

A View Without a Room: Old Friends Fifty Years Later

Just half a century ago, when Edward VII lounged on the British throne and the world was serene, a young Cambridge graduate who had recently returned from an Italian sojourn published his third novel, "A Room With a View." It was liked, as its author E. M. Forster himself said, "by the young, and business men." The critical consensus is that this charming tale is one of the great novelist's finest works. The slight plot begins in Florence, a city favored by Britishers

in quest of culture. Pretty, proper Lucy Honeychurch and her old-maidish cousin Charlotte Bartlett, arriving at the Pension Bertolini, are upset to discover that the rooms assigned to them have no view. When Old Mr. Emerson offers them his and his son's rooms, the ladies accept, entailing an obligation Lucy comes to regret when George Emerson, a most impulsive young man, takes it upon himself to kiss her while they are on an outing. She regrets it even more when she goes back

home to her mother and brother Freddy at Windy Corner and becomes engaged to priggish Cecil Vyse—for what does Cecil do but persuade the Emersons to become the Honeychurches' neighbors, which affords George a chance to steal another kiss! Ironically, it is spinsterish Charlotte who enables Lucy and George to end the story honeymooning at the Pension Bertolini. Mr. Forster, now crowding eighty, tells what has since happened to the Emersons and their friends in this golden anniversary essay.



E. M. Forster.

BY E. M. FORSTER

"A ROOM WITH A VIEW" was published in 1908. Here we are in 1958 and it occurs to me to wonder what the characters have been doing during the interval. They were created even earlier than 1908. The Italian half of the novel was almost the first piece of fiction I attempted. I laid it aside to write and publish two other novels, and then returned to it and added the English half. It is not my preferred novel—"The Longest Journey" is that—but it may fairly be called the nicest. It contains a hero and heroine who are supposed to be good, good-looking and in love—and who are promised happiness. Have they achieved it?

Let me think.

Lucy (Mrs. George Emerson) must now be in her late sixties, George in his early seventies—a ripe age though not as ripe as my own. They are still a personable couple, and fond of each other and of their children and grandchildren. But where do they live? Ah, that is the difficulty, and that is why I have entitled this article "A View Without a Room." I cannot think where George and Lucy live.

After their Florentine honeymoon they probably settled down in Hampstead. No—in

Highgate. That is pretty clear, and the next six years were from the point of view of amenity the best they ever experienced. George cleared out of the railway and got a better-paid clerkship in a government office, Lucy brought a nice little dowry along with her, which they were too sensible not to enjoy, and Miss Bartlett left them what she termed her little all. (Who would have thought it of Cousin Charlotte? I should never have thought anything else.) They had a servant who slept in and were becoming comfortable young capitalists when World War I exploded—the war that was to end war—and spoiled everything.

George instantly became a conscientious objector. He accepted alternative service, so did not go to prison, but he lost his government job and was out of the running for Homes for Heroes when peace came. Mrs. Honeychurch was terribly upset by her son-in-law's conduct.

Lucy now got on her high horse and declared herself a conscientious objector too, and ran a more immediate risk by continuing to play Beethoven. Hun music! She was overheard and reported and the police called. Old Mr. Emerson, who lived with the young couple, addressed the police at length. They told him he had better

look out. Shortly afterward he died, still looking out and confident that Love and Truth would see humanity through in the end.

They saw the family through, which is something. No government authorized or ever will authorize either Love or Truth but they worked privately in this case and helped the squalid move from Highgate to Carshalton. The George Emersons now had two girls and a boy and were beginning to want a real home—somewhere in the country where they could take root and unobtrusively found a dynasty. But civilization was not moving that way. The characters in my other novels were experiencing similar troubles. "Howard's End" is a hunt for a home. India is a Passage for Indians as well as English. No resting place.

FOR a time Windy Corner dangled illusively. After Mrs. Honeychurch's death there was a chance of moving into that much loved house. But Freddy, who had inherited it, was obliged to sell and realize the capital for the upbringing of his family. An unsuccessful yet prolific doctor, Freddy could not do other than sell. Windy Corner disappeared, its garden was built over, and the name of

Honeychurch resounded in Surrey no more.

In due course World War II broke out—the one that was to end with a durable peace. George instantly enlisted. Being both intelligent and passionate, he could distinguish between a Germany that was not much worse than England and a Germany that was devilish. At the age of 50 he could recognize in Hitlerism an enemy of the heart as well as of the head and the arts. He discovered that he loved fighting and had been starved by its absence, and also discovered that away from his wife he did not remain chaste.

For Lucy the war was less varied. She gave some music lessons and broadcast some Beethoven, who was quite all right this time, but the little flat at Watford, where she was trying to keep things together against George's return, was bombed, the loss of her possessions and mementos was complete, and the same thing happened to their married daughter, away at Nuneaton.

At the front George rose to the rank of corporal, was wounded and taken prisoner in Africa, and imprisoned in Mussolini's Italy, where he found the Italians sometimes as sympathetic as they had been in his tourist days, and sometimes less sympathetic.

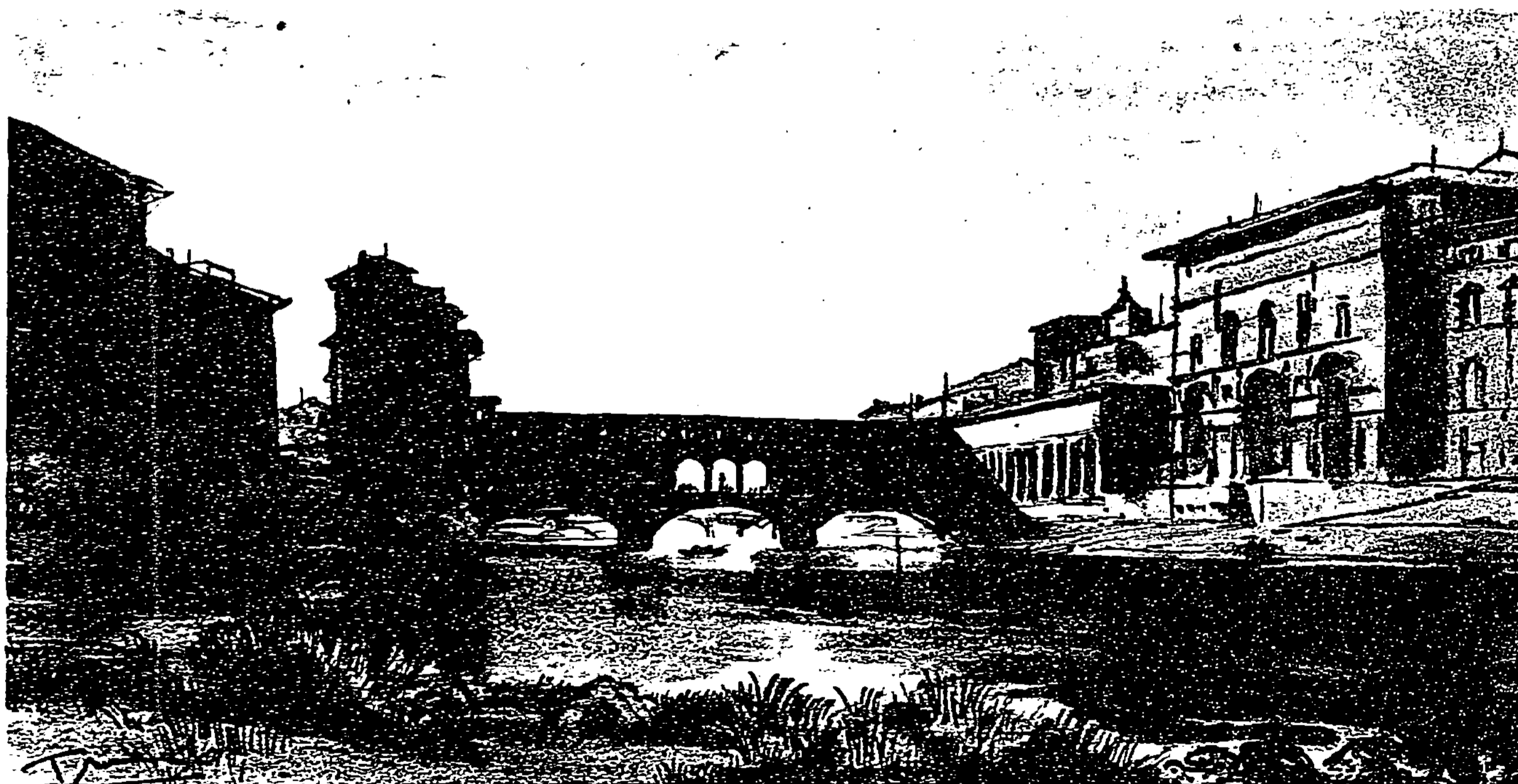
When Italy collapsed he

moved northward through the chaos toward Florence. The beloved city had changed, but not unrecognizably. The Trinità Bridge had been destroyed, both ends of the Ponte Vecchio were in a mess, but the Piazza Signoria, where once a trifling murder had occurred, still survived. So did the district where the Pension Bertolini had once flourished—nothing damaged at all.

And George set out—as I did myself a few years later—to locate the particular building. He failed. For though nothing is damaged all is changed. The houses on that stretch of the Lung' Arno have been renumbered and remodeled and, as it were, remelted, some of the façades have been extended, others have shrunk, so that it is impossible to decide which room was romantic half a century ago. George had therefore to report to Lucy that the View was still there and that the Room must be there, too, but could not be found. She was glad of the news, although at that moment she was homeless. It was something to have retained a View, and secure in it and in their love as long as they have one another to love, George and Lucy await World War III—the one that would end war and everything else, too.

CECIL VYSE must not be omitted from this prophetic retrospect. He moved out of the Emersons' circle but not altogether out of mine. With his integrity and intelligence he was destined for confidential work, and in 1914 he was seconded to Information or whatever the withholding of information was then entitled. I had an example of his propaganda, and a very welcome one, at Alexandria. A quiet little party was held on the outskirts of that city, and some one wanted a little Beethoven. The hostess demurred. Hun music might compromise us. But a young officer spoke up. "No it's all right," he said, "a chap who knows about those things from the inside told me Beethoven's definitely Belgian."

The chap in question must have been Cecil. That mixture of mischief and culture is unmistakable. Our hostess was reassured, the ban was lifted, and the Moonlight Sonata shimmered into the desert.



"Arno Bridge, Florence."

Wash drawing by Van Day Truitt. Courtesy Corcoran Gallery.