

FOREWORD

Few people can evoke the spirit of place more vividly than Ann Bridge. Enormously popular in her lifetime, her novels, interweaving her own experiences as a traveler with fictional characters and situations, were almost a genre in themselves. For those who come fresh to them today they have acquired an added dimension; so many of the worlds she describes have vanished utterly that we feel we are embarking on a voyage of discovery when we read them.

Ann Bridge (Lady O'Malley), the daughter of an American mother and an English father, was born in 1889. Married to a diplomat, she came to writing fairly late; her first book, *Peking Picnic*, was published in 1932. Its success was instantaneous. From then on she was launched as a best-selling novelist (though in order to comply with Foreign Office regulations she was forced to use a pseudonym, taking the surname Bridge from her home, Bridge End, and Ann from her Christian names, Mary Anne). *Peking Picnic* won the prestigious Atlantic Monthly Prize, and her subsequent two books, *The Ginger Griffin* in 1934, and *Illyrian Spring* in 1935, were Book Society Choices. A string of successes followed, their foreign settings varying with her travels as a diplomat's wife or on her own. *Illyrian Spring* in particular set a vogue for travel in the Adriatic. The Prince of Wales took his yacht there on a much publicised trip with Mrs Simpson and the public followed suit; within a year the number of American and British tourists to Dalmatia had more than doubled.

It was never going to be so easy to visit China, which in the late 1920s and early 1930s was in a state of political and social chaos, with regional warlords vying for power, and the outlawed Communist party waiting in the wings. But to this day knowledgeable visitors to Peking, or Beijing, arrive with *Peking Picnic* in their hand. Some things have changed beyond recognition, others are instantly familiar from her descriptions: the wheeling of

pigeon orchestras, each bird with a pipe playing a different note attached to its pinion feathers; the shock of excitement as the walls and roofs of the Forbidden City first come into view; the two great temple complexes outside the city, Chieh T'ai Ssu and T'an Chüeh Ssu, where most of the action of the novel takes place; the "masterly geometrical flatness" of the plain beyond the city; the bare, brown earth and blossoming trees in spring, recalling the brown silk background to the masterpieces of Chinese flower painting.

Peking, where her husband was Counselor to the British Legation, was Ann Bridge's first foreign post. It was a time when the foreign concessions were still in place, and Europeans led a seemingly privileged existence, waited on by numerous servants and backed up by Legation troops, but uneasily aware of the fragility of their position when civil war approached the capital or a fresh warlord captured or purchased the city from a rival. "Well, that will make your – what, sixth siege, Hubbard," says Mrs Leroy, the heroine, when her maid reports rumours of a new outbreak of civil war. "Seventh, Madam," replies Hubbard with modest pride. Against this troubled background the conventions are maintained, hospitality given and returned, less for pleasure than in order to ease transactions within the business and diplomatic community. Mrs Leroy, as the wife of the Commercial and Oriental Attaché, keeps a profit and loss account of lunches and dinners given and received, which she balances each quarter. "It is just part of the job", she explains to her horrified niece.

Just part of the job too is her separation from her children for all but two months of the year, normal enough to diplomats' wives at the time, but far less acceptable now. A strain of homesickness and longing is woven into Laura Leroy's Chinese life. But China, alien at first, has also caught her under its spell, and she knows that in some ways England will seem small and suffocating compared with its vast spaces. It is a place of extremes, where death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, and the atmosphere is heightened, producing a kind of nervous stimulation leading among other

things to the phenomenon known as “Peking quarrel,” but also to a sense of emotional exaltation in which the most unusual behavior seems possible and normal.

In this heightened atmosphere, once away from the constraints of legation life, perceptions shift, relationships intensify, and journeys of self-discovery are made. The picnic of the title is a weekend expedition, organised by Nina, the American wife of the British General Nevile, to a temple at some distance from the capital. The party includes her niece, Little Annette, a tall, unawakened and curiously tragic beauty; a well-known American novelist, Anna Hande, nicknamed Big Annette to differentiate her from the niece; Vinstead, a professor of psychology just arrived from England; Laura Leroy (whose husband stays behind); her nieces, Judith, the “Singing Kuniang,” and her silent sister, Lilah; and a young attaché, Derek Fitzmaurice.

The journey begins amid various ominous signs. Menacing groups of soldiers, an outbreak of smallpox in a village they pass through, create a feeling of foreboding. The casualness and filth appall the less-experienced travelers. “But isn’t there a very great deal of illness?” asks Miss Hande. “There’s a great deal of death!” says Derek grimly. “You don’t get ill in Peking – you die.”

Omens are forgotten when they finally reach Chieh T’ai Ssu, a complex of ancient courtyards, pavilions, shrines and terraces covering several acres, with waves of fruit blossom surging in and around it. “Strange magic of the blossoming tree – ancient wisdom that brings in the spring to worship within its holy places! It is not easy to escape these wholly; all did not wholly escape. There is no cause for wonder if in that place, and then, some bonds of thought and custom were loosened, some curtains of the soul drawn back – if eyes were opened, if vision for a moment gleamed, and ardor sprang in pursuit.”

The enchantment of the place is conducive to love. Romances develop. Even Mrs Leroy, the confidante and counsellor of the younger members of the party, is not immune. Her relationship

with the Professor, first met at the outset of the expedition, provides the story's central theme. Reticence, delicacy of feeling and renunciation are unfashionable virtues today, and they may not save her from eventual tragedy. "She looks like Anna Karenina," thinks Little Annette, as she watches her lying asleep. Middle-aged love, as Miss Hande observes, is always more complicated than the younger kind.

The leisurely interplay of relationships, evolving over the first two days of the weekend, gives place to sudden drama on the Sunday, when half of the party visit a second temple, T'an Chüeh Ssu, and are held up by bandits. The dangerous and volatile element which has always been latent in the Chinese scene comes to the surface, the careless violence of their captors made more alarming by its unpredictability. In the nerve-wracking hours which follow, the passive Lilah proves an unexpected heroine. You can still see the narrow passage behind the pavilion in the inner courtyard, by which she manages to escape unseen, edging upwards, back against one side, feet against the other, over the high temple wall. As a first-class alpinist who had climbed with Mallory, Ann Bridge drew on her own experience in inventing and describing her technique.

The episode ends almost in anti-climax, and the party returns to Peking. But death is awaiting one of them, confirming earlier warning signs, and none of those who have taken part in the weekend's expedition will ever be quite the same again. Ann Bridge's special blend of landscape and romance, in the first and perhaps the best loved of her many books, makes us feel that we have been there too and have shared its dramas and enchantments.

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2000