

ANTON WILDGANS*

AN EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIA

Translated by Noel Macainsh

I no longer recall the river's name, only that we travelled on a harbour-steamer for about an hour up-stream from Sydney, so as to visit Miss Ethel Veloschi. My friend and I had got to know her on the German liner that had brought us across from Ceylon to Australia.

She was one of those rare beauties made possible by the racial mixture of her continent. The streets of an Australian metropolis repeatedly surprise the wanderer by the almost improbable charms of their young women. One thinks of the multiplicity of nations that have sent and still send their migrants here. Englishmen, Spaniards, Germans and Jews, Indians, Malayans and Japanese form a mixed people, whose basis has been laid by colonies of those departed from various States about the middle of the previous century. Hence these young women. By and large, their slender figures suggest the type of the English girl, but they otherwise combine racial features quite remote from each other. Blondes, redheads and brunettes predominate. However, a golden blonde often has the terra-cotta tint of the southern European girl as well as her dark, vivacious eyes. Others again have dark hair but their skin is white and their eyes are blue or sea-green. Such a striking inspiration of Nature was the beauty of Miss Ethel Veloschi, who, in the blue veins beneath her white skin that shimmered like ivory, bore Italian blood from her father and Anglo-Saxon blood from her mother, while

*Anton Wildgans (1881-1932) was a well-known Viennese writer who came to Australia in 1904. The account is taken from his *Musik der Kindheit und andere autobiographische Skizzen*, Vienna, Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau, 1953, pp. 202-8. My thanks are due to Professor Leslie Bodi of Monash University for drawing attention to this story, in his essay "Antipodean Inversion and Reality," published in *Captain James Cook—Image and Impact, South Sea Discoveries and the World of Letters*, Volume II, edited and introduced by Walter Veit, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1979, pp. 76-94. The style of the story accords with Professor Bodi's description of Wildgans as "a poet of refined *fin de siècle* sensibility." N.M.

on her head she bore a heavy crown of chestnut-brown hair and in her eyes the grey-green reflection of a northern sea. On certain evenings when there was dancing and music on board she was like a seventeen-year old although she was exactly ten years older. Admittedly, on some mornings her eyes were darkly shadowed like those of women who are conscious of all too many years of lonely nights. At such times her hands seemed weak, and innumerable pale red-brown freckles emerged on them; on such days she also had a kind of melancholy staleness in her nature, something old-maidish and shrill in her talk and movements, something shy, reproachful in her glances, something that slightly shifted her regrettable lot out of the sphere of sympathy into that of the cheap mockery with which those who are blossoming and thoughtlessly healthy always contemplate the fate of the aging, unmarried woman.

Nevertheless both of us fell a little in love with her, each according to his own character. That which was past, irretrievable in her features, was one more charm for the one of us, while for the other it reduced her power of attraction. In other words: one of us was moved by what was still there, the other by what she no longer possessed. Her shy and yet thirsting inclination, unspoken but betrayed in a thousand subtle details, turned to my friend who was of course more depressed than cheered by the civil hopes that were attached to his person.

It was also these hopes that had occasioned the European journey of this woman and her mother. It was not the first time that she had participated in the "Season" in London. But this time had been the last time. She told us all this with a composure reconciled to things irrevocably gone. When I allowed myself to put the obvious question, whether there were not people also in Australia—I avoided the word "men"—she only replied with a certain despairing smile: "Come and visit us when you are in Sydney. You will see." We followed this invitation.

A wooden landing-jetty painted white stood far out into the river dried out at its banks. The steamer tied up. We hastened onto land and saw Miss Ethel across from us, awaiting us with an open buggy drawn by two ponies. It was her finest hour; she wore a white sports costume and a panama decorated with

white emu-feathers. At first glance, her cheerfulness seemed to me more than would be justified by the visit of two young people who were basically still strangers. I was also a little struck at the indifference with which she directed me as the unavoidable third into the well of the carriage, while she invited my friend to take his place alongside her on the driver's seat. She steered. We travelled—but through what a district!

So long as we kept along the river, there were traces of vegetation present. But then, into the country, there was only a grey plain sparsely studded with pale, singed weeds, from which, here and there, the skeleton of some kind of tree loomed up like a giant. The colour of the whole country was hardly to be distinguished from the wide road full of cracks. Heads of sheep sometimes serrated the comfortless linearity of the horizon. We passed groups of villa-like houses. The sight of this kind of housing depressed me and I began to entertain various melancholy suspicions which, a quarter of an hour later, proved themselves correct.

We stopped in front of such a house; it stood in the middle of a paddock fenced around with barbed wire. Some trunks that seemed to be rammed into the rocks were shyly trying to be trees. A few paths lay woven through the green, as though laid out by ruler and compass. Small sandstone figures and containers which, however, held no water formed here and there the centre-points of presumed areas of lawn. The house itself, all of whose windows were blocked out with roller-blinds against the tropically glowing sun, made the impression of a cholera-barracks on which a grotesque humour had conferred the architecture of a villa. The sun radiated off the iron roof with an enervating glare. The walls appeared likewise to be of iron painted a clay-colour. No sound was to be heard; no dog sprang towards us. Only an old servant emerged from somewhere and took the horses and carriage into his keeping.

In the hall, which had a high window hung with coarse fabric and which otherwise was rather comfortably furnished with Persian carpets and charming cane-furniture, we were greeted by Ethel's mother. She excused her husband who could not come away from his work-place at this time. She then left us alone

with the young woman whose happy endearments could hardly contain her joy.

After tea, Miss Ethel invited us to inspect the 'garden,' the tennis-court, her breeding-hens and riding-track, and I noticed that she clung to these words with an emphasis that made the existence of other pleasures in her life seem improbable. Since the invitation, accompanied by lit-up eyes, audible breathing and a perplexed side-glance at myself, was chiefly directed to my friend, I pleaded aversion to the great heat of the afternoon and stayed back alone in the relatively cool room.

This stillness was unending, was like some invisible corporal being from which a silent rain of molecules was let loose over everything. Gradually there came over me the feeling of being an insect that had been enclosed in a lump of amber for thousands of years. My glance fell upon some red poppies in a Tiffany vase, which made the tea-table inviting. I noticed that the stalks did not stand in water, and I realised that the flowers were deceptively made of silk and wire. Miss Ethel had already expressed regret that the table-cloth was not made of linen but of waxed cotton, and that the water available sufficed only for the washing of what was absolutely necessary. I sipped from the water, in my glass. It had the insipid, stale taste of rainwater unnaturally overcooled by addition of ice. These seemingly inconsequential-details affected me uncomfortably. My glance, now anxious, ranged across the walls. Pictures hung on them. All kinds. Mostly reproductions of the kind of paintings that once were to be found in almost every dwelling, in every coffee-house, in every barber's shop of our continent. But here time had stood still. Whereas we in Europe now already kept pictures of women by Asti, here one could still see madonnas by Kaulbach, oil-prints after older English pictures of the hunt *par force* and Thusnelda in the triumphal procession of Germanicus. On the consoles and small tables stood innumerable little figures, each a piece of dead experience. These glasses witnessed to a stay in Venice. My God, if in this grave of a room they stirred up memories of the squares and narrow streets of that city flooded with dizzying possibilities! It seemed to me as if I had to squash the slender glasses in my fist, so as to prevent this.

And here—an album of postcards, mostly addressed by Miss Veloschi to her father. Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, Rome, Naples, a few gaily printed leaves, irretrievable realities turned to paper; beyond Suez swept through with breathtaking life, here become yellowing remnants, on which fading inscriptions could not announce that the great event was still to come. And, despite this, almost always the names of men written below, given names ringing with intimacy, and cool surnames—written in hieroglyphs, an Odyssey of wishes that never found their goal.

Ethel and my friend came in again. She with the uncertain vivacity that would like to conceal some kind of disappointment, he with the expression of a man who has carefully tried to circumvent a painful situation, and then, after its happy surmounting, expresses a certain harmlessly meant gaiety, an ignorance in face of an offered opportunity, which, with a woman less noble than Miss Ethel, would be punished with sarcastic allusions. But she only concerned herself with everything in the world so as to hold him fast for another half hour.

It was the despairing wingbeats of a bird that had flown in error out of the blue infinity of heaven into a stuffily limited room. She requested my friend to play a little on the piano; she herself could not, and at present in this period of heat the water that would otherwise supply the electric power to drive the pianola had dried up. He played a few chords. A few broken notes of song freed themselves from her throat. Then the gramophone. Hits from the great cities of the earth, a few famous tenors, long-forgotten-loved scraps of orchestral pieces. The hoarse asthmatic lungs of the instruments bellowed in the reverberant deathly stillness, wild, brutish, harsh. The electrical piano, the gramophone, the poppy-blooms of silk, the tablecloth of waxed cotton—pure surrogates for realities, which for millions of others, even for the poor and poorest of people, are unremarked commonplaces. Things that one accepts without going down on one's knees in thanks for them, present here only in artificial imitation: the voices of people, the intoxicating swell of orchestras, the white, fragrant pliancy of freshly ironed table-coverings—the red streamers of fields of golden corn.

As we took our leave of Miss Ethel her face was furrowed

with many dark paths, over which caravans of dead wishes passed in sad pilgrimage. When I bent over her hand for the mute last kiss, it was moist and cold. "Come again soon," she said to us on leaving. But all three of us knew that we would never see each other again.

BETTINA CUMMINS

WANTED KNOWN

We are not past it
expectantly we attend seminars and workshops
and after the break-up party of chicken and white wine
fall asleep
puzzling over acrostics in the latest lit. mags.

To dream of editors
who having rejected thirty birthdays-
are bored with the rape of Anglo Saxon maidens
and might enjoy a mild flirtation
(strictly platonic)
with ladies of maturity.