

A Canary for One

By Ernest Hemingway

Chapter One

The Train Ride Begins

It was a hot summer day. A long train moved quickly through the countryside of France. The train passed red stone houses and big green palm trees. On one side of the train, the passengers could see the blue sea. On the other side, there were hills, fields of grapes, and trees.

In the train, in a small salon compartment, three people sat together. A middle-aged American woman, a younger American woman, and her husband were traveling. They sat quietly in the heat. The windows were open, but there was no wind. The American lady pulled down the curtain. She didn't want the hot sun.

The American lady smiled and held a small birdcage in her hands. Inside the cage was a small yellow bird — a canary.



"I bought him in Palermo," she said proudly. "We only had one hour on land. It was Sunday. The man selling birds wanted dollars. I gave him a dollar and a half. The canary sings very beautifully."

She loved the bird. She talked about him often.

The train stopped at a big station — Marseilles. There was smoke in the air from many chimneys. The train stayed for twenty-five minutes. The American lady got out and bought a newspaper and a small bottle of water. She did not go far from the train. She was afraid the train would leave without her.

She was a little deaf and didn't always hear announcements. Once, in Cannes, the train left with no signal. She had just jumped on in time.

Now, the train started again and moved out of the city. The sky was getting dark. People were working in fields. Some were watching a fire. A small house had burned. Soldiers stood on the station platform. They were tall and wore brown uniforms. Their faces looked serious under the electric lights. The American lady looked at them, but she didn't say anything.

The train kept moving. The American lady looked out the window and then turned to the young couple.

"It's so hot," she said. "I didn't sleep at all last night. The train is too fast. I worry about accidents."

The younger woman smiled politely, but didn't say much. Her husband looked out of the window, lost in thought.

That night, the porter came and made the beds. The beds pulled out from the wall. The canary was placed safely in the corridor with a cloth over the cage. The American lady lay awake, afraid of a crash. She didn't like fast trains, especially at night.

Outside, everything was dark, and the train moved very fast.

Chapter Two

The American Lady Talks

The next morning, the sun was shining. The train was near Paris. The American lady came back from the washroom. She looked clean and fresh, even though she hadn't slept much.

She carefully took the cloth off the birdcage and hung the cage near the window. The sunlight came into the salon compartment. The little yellow canary moved his wings and shook his feathers. The train was moving slower now. It would reach Paris soon.

"He loves the sun," the American lady said. "He'll sing soon."

The canary looked happy. He made a small sound and pecked at his feathers.

"I've always loved birds," the lady said with a soft voice. "I'm taking him home to my little girl."

"There—he's singing now," she said happily.

The train passed through green forests and quiet towns. There were signs and big posters on the walls near the tracks. People in the towns walked to work or sat on benches. The young man, who was the narrator of this story, watched out the window and didn't say anything for a while.

The American lady kept talking. She looked at the young woman.

"Is your husband American too?" she asked kindly.

"Yes," the young woman replied. "We're both Americans."

"Oh! I thought you were English," said the American lady.

"No," the man replied. "Maybe it's because of my clothes. I'm wearing braces for my trousers instead of suspenders. That might make me look English."

The lady didn't hear him well. She was a little deaf. She looked at the young woman and smiled again.

"I'm so glad you're Americans," she said warmly. "American men make the best husbands. That's why we left the Continent. You know, my daughter fell in love with a man in Vevey."

She stopped and looked serious.

"They were madly in love. But I took her away, of course."

The young woman looked surprised.

"Did she get over it?" she asked.

The American lady shook her head.

"I don't think so. She stopped eating. She couldn't sleep. I tried very hard to help her. But she still thinks about him. I told her, 'No foreigner can make an American girl a good husband.'"

She looked out the window. The train passed through more towns.

"Some people may not agree," she said. "But my friend, a very good woman, told me, 'Only American men are the right husbands for American girls.' And I believe that."

The train kept moving slowly toward Paris.

Chapter Three

Past Memories and Quiet Sadness

The American lady looked at the young wife's coat and smiled.

"What a beautiful traveling coat!" she said.

"Thank you," said the young woman.

"I know where that's from!" the lady added. "I've bought my clothes from the same shop in the Rue Saint Honoré for twenty years."

She talked about how she ordered dresses from Paris. The shop knew her measurements, and they chose dresses she liked. Then the shop sent the clothes to New York. Everything was simple and not too expensive. The dresses never had too much gold or shine.

"There were only two women who worked at the shop in all those years," she explained. "They always knew what I liked. They even had my daughter's size. But now, she is grown. Things are changing."

The young man listened quietly. He looked out the window. Grass grew along the sides of the train tracks, but in many places, it hadn't grown at all. There were many cars on the tracks, brown wooden restaurant cars and sleeping cars. Some were going to Italy.

"Maybe they're going to Rome," the young woman said.

The American lady kept talking to her.

"Americans make the best husbands," she repeated.

The man stood up and began to collect their bags. They were close to Paris. His wife sat quietly and smiled sometimes, but she didn't speak much now.

"How long ago did you leave Vevey?" the young woman asked.

"Two years ago this fall," the lady answered. "It was her—my daughter—you know. That's who I'm taking the canary to."

"Was the man your daughter loved a Swiss?"

"Yes," said the lady. "He came from a good family. He was going to be an engineer. They met in Vevey. They liked to walk together."

"We know Vevey," the young woman said. "We were there for our honeymoon."

"Really?" said the lady. "I had no idea. It's a lovely place."

"Yes," said the young wife. "We stayed at the Trois Couronnes hotel."

"Oh, I know that hotel," said the American lady. "It's a very fine old place."

"Yes," said the wife. "We had a lovely room, and in the fall the country was beautiful."

"Were you there in the fall?" asked the lady again.

"Yes," said the wife softly.

Suddenly, the man looked out the window and said, "Look, there's been a wreck."

Three broken train cars stood beside the tracks. The sides were torn, and the roofs had fallen in.

"I was afraid of that all night," the American lady said. "I didn't sleep because of it. I have strong feelings about things. I'll never ride a rapide train again at night. There must be slower trains that are safer."

The train moved into the darkness of the Paris train station — Gare de Lyon. It was very dim, and porters came to the windows to help passengers.

The man handed their bags through the window. The American lady found a porter from Cook's Travel Service and spoke to him.

"Just a moment, madame," he said. "I will find your name."

The young man helped with the bags. His wife stood beside him. The American lady said goodbye and smiled. Her name had been found on a paper by the man from Cook's.

The couple followed the porter down the long platform. At the end, there was a gate. A man took their tickets.

Chapter Four

The Truth Behind the Silence

The train ride was over. They had reached Paris.

The man and his wife walked slowly behind the porter. The platform was long and quiet. The American lady went with the man from Cook's travel company. She held her birdcage carefully. The little yellow canary inside moved a little. The sun was rising, and the air was cool.

The young man and his wife said nothing as they walked. The city of Paris was waking up. Cars were starting to move, and people were beginning their day. But for the couple, everything felt slow and heavy.

The man thought about the trip. The American lady had talked so much. She believed American men were the best husbands. She believed no foreign man could love an American girl. She had taken her daughter away from the man she loved.

The young man thought about his own life. He looked at his wife. She walked quietly beside him. She didn't speak. She hadn't said much for the whole trip.

She had once laughed easily. She had once smiled at him often. But now, she only smiled politely at strangers. Something had changed between them. But they never said it out loud.

The train trip was not just a vacation. It had been something more. They had traveled to get away from problems. But problems don't go away with a train ride.

As they neared the end of the platform, the man remembered the last words of the story:

"We were returning to Paris to set up separate residences."

It was quiet now. The American lady was gone. The train was behind them. The sound of the canary was gone too.

They had come back not as one, but as two.

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