

## Where?

By Stein Riverton (Translated by Lucy Moffatt)

Mr Elling Winter is one of those people who spend their lives in restless wandering.

You may meet him anywhere in the world. I myself have sometimes encountered him by chance on my travels, most recently in Northern Italy. He has that touch of arrogance in his manner that surely stems from his lengthy sojourn in the English colonies. But he is by no means the worst of those globetrotting types. Behind that trivial veneer of spleen, tiger-hunting and amorous experience, a fellow countryman can swiftly discern an amiable and cordial nature. He likes to tell of his experiences, which do not all make for entirely pleasant listening. There is always something impersonal about his delivery. His technique is almost ingenious: he knows how to keep himself in the background but, like the thoroughgoing man of the world that he is, he nonetheless allows his own role in events to shine through. The last time I met him in Northern Italy, though, he told me of an occurrence that lay outside his customary realm, for it concerned quite ordinary people. The fact that I witnessed the actual circumstance that led him to remember the story caused it to captivate me from the start. This is what happened.

We had eaten dinner together at the Hotel Colle in the mountains above Bolzano and had just sat down to take coffee on the terrace, which offers a spectacular panorama deep into the distant, snow-glittering Swiss Alps.

All of a sudden, I saw a woman walking up the steps to the terrace. She was one of those women you often see at the large international sanatoriums where the wretched seek repose for their shattered nerves. No longer quite young, but not yet marked by age. With a touch of something else – of melancholy and unease. Grey hair, grey gaze and grey garb. She was followed by another, somewhat older woman. It was not hard to deduce that this was a female nurse. The lady in grey walked slowly across the terrace, past the many chattering people. Her entire bearing spoke of an indescribable loneliness. It was as if she were walking in a void. She vanished silently into the hotel.

I noticed with astonishment that Elling Winter had bent over just as she walked past and was hiding his face behind a napkin.

“Do you know her?” I asked

“Yes,” he replied.

“And do you not wish to meet her?”

“I do not wish her to see me. She is a person deserving of much compassion.”

He rose and stared across the hotel roof searchingly, as if he were gazing after birds flying by.

“I thought as much,” he said. “The hotel has no telephone. I have heard that she roams restlessly from place to place, but that she always chooses to stay at places where there is no telephone. She associates the shrill, merciless sound of the telephone bell with a terrible episode in her life. This episode, I too lived through. That is why I had no wish for her to see me.”

I urged him to tell me – and this is his account, in his very own words. As he told his tale the dusk fell rapidly, the way it does in the south, and the town of Bolzano lit up below us. His story was about just this hour of the day, but in another time and another country; about the hour when day turns into night. A transition that can create the most disparate of atmospheres – from the deepest peace to the most agonizing anxiety and unease.

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It was a spring evening in that large northern city you also know so well.

I was at a party at the home of a highly cultivated and fairly happy family. The hostess was that lady you just saw passing by. I remember everything that happened with extraordinary clarity precisely because the events of that evening had such a terrible significance for my friends. I recall that the lady of the house and I stood out on the balcony, staring down into a long, deep street. The balcony door into the apartment was open and we could hear lively chat. Inside, the lights were not yet on, the dusk seeped in through the window and only a few faces could be glimpsed in the dwindling light. Here and there, cigars glowed and the snow-white keys of a grand piano over in a

corner gleamed. We two out on the balcony spoke of the spring and the first spring evening. What was said? I recollect that I was, at just that time, greatly preoccupied by personal affairs. And this must certainly have lent the conversation some of its colour. Inadvertently, it took on a tone that most oddly presaged what was to come – something ominous and menacing. I said, as is true, that I always feel a certain unreasoning fear of spring. It is this fear that always drives me off on my travels. The spring assaults every human being, just as it assaults every tree in the forest. Everything that must grow in a person grows in the spring, good and evil; it is a perilous time. As we stood there talking about this, we saw that the city was growing steadily darker. I leant out over the balustrade and watched the people and the carriages down there, moving away along the tarmac. It was still light enough to be able to distinguish separate individuals. I pointed down at two small figures walking along swiftly, close beside each other. I thought I recognised the two children of the house and drew their mother's attention to them.

The mother leaned forward. She laid her arm upon the balustrade and rested her body upon it. I looked at her blonde hair and her face with its calm smile. I heard her whisper: Anne-Marie and Luise. It seemed natural for her to whisper. Since it was their mother whispering, the two children on the street would surely hear it. But then she straightened up.

“No, it isn't them,” she said...

Good God, the peace and joy of that hour!

And now, consider the woman you saw a few minutes ago.

It grew gradually darker; the arched electric streetlamps were lit and gave off a hissing sound. The street filled with twinkling hats, and the streetcars seemed to float upon a stream of light. Along with that artificial glare came a cold gust, up towards the balcony. We went inside. The lights were still not on in the balcony room, but the one beside it was lit. The feeble light from the side room mingled with the dusk from the windows, making all the faces strangely grey and indistinct. The voices were low, as they often are in dark or dimly lit places when thoughts thrive and people are afraid to wake a dreaming man or disturb each other's calm. All was peace and wellbeing in

that quiet and ordinary gathering until a nearby clock struck the hour and all conversation abruptly ceased. Two chimes. It was half-past eight.

The lady of the house rose and fumbled for the electric light switch. The sharp, white glare filled the room and revealed a row of faces, seemingly astonished at their hostess's haste. Her eyes were frightened. Not greatly. But a *little* frightened.

"Half-past eight," she said, and looked around questioningly. "The children should have come back long ago."

"Now, now," said her husband soothingly. "They'll be along soon. Where are they?"

"At Aunt Hanne's. She promised to send them home by half-past seven."

Here and there people laughed gently and let slip various remarks. Aunt Hanne must simply have wanted to keep the dear children with her for a little longer. Good heavens, but they are grown so big now... Ah, parents are all the same... And then the conversation shifted to another topic. When the clock struck again, it fell quiet. It was nine now.

The young mother had sat there, pensive and nervous, for the past quarter of an hour. When the clock struck, she rushed over to the door of the side room and called out to her husband:

"Hans! It's nine o'clock and the children are still not home."

Her trembling voice forced everybody to sit there silently. Slowly, all faces turned towards her. This absolute silence lasted for a second. Then she heard somebody get up suddenly in the side room. Her husband appeared in doorway. As soon as he saw his fearful wife, he became calm again.

"You're making me nervous," he said. "Of course the children must still be at Aunt Hanne's."

He rang for the maid and asked her to telephone Aunt Hanne and enquire.

I noticed how the mother tried to battle her anxiety, and thought to offer her some soothing words, for I knew her fairly well after all. But she suddenly looked at me with a gaze as if she had never seen me before. Aunt Hanne had said on the telephone that the children had left her an hour and a half earlier. And it should not have taken them more than a quarter of an hour to

get home. When the mother heard this, her first instinct was to turn towards the city. She opened the balcony door and went out. The night was swallowing up the city. The realisation that it was growing steadily quieter out there between the menacing stone buildings almost certainly heightened her anxiety.

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Dear friend, I need not tell you that we had all become truly concerned, but we tried to hide it from the mother of course. Little girls who are out and about on their own are always at risk of a certain danger, and especially in the big cities. Just about that time, moreover, there had been a particularly vicious case. It had been so shocking that the respectable newspapers had shrunk from reporting it. Perhaps the mother did not know about the story. But she certainly understood this danger; I could see it in her gaze, which leapt, searchingly, from one person to the next. It was odd and ghastly to observe how the studied lightness of her conversational tone gradually became ever more shrilly false until it was, at last, utterly strangled by the encroaching fear. All this time, the mother conveyed a mute but intensely vivid tale. Bound by conventional and painful consideration for her guests, her senses alert as an animal's, mortally impatient.

I seem to see her standing there still beside the balcony window, head bowed as she listened to the low voices behind her and the noise from the city. No human creature is more unreasonable than a frightened mother. There she stood, suddenly like a hunted deer in the woods, scenting danger all around her. The abrupt dilation of her dark pupils, which became intensely deep, the heave and sink of her breast, the dryness of her lips and the quiver of her nostrils – all of this conveyed a quite animal impression. Even when her husband came towards her with outstretched arms, she gave a start, frightened by that indulgent smile of his. Perhaps he was only smiling like that to conceal from her something he himself feared. And why had we become so quiet all at once? Down in the city it had become still, too. Steeped in evening calm. The city surely assumed the form of a living being in the mother's

agitated mind. Of a huge and sinister enemy that no longer dared speak aloud because it knew that something was about to happen, *or already had*. I thought about the little girls I had seen so often. And I truly felt I could see their faces down there in the city's dark, and the fleeting smiles on their innocently red lips. What terrible moments those were. And all these idiotic guests!

I shall recall the conversation: "All mothers are like this when it comes to their children. They think that *their own children* will always be in danger's way when the truth of the matter is that nobody is better cared for in the big cities than children. They cannot take a step without watchful eyes gazing after them, and if they do get lost, there's a constable on every corner, a great friendly Bobby to take care of them and bring them home.

"Think a little about our own childhood, when we walked through the streets before the magnificent display windows, all lit up. Did we consider the time? The hours flew by, but we simply looked and looked and wondered at it all. We tore around the corner without even noticing. And suddenly, there we were in a swarm of strangers. If Anne-Marie and Luise are lost and are looked after by some kind Bobby or another, all that will come of it is that they will learn a lesson. It's still early enough in the evening. The great boulevards won't even have come to life yet. It is a long, long time before people will start to settle down for the night and shut their doors..."

The mother was seized once more by a painful impatience. She looked around at the ring of guests and surely sensed instinctively that all were busy hiding something from her. She trembled with suppressed rage at their remarks. They even spoke about how beautiful the evening was. It was blue and cool, and the wind had dropped. The curtains hung motionless before the open balcony door. Down there lay the city, and the light flickered upon all the closed windows. Not a sound emerged from any of the many thousand courtyards...

Suddenly she cried: "I can hear footsteps on the stairs!"

None of the rest of us heard any steps but as we sat and listened, the dreadful ticking of the clock cut through the silence. Shortly afterwards, we too heard the steps and the parents hastened out to open the door.

Immediately afterwards, voices sounded, men's voices, and into the room came two of the guests. Their faces were still flushed from their quick march around the streets. And now the mother learned what she had perhaps suspected: that some of the guests had left at once to look for the children. It was clear that this roused her terror. For it confirmed that we were anxious after all. She scarcely listened to what the men had to say. They had not seen the two girls, but the city was bright and full of spring cheer, the cafes teeming. There were people everywhere. There was no danger.

The mother stood there for a while, thinking. Then she said:

“Give me my coat.”

As one, the guests rose spontaneously at the sound of her voice. It was as if it were no longer her own. Just then, the shrill ring of a telephone sounded through the room. It struck us all. It sounded ominous. The mother hastened towards the telephone, arms outstretched. The little white nickel bell above the dark mahogany table was still vibrating when she seized the receiver in her hands.

It was Anne-Marie on the telephone.

I can assure you, dear friend, that this telephone conversation has been repeated countless times. Every word spoken has been tested and weighed, yes, even the tone of voice in which the words were spoken... all to find some way out of the darkness, some clue. The mother tells us that she first heard a sighing of breath in the telephone and then, mingled in with it, a light, slightly inquisitive child's voice that she recognised as Anne-Marie's. The voice said:

“Is that you, Mummy?”

The mother bowed over the telephone, as if to hurl herself into the unknown distance that separated her from the voice.

“Yes, it's me!” she cried, jubilantly. “It's me! Where are you now, child? Do you hear, Anne-Marie, where are you?”

No answer came. But she could hear the child breathing into the telephone receiver, far away.

“Answer me!” she cried. “Anne-Marie, answer me! It’s me. It’s Mummy.”

Still no reply. But then, suddenly, she heard quite clearly that the child was whispering; the child was whispering to somebody standing close to her, beside the telephone. The mother could not hear the words.

The whispering was not anxious, but questioning and inquisitive.

“God in heaven!” the mother cried in desperation. “Who on earth are you talking to, Anne-Marie? Answer me. Who are you talking to? It’s me. It’s Mummy.”

And then the mother heard as the child, instead of answering, *put down the telephone*. She heard the little click in her ear. The connection was broken, the dial tone was gone, everything was black and silent.

We guests could no longer preserve our calm. Our air of indifference had, after all, been assumed and now it fell entirely to pieces and was replaced with confusion and departures. Perhaps we might have been better able to maintain our composure had the mother not been present, but her desperation mesmerised us. She could not tear herself away from the merciless instrument. That scene by the telephone has left its indelible print upon me: the mother clutching wildly at the telephone bell, as if to restore the connection to life. I still seem to see the little white nickel bell between her feverishly trembling hands, like a staring eye that will never shut again, but will fix her with its ghastly gaze her whole life through.

Elling Winter halted in his tale.

“But good God, man!” I broke in. “Surely there was some explanation for the mystery.”

“No,” he said in a low voice.

“Are you honestly telling me that the children were not found?”

“Six years have passed since this happened. You saw the mother yourself this afternoon. Is her appearance not answer enough? Nobody has heard anything of the two little girls. The last sign of life was that terrible telephone call.”

“But the police?”

“The police.” My friend shrugged. “The police in a million-strong city,” he muttered. “Of course everything possible was done, but to no avail. Investigations were launched at once to find out where the telephone call had come from, but it proved impossible to ascertain. The telephone network in a big city is so tangled that it is most often impossible to clarify such matters. Nor was there anything in the child’s voice that might explain the situation – no fear, no haste, rather a kind of childish, mysterious trust. And then that whispering.”

“Who was it she was whispering to? Was it her sister, perhaps?”

“Perhaps her sister.”

“Or perhaps somebody else?”

“Yes, perhaps somebody else.”

We sat there for a while, silent and brooding. Then my friend said:

I know that one street and one house in that great city *must* know the secret. Every time I approach the city on my travels – which happens at intervals of several years – and the train flies through the throng of tall, sad houses lit by the bluish flash of the streetcar cables, I think to myself:

“Where... where...”

I sat and listened half-absently to his voice. Deep in the valley below, Bolzano, with its illuminated streets, no longer seemed as beautiful to me as before. Involuntarily, I cast a glance over at the hotel where I knew the mother to be staying. The lower windows were dimly lit, but the upper floor beneath the roof lay in darkness, crushed and heavy. Above it glittered the stars, shining clearly as they always do in the south – the stars, symbols of eternity, that always confront us with this question, which applies alike to existence, people and the sufferings of life.

Where, Whither, Why?