price, meets her on the quay to welcome her home. Later at Miss Price’s house they have an early cup of tea :

“Your trip was a success, wasn’t it?”

“A distinct success. It was very nice.”

“And you didn’t mind being with all those Germans?”

“Of course they’re not like English people. One has to get used to their ways. They sometimes do things that—well, that English people wouldn’t do, you know. But I always think that one has to take things as they come.”

“What sort of things do you mean?”

Miss Reid looked at her calmly. Her long stupid face had a placid look, and Miss Price never noticed that in the eyes was a strangely mischievous twinkle.

“Things of no importance really. Just funny, unexpected, rather nice things. There’s no doubt that travel is a wonderful education” (WC ; 255).

While the way Miss Reid behaves at the beginning of the story may seem very selfish and ethnocentric (her need for them to speak English, her domination of any conversation), and while it is true her platitudes are all limiting and show a limited mind, her personal kindness to the men on the ship reveals someone who sees no difference between Germans and Englishmen, someone who is willing to place others before herself ; in addition, at the end of the story she is markedly different. Her way has changed. Was the doctor’s remedy really effective? What has she experienced and what has she learned on the ship? What have the Germans learned? This story was published after World War One, so Maugham is probably suggesting that one way to overcome broader cultural misunderstanding is through the kind of close personal relationships Miss Reid and the crew of the *Friedrich Weber* have formed. E. M. Forster’s recommendation that in human relations we need “only connect” is appropriate to Maugham’s story.