



Divorce in Naples, William Faulkner

## Divorce in Naples

I

WE WERE SITTING at a table inside: Monckton and the bosun and Carl and George and me and the women, the three women of that abject glittering kind that seamen know or that know seamen. We were talking English and they were not talking at all. By that means they could speak constantly to us above and below the sound of our voices in a tongue older than recorded speech and time too.

Older than the thirty-four days of sea time which we had but completed, anyway. Now and then they spoke to one another in Italian. The women in Italian, the men in English, as if language might be the sex difference, the functioning of the vocal cords the inner bidding until the dark pairing time. The men in English, the women in Italian: a decorum as of two parallel streams separated by a levee for a little while.

We were talking about Carl, to George.

“Why did you bring him here, then?” the bosun said.

“Yes,” Monckton said. “I sure wouldn’t bring my wife to a place like this.”

George cursed Monckton: not with a word or even a sentence; a paragraph. He was a Greek, big and black, a full head taller than Carl; his eyebrows looked like two crows in overlapping flight. He cursed us all with immediate thoroughness and in well-nigh faultless classic Anglo-Saxon, who at other times functioned in the vocabulary of an eight-year-old by-blow of a vaudeville comedian and a horse, say.

“Yes, sir,” the bosun said. He was smoking an Italian cigar and drinking ginger beer; the same tumbler of which, incidentally, he had been engaged with for about two hours and which now must have been about the temperature of a ship’s showerbath. “I sure wouldn’t bring my girl to a dive like this, even if he did wear pants.”

Carl meanwhile had not stirred. He sat serene among us, with his round yellow head and his round eyes, looking like a sophisticated baby against the noise and the glitter, with his glass of thin Italian beer and the women murmuring to one another and watching us and then Carl with that biding and inscrutable foreknowledge which they do not appear to know that they possess.

“Èinnocente,” one said; again they murmured, contemplating Carl with musing, secret looks. “He may have fooled you already,” the bosun said. “He may have slipped through a porthole on you any time these three years.”

George glared at the bosun, his mouth open for cursing. But he didn’t curse. Instead he looked at Carl, his mouth still open. His mouth closed slowly. We all looked at Carl. Beneath our eyes he raised his glass and drank with contained deliberation.

“Are you still pure?” George said. “I mean, sho enough.”

Beneath our fourteen eyes Carl emptied the glass of thin, bitter, three per cent beer. “I been to sea three years,” he said. “All over Europe.”

George glared at him, his face baffled and outraged. He had just shaved; his close blue jowls lay flat and hard as a prizefighter's or a pirate's, up to the black explosion of his hair. He was our second cook. "You damn lying little bastard," he said.

The bosun raised his glass of ginger beer with an exact replica of Carl's drinking. Steadily and deliberately, his body thrown a little back and his head tilted, he poured the ginger beer over his right shoulder at the exact speed of swallowing, still with that air of Carl's, that grave and cosmopolitan swagger. He set the glass down, and rose. "Come on," he said to Monckton and me, "let's go. Might as well be board ship if we're going to spend the evening in one place."

Monckton and I rose. He was smoking a short pipe. One of the women was his, another the bosun's. The third one had a lot of gold teeth. She could have been thirty, but maybe she wasn't. We left her with George and Carl. When I looked back from the door, the waiter was just fetching them some more beer.

II

They came into the ship together at Galveston, George carrying a portable victrola and a small parcel wrapped in paper bearing the imprint of a well-known ten-cent store, and Carl carrying two bulging imitation leather bags that looked like they might weigh forty pounds apiece.

George appropriated two berths, one above the other like a Pullman section, cursing Carl in a harsh, concatenant voice a little overburred with v's and r's and ordering him about like a nigger, while Carl stowed

their effects away with the meticulousness of an old maid, producing from one of the bags a stack of freshly laundered drill serving jackets that must have numbered a dozen.

For the next thirty-four days (he was the messboy) he wore a fresh one for each meal in the saloon, and there were always two or three recently washed ones drying under the poop awning.

And for thirty-four evenings, after the galley was closed, we watched the two of them in pants and undershirts, dancing to the victrola on the after well deck above a hold full of Texas cotton and Georgia resin. They had only one record for the machine and it had a crack in it, and each time the needle clucked George would stamp on the deck. I don't think that either one of them was aware that he did it.

It was George who told us about Carl. Carl was eighteen, from Philadelphia. They both called it Philly; George in a proprietorial tone, as if he had created Philadelphia in order to produce Carl, though it later appeared that George had not discovered Carl until Carl had been to sea for a year already.

And Carl himself told some of it: a fourth or fifth child of a first generation of Scandinavian-American shipwrights, brought up in one of an identical series of small frame houses a good trolley ride from salt water, by a mother or an older sister: this whom, at the age of fifteen and weighing perhaps a little less than a hundred pounds, some ancestor long knocking his quiet bones together at the bottom of the sea (or perhaps havened by accident in dry earth and become restive with ease and quiet) had sent back to the old dream and the old unrest three or maybe four generations late.

“I was a kid, then,” Carl told us, who had yet to experience or need a shave. “I thought about everything but going to sea. I thought once I’d be a ballplayer or maybe a prize fighter. They had pictures of them on the walls, see, when Sis would send me down to the corner after the old man on a Saturday night. Jeez, I’d stand outside on the street and watch them go in, and I could see their legs under the door and hear them and smell the sawdust and see the pictures of them on the walls through the smoke. I was a kid then, see. I hadn’t been nowhere then.”

We asked George how he had ever got a berth, even as a messman, standing even now about four inches over five feet and with yet a face that should have followed monstrosities up church aisles, if not looked down from one of the colored windows themselves.

“Why shouldn’t he have come to sea?” George said. “Ain’t this a free country? Even if he ain’t nothing but a damn mess.” He looked at us, black, serious. “He’s a virgin, see? Do you know what that means?” He told us what it meant. Someone had evidently told him what it meant not so long ago, told him what he used to be himself, if he could remember that far back, and he thought that perhaps we didn’t know the man, or maybe he thought it was a new word they had just invented.

So he told us what it meant. It was in the first night watch and we were on the poop after supper, two days out of Gibraltar, listening to Monckton talking about cauliflower. Carl was taking a shower (he always took a bath after he had cleared the saloon after supper. George, who only cooked, never bathed until we were in port and the petite cleared) and George told us what it meant.

Then he began to curse. He cursed for a long time.

“Well, George,” the bosun said, “suppose you were one, then? What would you do?”

“What would I do?” George said. “What wouldn’t I do?” He cursed for some time, steadily. “It’s like the first cigarette in the morning,” he said. “By noon, when you remember how it tasted, how you felt when you was waiting for the match to get to the end of it, and when that first drag—” He cursed, long, impersonal, like a chant.

Monckton watched him: not listened: watched, nursing his pipe. “Why, George,” he said, “you’re by way of being almost a poet.”

There was a swipe, some West India Docks crum; I forget his name. “Call that lobbing the tongue?” he said. “You should hear a Lymus mate laying into a fo’c’sle of bloody Portygee ginneys.”

“Monckton wasn’t talking about the language,” the bosun said.

“Any man can swear.” He looked at George. “You’re not the first man that ever wished that, George. That’s something that has to be was because you don’t know you are when you are.” Then he paraphrased unwitting and with unprintable aptness Byron’s epigram about women’s mouths. “But what are you saving him for? What good will it do you when he stops being?”

George cursed, looking from face to face, baffled and outraged.

“Maybe Carl will let George hold his hand at the time,” Monckton said. He reached a match from his pocket. “Now, you take Brussels sprouts—”

“You might get the Old Man to quarantine him when we reach Naples,” the bosun said.

George cursed.

“Now, you take Brussels sprouts,” Monckton said.

III

It took us some time that night, to get either started or settled down. We — Monckton and the bosun and the two women and I — visited four more cafés, each like the other one and like the one where we had left George and Carl — same people, same music, same thin, colored drinks. The two women accompanied us, with us but not of us, biding and acquiescent, saying constantly and patiently and without words that it was time to go to bed. So after a while I left them and went back to the ship. George and Carl were not aboard.

The next morning they were not there either, though Monckton and the bosun were, and the cook and the steward swearing up and down the galley; it seemed that the cook was planning to spend the day ashore himself.

So they had to stay aboard all day. Along toward midafternoon there came aboard a smallish man in a soiled suit who looked like one of those Columbia day students that go up each morning on the East Side



subway from around Chatham Square. He was hatless, with an oiled pompadour. He had not shaved recently, and he spoke no English in a pleasant, deprecatory way that was all teeth. But he had found the right ship and he had a note from George, written on the edge of a dirty scrap of newspaper, and we found where George was. He was in jail.

The steward hadn't stopped cursing all day, anyhow. He didn't stop now, either. He and the messenger went off to the consul's. The steward returned a little after six o'clock, with George. George didn't look so much like he had been drunk; he looked dazed, quiet, with his wild hair and a blue stubble on his jaw.

He went straight to Carl's bunk and he began to turn Carl's meticulous covers back one by one like a traveler examining the bed in a third-class European hotel, as if he expected to find Carl hidden among them. "You mean," he said, "he ain't been back? He ain't been back a-tall?"

"We haven't seen him," we told George. "The steward hasn't seen him either. We thought he was in jail with you."

He began to replace the covers; that is, he made an attempt to draw them one by one up the bed again in a kind of detached way, as if he were not conscious, sentient. "They run," he said in a dull tone. "They ducked out on me. I never thought he'd a done it. I never thought he'd a done me this way. It was her. She was the one made him done it. She knew what he was, and how I . . ." Then he began to cry, quietly, in that dull, detached way. "He must have been sitting there with his hand in her lap all the time. And I never suspicioned.

She kept on moving her chair closer and closer to his. But I trusted him. I never suspicioned nothing. I thought he wouldn't a done nothing serious without asking me first, let alone . . . I trusted him."

It appeared that the bottom of George's glass had distorted their shapes enough to create in George the illusion that Carl and the woman were drinking as he drank, in a serious but celibate way. He left them at the table and went back to the lavatory; or rather, he said that he realized suddenly that he was in the lavatory and that he had better be getting back, concerned not over what might transpire while he was away, but over the lapse, over his failure to be present at his own doings which the getting to the lavatory inferred. So he returned to the table, not yet alarmed; merely concerned and amused. He said he was having a fine time.

So at first he believed that he was still having such a good time that he could not find his own table. He found the one which he believed should be his, but it was vacant save for three stacks of saucers, so he made one round of the room, still amused, still enjoying himself; he was still enjoying himself when he repaired to the center of the dance floor where, a head above the dancers, he began to shout "Porteus ahoy!" in a loud voice, and continued to do so until a waiter who spoke English came and removed him and led him back to that same vacant table bearing the three stacks of saucers and the three glasses, one of which he now recognized as his own.

But he was still enjoying himself, though not so much now, believing himself to be the victim of a practical joke, first on the part of the management, and it appeared that he must have created some little disturbance, enjoying himself less and less all the while, the center of an augmenting clump of waiters and patrons.

When at last he did realize, accept the fact, that they were gone, it must have been pretty bad for him: the outrage, the despair, the sense of elapsed time, an unfamiliar city at night in which Carl must be found, and that quickly if it was to do any good. He tried to leave, to break through the crowd, without paying the score. Not that he would have beaten the bill; he just didn't have time. If he could have found Carl within the next ten minutes, he would have returned and paid the score twice over: I am sure of that.

And so they held him, the wild American, a cordon of waiters and clients — women and men both — and he dragging a handful of coins from his pockets ringing onto the tile floor. Then he said it was like having your legs swarmed by a pack of dogs: waiters, clients, men and women, on hands and knees on the floor, scrabbling after the rolling coins, and George slapping about with his big feet, trying to stamp the hands away.

Then he was standing in the center of an abrupt wide circle, breathing a little hard, with the two Napoleons in their swords and pallbearer gloves and Knights of Pythias bonnets on either side of him. He did not know what he had done; he only knew that he was under arrest. It was not until they reached the Prefecture, where there was an interpreter, that he learned that he was a political prisoner, having insulted the king's majesty by placing foot on the king's effigy on a coin. They put him in a forty-foot dungeon, with seven other political prisoners, one of whom was the messenger.

"They taken my belt and my necktie and the strings out of my shoes," he told us dully. "There wasn't nothing in the room but a barrel

fastened in the middle of the floor and a wooden bench running all the way round the walls.

I knew what the barrel was for right off, because they had already been using it for that for some time. You was expected to sleep on the bench when you couldn't stay on your feet no longer. When I stooped over and looked at it close, it was like looking down at Forty-second Street from a airplane. They looked just like Yellow cabs. Then I went and used the barrel. But I used it with the end of me it wasn't intended to be used with."

Then he told about the messenger. Truly, Despair, like Poverty, looks after its own. There they were: the Italian who spoke no English, and George who scarcely spoke any language at all; certainly not Italian. That was about four o'clock in the morning. Yet by daylight George had found the one man out of the seven who could have served him or probably would have.

"He told me he was going to get out at noon, and I told him I would give him ten lire as soon as I got out, and he got me the scrap of paper and the pencil (this, in a bare dungeon, from among seven men stripped to the skin of everything save the simplest residue of clothing necessary for warmth: of money, knives, shoelaces, even pins and loose buttons) and I wrote the note and he hid it and they left him out and after about four hours they come and got me and there was the steward."

"How did you talk to him, George?" the bosun said. "Even the steward couldn't find out anything until they got to the consul's."

"I don't know," George said. "We just talked. That was the only way I could tell anybody where I was at."

We tried to get him to go to bed, but he wouldn't do it. He didn't even shave. He got something to eat in the galley and went ashore. We watched him go down the side.

"Poor bastard," Monckton said.

"Why?" the bosun said. "What did he take Carl there for? They could have gone to the movies."

"I wasn't thinking about George," Monckton said.

"Oh," the bosun said. "Well, a man can't keep on going ashore anywhere, let alone Europe, all his life without getting ravaged now and then."

"Good God," Monckton said. "I should hope not."

George returned at six o'clock the next morning. He still looked dazed, though still quite sober, quite calm. Overnight his beard had grown another quarter inch. "I couldn't find them," he said quietly. "I couldn't find them nowheres."

He had to act as messman now, taking Carl's place at the officers' table, but as soon as breakfast was done, he disappeared; we heard the steward cursing him up and down the ship until noon, trying to find him. Just before noon he returned, got through dinner, departed again. He came back just before dark.

"Found him yet?" I said. He didn't answer. He stared at me for a while with that blank look. Then he went to their bunks and hauled one of the imitation leather bags down and tumbled all of Carl's things into it and crushed down the lid upon the dangling sleeves and socks and

hurled the bag out onto the well deck, where it tumbled once and burst open, vomiting the white jackets and the mute socks and the underclothes. Then he went to bed, fully dressed, and slept fourteen hours. The cook tried to get him up for breakfast, but it was like trying to rouse up a dead man.

When he waked he looked better. He borrowed a cigarette of me and went and shaved and came back and borrowed another cigarette. "Hell with him," he said. "Leave the bastard go. I don't give a damn."

That afternoon he put Carl's things back into his bunk. Not carefully and not uncarefully: he just gathered them up and dumped them into the berth and paused for a moment to see if any of them were going to fall out, before turning away.

#### IV

It was just before daylight. When I returned to the ship about midnight, the quarters were empty. When I waked just before daylight, all the bunks save my own were still vacant. I was lying in a halfdoze, when I heard Carl in the passage. He was coming quietly; I had scarcely heard him before he appeared in the door. He stood there for a while, looking no larger than an adolescent boy in the halflight, before he entered. I closed my eyes quickly. I heard him, still on tiptoe, come to my bunk and stand above me for a while. Then I heard him turn away. I opened my eyes just enough to watch him.

He undressed swiftly, ripping his clothes off, ripping off a button that struck the bulkhead with a faint click. Naked, in the wan light, he looked smaller and frailer than ever as he dug a towel from his bunk where

George had tumbled his things, flinging the other garments aside with a kind of dreadful haste. Then he went out, his bare feet whispering in the passage.

I could hear the shower beyond the bulkhead running for a long time; it would be cold now, too.

But it ran for a long time, then it ceased and I closed my eyes again until he had entered. Then I watched him lift from the floor the undergarment which he had removed and thrust it through a porthole quickly, with something of the air of a recovered drunkard putting out of sight an empty bottle. He dressed and put on a fresh white jacket and combed his hair, leaning to the small mirror, looking at his face for a long time.

And then he went to work. He worked about the bridge deck all day long; what he could have found to do there we could not imagine. But the crew's quarters never saw him until after dark. All day long we watched the white jacket flitting back and forth beyond the open doors or kneeling as he polished the brightwork about the companions.

He seemed to work with a kind of fury. And when he was forced by his duties to come topside during the day, we noticed that it was always on the port side, and we lay with our starboard to the dock. And about the galley or the after deck George worked a little and loafed a good deal, not looking toward the bridge at all.

"That's the reason he stays up there, polishing that brightwork all day long," the bosun said. "He knows George can't come up there."

"It don't look to me like George wants to," I said.

“That’s right,” Monckton said. “For a dollar George would go up to the binnacle and ask the Old Man for a cigarette.”

“But not for curiosity,” the bosun said.

“You think that’s all it is?” Monckton said. “Just curiosity?”

“Sure,” the bosun said. “Why not?”

“Monckton’s right,” I said. “This is the most difficult moment in marriage: the day after your wife has stayed out all night.”

“You mean the easiest,” the bosun said. “George can quit him now.”

“Do you think so?” Monckton said.

We lay there five days. Carl was still polishing the brightwork in the bridge-deck companions. The steward would send him out on deck, and go away; he would return and find Carl still working on the port side and he would make him go to starboard, above the dock and the Italian boys in bright, soiled jerseys and the venders of pornographic postcards.

But it didn’t take him long there, and then we would see him below again, sitting quietly in his white jacket in the stale gloom, waiting for supertime. Usually he would be darning socks.

George had not yet said one word to him; Carl might not have been aboard at all, the very displacement of space which was his body, impedeless and breathable air. It was now George’s turn to stay away from the ship most of the day and all of the night, returning a little drunk at three and four o’clock, to waken everyone by hand, save Carl,



and talk in gross and loud recapitulation of recent and always different women before climbing into his bunk.

As far as we knew, they did not even look at one another until we were well on our way to Gibraltar.

Then Carl's fury of work slacked somewhat. Yet he worked steadily all day, then, bathed, his blond hair wet and smooth, his slight body in a cotton singlet, we would see him leaning alone in the long twilight upon the rail midships or forward. But never about the poop where we smoked and talked and where George had begun again to play the single record on the victrola, committing, unrequested and anathemaed, cold-blooded encore after encore.

Then one night we saw them together. They were leaning side by side on the poop rail. That was the first time Carl had looked astern, looked toward Naples since that morning when he returned to the ship, and even now it was the evening on which the Gates of Hercules had sunk into the waxing twilight and the River Ocean began to flow down into the darkling sea and overhead the crosstrees swayed in measured and slow recover against the tall night and the low new moon.

"He's all right now," Monckton said. "The dog's gone back to his vomit."

"I said he was all right all the time," the bosun said. "George didn't give a damn."

"I wasn't talking about George," Monckton said. "George hasn't made the grade yet."

George told us. “He’d keep on moping and mooning, see, and I’d keep on trying to talk to him, to tell him I wasn’t mad no more. Jeez, it had to come some day; a man can’t be a angel all your life. But he wouldn’t even look back that way. Until all of a sudden he says one night:

“‘What do you do to them?’ I looked at him. ‘How does a man treat them?’

“‘You mean to tell me,’ I says, ‘that you spent three days with her and she ain’t showed you that?’

“‘I mean, give them,’ he says. ‘Don’t men give—’

“‘Jeez Christ,’ I says, ‘you done already give her something they would have paid you money for it in Siam. Would have made you the prince or the prime minister at the least. What do you mean?’

“‘I don’t mean money,’ he says. ‘I mean . . .’

“‘Well,’ I says, ‘if you was going to see her again, if she was going to be your girl, you’d give her something. Bring it back to her. Like something to wear or something: they don’t care much what, them foreign women, hustling them wops all their life that wouldn’t give them a full breath if they was a toy balloon; they don’t care much what it is. But you ain’t going to see her again, are you?’

“‘No,’ he says. ‘No,’ he says. ‘No.’ And he looked like he was fixing to jump off the boat and swim on ahead and wait for us at Hatteras.

“So you don’t want to worry about that,’ I says. Then I went and played the vic again, thinking that might cheer him up, because he ain’t the first, for Christ’s sake; he never invented it. But it was the next night; we was at the poop rail then — the first time he had looked back — watching the phosrus along the logline, when he says:

“‘Maybe I got her into trouble.’

“‘Doing what?’ I says. ‘With what? With the police? Didn’t you make her show you her petite?’ Like she would have needed a ticket, with that face full of gold; Jeez, she could have rode the train on her face alone; maybe that was her savings bank instead of using her stocking.

“‘What ticket?’ he says. So I told him. For a minute I thought he was crying, then I seen that he was just trying to not puke. So I knew what the trouble was, what had been worrying him. I remember the first time it come as a surprise to me. ‘Oh,’ I says, ‘the smell. It don’t mean nothing,’ I says; you don’t want to let that worry you. It ain’t that they smell bad,’ I says, ‘that’s just the Italian national air.’”

And then we thought that at last he really was sick. He worked all day long, coming to bed only after the rest of us were asleep and snoring, and I saw him in the night get up and go topside again, and I followed and saw him sitting on a windlass. He looked like a little boy, still, small, motionless in his underclothes.

But he was young, and even an old man can’t be sick very long with nothing but work to do and salt air to breathe; and so two weeks later we were watching him and George dancing again in their undershirts after supper on the after well deck while the victrola lifted its fatuous and reiterant ego against the waxing moon and the ship snored and hissed through the long seas off Hatteras. They didn’t talk; they just

danced, gravely and tirelessly as the nightly moon stood higher and higher up the sky.

Then we turned south, and the Gulf Stream ran like blue ink alongside, bubbled with fire by night in the softening latitudes, and one night off Tortugas the ship began to tread the moon's silver train like an awkward and eager courtier, and Carl spoke for the first time after almost twenty days.

"George," he said, "do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure, bud," George said, stamping on the deck each time the needle clucked, his black head shoulders above Carl's sleek pale one, the two of them in decorous embrace, their canvas shoes hissing in unison:

"Sure," George said. "Spit it out."

"When we get to Galveston, I want you to buy me a suit of these pink silk teddybears that ladies use. A little bigger than I'd wear, see?"

The End