

Alda De Franceschi

THE NED'S ROOM

I am an old room in the oldest hotel in the oldest city in the world. Countless travellers have laid their restless wayfarers' weariyness and the burden of their sins on my bed, but only one of them still lives in my memory, the most vital, restless boy in the world, the little Mercury from Oxford, factotum for the 1911-1914 English archeological expedition to Carchemish. I was the base for his forays into nearby Aleppo, where he spent frantic days besieged by merchants and various postulants, buying ancient seals, acting as arbitrator in tribal disputes, hiring labourers for the dig or spying on the movements of their German rivals. My daydreamer relaxed like a great gentleman, receiving foreign guests and eminent travellers or adventurers until late into the night, when he would then fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, often dropping off over his beloved classics. In the thousands of pages written about him, I've never found a trace of this secret of mine. Indeed, the hotels who gave him hospitality after us – the Shepherd in Cairo, the Paris Continental, the little hotels along the English coast and the Union Jack Club hostels – were only able to watch over many sleepless nights haunted by recurring night-

mares. There is still an old photo of him from almost a century ago on the dresser in the dining room. However, the picture of a very fair, impertinent young man doesn't do justice to the splendour of those grey-blue eyes that could read inside you with the omniscience of a benevolent god. And how vain he was! How often my mirror reflected him as he strutted around, wrapped in colourful Syrian robes that showed off his agile figure, making him look even younger than his young age. So untidy in Western clothes that were always rumpled, he knew how to wear the local dress with extraordinary elegance and dignity, my Ned, a salamander of many lives. What do I know about his numerous existences? You see, there's like an underground current of information between us rooms of illustrious men, and then, we avidly read the information about them in the many books left behind by our forgetful guests. That is how I learned that malicious biographers have disputed the merits of my boy. But which artist is greater than one who knew how to invent for himself the most incredible and romantic life ever lived? The very first myth created by the press, impersonated by splendid actors much taller than he was, painted, sculpted, admired by great intellectuals, even then he revealed his precocious literary vocation, writing wonderful, long letters on my desk. They were perhaps a little too erudite, but always redeemed by that sulphurous spirit that he was to maintain even in the quiet desperation of the last days of his short life. An elf who was afraid of growing old, the eternal adolescent drugged by speed. Here he used his feet and trains a lot, the same trains he would later blow up. They say he detested women, but that's not entirely true. He was titillated by their interest, and for some he could prove to be an extraordinary friend, something very rare for those times. Three women who were important in his life passed through here: Gertrude Bell,

Fareedah el Akle and Winifred Fontana. If Gertrude, the queen of spies, could not bring herself to make way for that "dear boy", her pupil, in the art of the "great game", if Fareedah, his Arabic teacher, had sublimated her affection for him in their common love for the Arab people, Winifred accepted him for the force of nature that he was, caustic, irritating and erratic, but capable of generosity and unsuspected delicacy. She was the only one to listen patiently to him without judging. Bright, cheerful, a good mother, for this he willingly became an older brother to her children, for whom he invented always different games. The wife of the British consul in Aleppo was irredeemably enchanted by him, with a sentiment far above any kind of love. Winifred would have prolonged for ever the happy light-heartedness of their boat rides on the Euphrates, at times gladdened by little local orchestras engaged by him to please her. While her young friend swam, she tried to trace those beloved lineaments on her sketchpad, surprising herself guiltily admiring the delicate skin reddened by the hot Eastern sun, the unrepeatably blue of his eyes, the strong curve of his nose. She would have liked to torment that chiseled profile with caresses to provoke the uncontrollable laughter of the naughty little rascal that she adored. But sensing something intangible, obscure in him, she contented herself with living in his shadow for the short time it would last. In the spring of 1914, with war impending, the digs were suspended

I witnessed their last encounter. If hotel rooms had eyes, I would have cried for Winifred's broken heart, for Ned, who would soon know the woes of life. He was the symbol of those clean young men with the power to give joy, to make women and children happy, of whom he would speak later, criticizing the disasters of the war that would make a myth of him, while refusing him any affection.

"Winnie, don't let's lose touch, let's write to each oth-

er as soon as possible; I'll keep your spirits up with my usual funny stories..."

"Ned, there's never been anyone as young as you, don't let the old world steal your splendid youth. Promise me that you'll keep the memory of this season in some part of your heart!"

"Why do you worry so much about my spiritual wellbeing? You know I don't want to belong to anyone, don't mother me, mine is such a cross to bear..."

"My pocket Hercules! You've always had fun being the "allumeur", you know you have a strange power of seduction over men and women, from Gertrude Bell to the least of your workmen at the digs. You ignite passions and then draw back satisfied."

"It's not like you to talk like this! This wasn't the pact between us. You were the only one who didn't want to read secret intentions into my eccentricities, which is why I became as fond of you as a sister. The truth is I don't love anyone, or rather, I love places, peoples, objects, but feel a sort of repulsion for the physicality of love. Perhaps my vanity will be hurt, but I can confide in you: tempted by the desire for a normal life, I asked Janet, a childhood friend, to marry me, a girl with a strong character who would have been a loyal companion for an ambitious man. She refused me. Maybe she guessed that our union would have only been a marriage of convenience."

"My poor dear boy! Don't forgo living! Why do you insist on repudiating the best part of yourself? Will you let me help you?"

"Forget about me! I'll tear up the letters you write me. I want to get inside the veins of life, not be the slave of the cave any longer, deluded by false images of small bourgeois achievements – a university career and a marriage with all the official blessings to wash away the stain of my illegitimate birth. Rather, I want to give a country to all the bastards of history..."

“And I, instead, I want to remember you as you are now, my reckless, cruel bad boy. It moves me that there are eyes like yours, a smile like yours and a serious nose like yours, the perfect shape of your solitude...”

Suddenly taking his leave, he gently brushed her hair, leaving a sheet of paper in her hands.

“It’s a copy of the poem you love so much...”

In the rush of emotion, Ned forgot to pay the bill, which he would later settle by post.

Back in England, Winifred was obsessed for the duration of the war by the thought of that mass of blond hair soiled by the mud of death.

No, Ned returned from the war, but he was not himself. His gay innocence had been left forever in Syria. The daydreamer, horrified by what his daydreams had created, condemned himself to atonement through underground lives under various identities. Winifred often re-read “Love will find out the way”, the poem that her young love had copied for her from the *Oxford Book of Verse*, the book that would accompany him throughout the war in the desert, and asked herself where the gold of that hair had gone. Rare letters arrived from him, disenchanted and heart-rending, that still caused her to shiver. The boy who loved the Arab people never returned to the “Baron” in Aleppo, but with his usual generosity, left a legacy, along with the relics of his legend, to my good-natured owners, Mr. and Mrs Mazlounian. A copy of the bill is still prominently on show. As for me, room number 202, I’m still very much in demand by those who hope to meet the restless spirit of Thomas Edward Lawrence, El Aurens, just Ned to me. Rest in peace, Effendi!