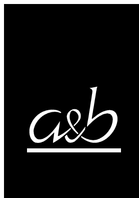

Freya Stark

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CHAPTER ONE

'The beckoning counts, and not the clicking latch behind you: and all through life the actual moment of emancipation still holds that delight, of the whole world coming to meet you like a wave.' Freya Stark was fifty-six when she wrote those words, in the first volume of her autobiography, *Traveller's Prelude*; she was referring to an incident shortly before her fourth birthday, when she set out from her Dartmoor home for Plymouth, with a mackintosh, a toothbrush and a penny, intent on finding a ship and putting out to sea. By four she was a practised traveller, having been carried at a very early age, long before the turn of the century, in a basket over the Dolomites to

Cortina, and crossing regularly between her father's Devonshire moors and the European cities of her mother's family.

Whether travellers are formed by early voyages is hard to say. For Freya there was never a moment of turning back: well into her nineties, the beckoning continued to count, the clicking latch meant only the joy of being on the move again, to observe and listen, and then to put on paper something of the pleasure of remote places and of their past. It is as a traveller, more than historian, archaeologist or scholar that she is known: self-disciplined, courageous, ruthless as most true travellers are, with largely self-taught knowledge and a sense of leisure and concern for morality that ties her firmly to a vanished world.

Very few independent women have been greatly fond of Empire, for by and large they have got little from it. Freya, admirer of soldiers, upholder of tradition, full of intelligent appraisal of what it had to offer, is one of the great exceptions to prove the rule. She was not a great explorer for, by the time she travelled to the East, the age of exploration was over; nor a distinguished Arabist, in the way that Sir Ronald Storrs was; nor an exceptionally scholarly historian: but she is an extraordinary figure, perhaps because so relentless with herself.

Freya is of the same mould as Isabella Bird or Flora Lewis, though of course coming later, but she is of their time, by upbringing, conviction and purpose. However obvious the comparison, it is still tempting to liken her to Gertrude Bell. Both were Arabists and came to Arabia late; both were full of contradictions – the one rather manly, the other always feminine, loving hats; both possessed characters of steel. Though Freya never had Gertrude Bell's wealth, nor her power, for Bell was possibly one of the most powerful women in the British Empire for the few years before she died, she has her drive, her strength, her enduring curiosity. 'The true wanderer, whose travels are happiness,' she wrote when she was seventy-five, 'goes out not to shun, but to seek.' Freya has been a wanderer all her life.

Freya's parents were first cousins. There was a grandmother in Torquay, a small and fragile woman who wore black ruffly silks and for whom the Victorian sense of order might have been invented. The house was all chintz and mahogany, velvet and bric-a-brac, with a 'sort of sacredness of tradition and routine . . . Every morning at eleven a sponge finger would be given us out of a silver box; every day at tea time a saucer of milk would be handed to the cat.' Even the animals seemed never to change, a

yellow cat being succeeded by an identical younger beast, then another, without apparent break. It was a life of tranquillity, security and some money, but no excessive regard for it, in which people took time to talk and listen and, when they could, to travel.

The other grandmother, on Freya's mother's side, lived in an apartment in Genoa, a more robust and formidable figure, with square face, greenish-grey eyes and a mouth 'neither pinched nor mean, but obstinate, with apparently an equal capacity for turning hard or gentle, according to the vicissitudes of life'. The Genoa grandmother had known more affluent days. As the daughter of a court painter in Aix-la-Chapelle, married to a well-to-do English artist who had seen her as she took the air in an open carriage in the Corso in Rome, she had presided over a Florentine salon where the Brownings, Thackerays and Trollopes had all been guests, until her husband was bitten by a mad dog and died in his early forties, leaving her with four daughters.

One of these was Flora, tall, with red-gold curls and a buoyant confidence born of life in a sunny Tuscan villa. She was seventeen when Robert Stark, a sculptor, with country tastes, eight years older, brought her back to the isolated English moors he loved. Flora had never been to England. The journey

itself was severe: after Newton Abbot a shabby country train with metal foot-warmers for the next stage to Moretonhampstead, then a pony carriage for the final seven-mile drive among the turnips. Towards the end, the track rose into the remote barrenness of treeless fields and boulders, with runnels of water trickling through the turf. There was no tarmac. An English countrywoman might have let her spirits fall. For a girl made for the 'easy, cultured, gregarious surface life of the South' the prospect of happiness seemed dim indeed. Flora, Freya wrote later, was 'singularly ill-equipped to deal with the Victorian order so uncompromisingly superimposed on the untidiness of God'.

Robert Stark walked, rode and began building what were to be four stone and granite houses. The first was Scorhill, on a steep slope above the North Teign where Dartmoor ends and the woods begin. The last was Ford Park, with an Italianate veranda and wooden balcony, and flint-granite windows, set hard up against the mountain. Inside, the rooms were beamed and wood panelled. From the upper windows you could see the piled rocks of Middle Tor and Kestor, and, nearer, the rare shrubs and trees which were his real passion. On his orders, and often by his own hand, lakes were scooped out of dips in the moor and glades of azaleas, rhododendrons and

bamboos planted. Much is still there: the gardens now overgrown and dense, and from the moor itself the natural lie of the land looks almost distorted, so heavy and almost alien are his woods encroaching upon it.

In the 1880s there was no electricity; peat gave out a pale heat from the narrow Victorian fireplaces. It was cold beyond belief. Several weeks each year the moorland houses were cut off by snowdrifts from Chagford, twenty minutes away by horse. When the snow ended, it rained. With three times the rainfall of the Southern Counties, Dartmoor seemed to drip, perpetually sodden. There was little to do but walk or ride. One afternoon Robert came home to find the house shuttered up, the lamps and candles lit and Flora reading, with desperate intensity. The south-west wind had been blowing ceaselessly for three days; she had walked or ridden morning and afternoon until there were no more dry tweeds. Then she had given up.

The Starks had been married thirteen years before Freya, their first surviving child, was born in Paris on 31 January 1893. Even so, her arrival was unexpected, for she came at seven months 'in the middle of Bohemia . . . with not a garment ready to receive me', so that Robert Stark and a student painter friend, Herbert Young, had to hasten off

to the Galeries Lafayette for some clothes. It was one of the rare periods of harmony in the Stark marriage. Both Robert and Flora were good painters (a rhinoceros sculpted by him is in the Tate); Flora had been studying at Julien's atelier in Paris and had not long before received a medal for a picture in the Salon. She had learnt to ride a bicycle, wearing bloomers. A year later came a second daughter, Vera.

Frequent moves made Flora's life just tolerable. There were escapes to London, where she played the piano and was invited into the St John's Wood artists' circle. There were nearly three years in a drab small villa in Farnham, so very preferable to the wet moors, and there were many expeditions to Genoa. The girls had governesses, most memorably a German girl who sang songs to them in the firelight sitting on the floor, and wore blue-and-white striped cotton blouses. Later came la Contessina, of impoverished Italian nobility, whom they loved and trampled on. Vera, with thick pigtails and pink cheeks, was good; Freya, a 'sort of byword for naughtiness'. Despite the governesses the girls remained wild, little educated and without other companions. They wore long ribbed woollen stockings, and got holes in them. They climbed trees. On Dartmoor, there were occasional

‘appalling social picnics’, with footmen handing out sandwiches, from which they fled like rabbits. Robert and Flora were seldom happy any longer. Freya was never to forget ‘the sight of my mother’s grim expression, doing the housework she hated’, nor her father’s mute and wistful unassumingness; observing their distress left her with an enduring hatred of argument.

In 1901 came a break. Flora took the girls to Asolo, the village in the foothills of the Dolomites where Robert Browning’s son Pen, a friend from student days, had bought and restored three houses, and where Herbert Young had now settled in a gatehouse in the village walls. Asolo was a charming place, and it is largely unaltered today: in the lee of a hill, on which lay scattered a few stone remains of a pre-Roman fortress, it had a square with trees and a fountain with a pedestal in the form of a fat Venetian lion squatting on its haunches. The narrow streets were lined with crooked and irregular porticoes. It was here that Catherine Cornaro, last Queen of Cyprus, kept a lively and provincial court, when the Venetian grandees brought her from her island, and it was Bembo, her Cardinal, who invented the word ‘asolare’ to describe the ‘purposeless, leisurely, agreeable passing of time’.

Freya with her younger sister Vera in England, 1898

Herbert Young was greatly attached to the two little girls. He read them Malory. In 1903 came a move to Dronero, a grey and cobbled town in a valley in Piedmont, drawn there by a new friend of Flora's, Count Mario di Roascio, a short, round young man who wore his moustache dipping downwards and who was starting a carpet business. Flora had taken La Mal Pensa, which had a garden full of glass pavilions and summer houses and a pond of croaking frogs. Robert Stark stayed behind in Chagford, though he came out to Italy for occasional holidays, when he taught the girls cricket and bought them guinea pigs with which they practised 'power politics with a fierce guinea pig, a bully, and a very timid one which my father would pick up and push towards the Dictator'. One year they went to Le Touquet and tobogganed down the sand dunes.

La Mal Pensa was too cold for winters. Flora and the two girls moved into part of a great house in the town, which was still icy, with marble, tessellated floors, then, the following year, into a fine old whitewashed villa away in the vineyards on the slope of a hill. The plain lay below them, and thirty miles away they could see the Bismarda, a peak covered most of the year in show. Freya and Vera were sent off to the nuns at the Sacré Coeur convent every day

to learn French and embroidery. The family was not well off. There was little money for wood and rarely butter or jam for breakfast. More painfully, a haze of scandal was building up over their heads: Flora had become increasingly involved in Mario Roascio's factory and people now assumed that he had become her lover. The girls felt shame and confusion; Freya, the elder, took on the role of leader, self-reliant, rather judging, perhaps, with a concern for morality and behaviour that was not to leave her. Vera remained passive.

Mario was quarrelsome, jealous and dictatorial; he discouraged all friendships and the visitors who did come usually left after some disagreeable exchange. 'I am glad to say,' wrote Freya somewhat stuffily many years later, 'that Vera and I kept our sense of proportion . . . Work was the household god and only people who worked like ourselves were any good at all.'

For by now Freya, aged thirteen, had found out about books. She was reading French, a lot of Dumas, and beginning to teach herself Latin. The desire to study had come to her on a summer visit to Chagford, when the unaccustomed heat had brought honeysuckle out all over Ford Park, the pond had been full of red and white water lilies and the girls bathed early each morning in the waterfalls.

While the others played tennis on a court covered in molehills and later went cubbing and hunting, Freya read ‘those books which, come in one’s life as a landscape suddenly revealed, a turning point which never again leaves one’. There was Plato’s dialogue on the death of Socrates, which seemed to her to answer every question about the future of the spirit; there was the life of Darwin, and the *Origin of the Species*; there were Milton, Spenser and Hazlitt, picked at random from the shelves. Before they returned to Dronero that winter, Freya read the whole of Caesar’s wars from beginning to end with the help of a dictionary. It was to be one of her longest and most fondly remembered visits to Dartmoor, for Robert Stark had decided to start a new life farming in Canada, and now sold Ford Park to the Duchy of Cornwall. Before he left, he and Freya paced out seven acres of moorland to give to her where the ‘hills faded into one another to a far distance’. Along one side ran a stream, for fishing; the rest, a sloping hillside of turf, they marked with boulders. They stand there still, an ‘S’ clearly carved into the rock.

It was fortunate that Freya had learnt the pleasure of books; they gave her a new anchor, a discipline, a longing to see and discover the world, and they opened a line of doors that would go on opening forever.

Freya in Asolo, 1902

At this moment in particular, however, their appeal was vital. One afternoon she went to visit the new factory Mario had opened in Dronero where, standing by the vast looms, her long hair hanging almost to her knees, she was suddenly caught up in one of the steel shafts and carried round, her feet striking the wall as she was dragged by. When she was pulled out, half her scalp was found to have been torn away. It was four months before she left hospital, patched up by the then totally new invention of skin grafts, but forever slightly disfigured down one side of her face. It was the sort of accident to break the confidence of any young girl; Freya, resilient already, became more so. Overcoming it added to her enormous natural courage, and gave her physical and mental reserves she later had need of; but the accident also made her very vulnerable in all things to do with her appearance and her effect on other people.

In 1908 Freya was allowed to stay on her own in London, at the house of Viva Jeyes and her husband Harry, assistant editor of the *Standard*, one of the evening papers, a sensible and brilliant man who talked about politics and books with her while they exercised the dogs in Regents Park. She met W. P. Ker, later Professor of Poetry at Oxford and one of the most distinguished literary men of his time, and

started going to his lectures in English at London University. He was unusually well loved, his students showing their approval by a gentle stamping of feet when he arrived in the lecture hall. Freya considered him her adopted godfather and said that he taught her all she knew of English literature, correcting her essays by writing underneath ‘too many words’.

For the next few years her frequent stays in London were to provide both great pleasure and great doubt. She delighted in the work, which by 1912 had become a degree course at Bedford College; she enjoyed the few literary soirées to which she was invited – there was one dinner with Yeats, Sickert and Edmund Gosse – and she took a certain anxious enjoyment in some new dresses. But she felt herself to be unattractive, over and above her scarred face, in the mannish shirts and unbecoming suits of the day, and podgy with a nose that was too big. She had also become shy, believing that her fellow students found her elaborate Italian manners affected. Rather than join them for lunch, she ate pâté sandwiches in a French café. She was at her happiest listening to W. P. Ker, or discussing the week’s *Nation* and *Spectator* with Herbert Young, or, when returning to Dartmoor to stay with friends, talking socialism with a new acquaintance called Dorothy, as they raced their ponies along the Druid

avenues and circles of the moor. Dorothy wanted to be a sanitary inspector.

In Dronero, pleasure came only when she and Vera escaped to walk in the mountains, or when Mario could be persuaded to let Flora and her daughters go off without him. To the girls, their mother seemed always too ready to placate him, to make sacrifices for him she would not make for them. 'My mother asked too much,' Freya wrote in *Traveller's Prelude*, 'and later on it was hard to forgive.' These years set the tone for her often ambivalent relationship with her mother: yearning, as if never receiving quite enough affection, and trying to win more, yet also slightly censorious, which made her ever after the custodian of family morals. By now, whenever in Italy, she was put in charge of the housekeeping, and at forty lire a month in wages she was being schooled to run the factory office. It took her nearly a year to notice that Mario was courting her, a suppressed unsettling courtship from which she backed sharply away. Three years later, Mario married Vera, who, having agreed to become a Catholic, spent the night before the ceremony crying in Freya's arms.

Both wars had an exceptionally strong effect on Freya's life and outlook; from both she emerged more resolute, more established, more appreciated.

But she cannot be said to have approached the first war unformed. In 1914 she was twenty-one, a 'very funny little thing', according to friends, in the home-made dresses she wore very long, after Flora told her that long clothes suited short people better than short ones. She spoke English with a slight foreign accent, and had completed most stages of an honours degree at London University, not in English but in History, saying that 'I found the former meant too much reading *about* people while for history one spent one's time with the sources themselves.'

She was, she thought, 'pretty tough' after her wandering life, and in total command of her temper, having simply decided, at the age of twelve, watching her mother's bouts of violent rage, that she would never let it become uncontrolled. She was not proud, 'due always, I believe . . . to a genuine love of inquiry into things for their own sake'. And most surprising of all, perhaps, she was not bitter, drawing strength from the 'warmth and affection' of her Dartmoor early childhood, from the honesty of her father from whom she considered that she had inherited a 'feeling of almost physical discomfort in the face of any lie which has lasted through life', and from her mother's vitality, if not her constancy.

She could ride, dance, embroider, construe Latin,

speak perfect Italian and adequate French and German. And she had the memory of a landscape, 'so that I never move into Devonshire lanes or towards the Dartmoor tors without the knowledge that my roots are there', that she was later to carry with her to the not dissimilar flat, undulating, green pastures of Luristan.