

AN AWFULLY
BIG
ADVENTURE

Beryl Bainbridge

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About the Author

Beryl Bainbridge is the author of seventeen novels, two travel books and five plays for stage and television. *The Dressmaker*, *The Bottle Factory Outing*, *An Awfully Big Adventure*, *Every Man for Himself* and *Master Georgie* (which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize) were all shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and *Every Man for Himself* was awarded the Whitbread Novel of the Year Prize. She won the Guardian Fiction Prize with *The Dressmaker* and the Whitbread Prize with *Injury Time*. *The Bottle Factory Outing*, *Sweet William* and *The Dressmaker* have been adapted for film, as was *An Awfully Big Adventure*, which starred Hugh Grant and Alan Rickman. Beryl Bainbridge died in July 2010.

AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

Beryl Bainbridge

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SLIGHTLY: ~~(Examining the fallen Wendy more minutely)~~ This is no bird; I think it must be a lady.

NIBS: *(Who would have preferred it to be a bird)* And Tootles has killed her.

CURLY: Now I see. Peter was bringing her to us. *(They wonder for what object)*.

OMNES: *(Though everyone of them had wanted to take a shot at her)* Oh, Tootles!

TOOTLES: *(Gulping)* I did it. When ladies used to come to me in dreams I said: 'Pretty mother', but when she really came I shot her.

James Barrie, *Peter Pan*, Act Two.

When the fire curtain had been lowered and the doors were at last closed, Meredith thought he heard child crying. He switched on the house lights, but of course there was no one there. Some unfortunate had left a teddy-bear perched on the tip-up seat in the third row.

The girl was waiting for him in the property room. At his approach she stepped backwards, as though afraid he would strike her. He didn't look at her; he simply told her, in that particular tone of voice which in the past he had always used for other people, that he wasn't interested in excuses and that in any case there were none that would fit the bill.

'I was upset,' she protested. 'Anybody would be. It will never happen again.'

They both heard a door opening on the floor above, and footsteps as Rose clumped along the passage.

'If it was up to me,' he said, lowering his voice, 'you wouldn't get the chance.'

'You're wrong,' the girl persisted. 'He was happy. He kept saying "Well done". I'm not old enough to shoulder the blame. Not all of it. I'm not the only one at fault.'

'Get out of my sight,' he said, and pushing past her strode up the corridor to waylay Rose.

'I was encouraged,' she shouted after him. 'Don't you forget that!'

He slashed the air with his hook.

'You don't want to be too hard on her,' Rose said. 'She's young.'

He followed her through the pass door and across the dark stage into the auditorium. When Rose saw the teddy-bear she picked it up by one ear and walked on with it dangling against the skirt of her black frock.

'Did you get through to the wife?' asked Meredith.

'I did,' Rose said. 'She's coming up on the milk train.'

He climbed the stone steps after her, ducking his head beneath the singing gas mantles until they reached the top floor and the round window overlooking the square. Only the fireman and the rain-catcher came this far.

'The note,' he enquired. 'Did it shed any illumination?'

'Who can tell?' she said. 'Bunny saw fit to put a match to it.'

At this hour the square was empty. The flower-sellers had long since gone home, leaving the orange boxes piled up beside the urinals. Between the jagged buildings the lights of ships jumped like sparrows above the river.

They stood in silence, looking down into the darkness as though waiting for a curtain to rise. There was a sudden seep of orange light as the door of Brown's Café opened and the slattern in the gumboots staggered out to sling washing-up slops into the gutter.

Then the girl appeared from out of the side street and began to run in the direction of the telephone box on the corner. Once she looked back and up at the window as though she knew she was observed. At this distance her face was a pale blur. A man with a white muffler wound about his throat rolled from the black shadows of Ice Warehouse and the girl stopped and spoke to him.

He fumbled in his pockets and handed her something. He was holding a bouquet of flowers in a twist of paper.

'The Board won't like it,' Meredith said. 'Rushworth is bound to kick up rough.'

'I'm a match for him,' said Rose. She was holding the teddy-bear to her sequined breast, circling

with the pad of her finger the cold button of its eye.

‘I don’t suppose,’ Meredith asked her, ‘that we can keep it out of the newspapers.’

‘I could,’ Rose told him, ‘but I won’t. The orphanage has rung twice already. God forgive us, but it’ll be good for business.’

Directly below, where the branches of the lime trees bounced in the wind, sending the lamplight skeetering across the cobblestones, the man in the muffler stood relieving himself within the wrought-iron enclosure of the public urinal, one arm fastidiously raised above his head. They could see his boots, glossy under the street lamp, and that bedraggled fistful of winter daffodils . . .

At first it had been Uncle Vernon's ambition, not Stella's. He thought he understood her; from the moment she could toddle he had watched her lurching towards the limelight. Stella herself had shown more caution. 'I'll not chase moonbeams,' she told him.

Still, she went along with the idea and for two years, on a Friday after school, she ran down the hill to Hanover Street and rode the lift in Crane Hall, up through the showrooms of polished pianofortes where the blind men fingered scales, until she reached the top floor and Mrs Ackerley whose puckered mouth spat out 'How now brown cow' behind the smokescreen of her Russian cigarettes.

She came home and shut herself in her bedroom off the scullery and spouted speeches. She sat at the tea table and dropped her cup to the saucer, spotting the good cloth with tannic acid, wailing that it might be a poison that the Friar Lawrence had administered. When Uncle Vernon shouted at her she said she wasn't old enough to control either her reflexes or her emotions. She had always had a precise notion of what could be expected of her.

Lily had imagined that the girl was merely learning to speak properly and was dismayed to hear she was called Dramatic Art. She fretted lest Stella build up hopes only to have them dashed.

Then Stella failed her mock school certificate and her teachers decided it wasn't worth while entering her for the real thing. Uncle Vernon went off to the school prepared to bluster, and returned convinced. They'd agreed she had the brains but not the application.

'That's good enough for me,' he told Lily. 'We both know it's useless reasoning with her.'

He made enquiries and pulled strings. After the letter came Stella spent four extra Saturday mornings at Crane Hall being coached by Mrs Ackerley in the telephone scene from the *Bill of Divorcement*. Mrs Ackerley, dubious about her accent, had thought a Lancashire drama more suitable, preferably a comedy; the girl was something of a clown.

Stella would have none of it. She was a mimic, she said, and sure enough she took off Mrs Ackerley's own smoky tone of voice to perfection. Admittedly she was a little young for the part, but as she shrewdly observed, this would only stress her versatility. The audition was fixed for the third Monday in September.

Ten days before, over breakfast, she told Uncle Vernon she was having second thoughts.

'Get away with you,' he said. 'It's too late to change things now.' He wrote out a shopping list and gave her a ten-shilling note. Half an hour later when he came up into the dark hall, jingling the loose coppers in his pocket, he found her huddled on the stairs, one plump knee wedged between the banister rails. He was annoyed because she knew she wasn't supposed to hang about this part of the house, not unless she was in her good school uniform. She was staring at the damp patch that splodged the leaf-patterned wallpaper above the telephone.

He switched on the light and demanded to know what she was playing at. At this rate there'd be nothing left on Paddy's vegetable barrow but a bunch of mouldy carrots. Did she think this was any way to conduct a business?

She was in one of her moods and pretended to be lost in thought. He could have hit her. There was nothing of her mother in her face, save perhaps for the freckles on her cheek-bones.

'Carry on like this,' he said, not for the first time, 'and you'll end up behind the counter at Woolworth's.' It was foolish of him to goad her. It was not beyond her to run towards such employment in order to spite him.

‘You push me too hard,’ she said. ‘You want reflected glory.’

He raised his arm then, but when she pushed past him with swimming eyes his world was drowned tears.

He telephoned Harcourt and sought reassurance, in a round-about way. ‘Three bottles of disinfectant,’ he said, reading from the list in front of him. ‘Four pounds of carbolic soap . . . or dozen candles . . . two dozen toilet rolls . . . George Lipman’s put in a word with his sister. On Stella’s behalf.’

‘Fraid I can only manage a dozen,’ Harcourt said. ‘And they’re shop-soiled.’

‘Am I doing the right thing, I ask myself?’

‘I don’t see what else is open to her,’ said Harcourt. ‘Not if the school won’t have her back.’

‘Not *won’t*,’ corrected Vernon. ‘It’s more that they don’t feel she’ll gain any benefit from staying on. And you know Stella. Once her mind’s made up . . .’

‘Indeed I do,’ said Harcourt. Although he had never met the girl he often remarked to his wife that he could take an exam on the subject, if pushed. His extensive knowledge of Stella was based on the regular progress reports provided by Vernon when making his monthly order for bathroom and washhouse supplies.

‘She caused an uproar the other week,’ confided Vernon, ‘over the hoteliers’ dinner dance: Lily got her hands on some parachute silk and took her to that dressmaker in Duke Street to be fitted for a frock. Come the night, with the damn thing hanging up on the back door to get rid of the creases, she refused to wear it. She was adamant. In the end none of us went. I expect you all wondered where we were.’

‘We did,’ lied Harcourt.

‘She took exception to the sleeves. According to her they were too puffy. She said she wasn’t going out looking as if her arms belonged to an all-in wrestler. I never saw her in it, but Lily said she was in a picture. She’s burgeoning, you know.’

‘Is she?’ Harcourt said, and thought briefly of his own daughter who, in comparison with Stella, often seemed an imitation of the real thing. He had no idea whether his daughter was burgeoning or not; night and day she walked with rounded shoulders, clutching a handbag to her chest. ‘And how about the cough?’ he asked. He listened to the faint scratching of Vernon’s moustache as it brushed against the mouthpiece.

‘No problem at all,’ Vernon said. ‘Absolutely none. Kind of you to ask. I’m much obliged to you,’ and he ordered a new bucket and a tin of bath scourer before replacing the receiver.

He told Lily that Harcourt believed they were doing the best thing. She was chopping up a rabbit in the scullery. ‘Harcourt thinks she was born for it,’ he said.

Lily was unconvinced. ‘People like us don’t go to plays,’ she said. ‘Let alone act in them.’

‘But she’s not one of us, is she?’ he retorted, and what answer was there to that?

They came down the steps as though walking a tightrope, Stella pointing her toes in borrowed shoes, Uncle Vernon leaning backwards, purple waistcoat bulging above the waistband of his trousers, one hand under her elbow, the other holding aloft a black umbrella against the rain.

It was a terrible waistcoat, made out of pieces of untrimmed felt that Lily had bought at a salvage sale with the purpose of jollying up the cushions in the residents’ lounge. She had meant to sew triangles, squares and stars on to the covers, only she hadn’t got round to it.

‘Leave me alone,’ the girl said, shaking herself free. ‘You’re embarrassing me.’

‘So,’ Uncle Vernon said, ‘what’s new?’ But his tone was good-humoured.

The three o'clock aeroplane, the one that climbed from Speke and circled the city on five-minute trips, had just bumped overhead. Alarmed at its passage the pigeons still swam above the cobblestones; all, that is, save the one-legged bird who hopped in the gutter, beak pecking at the mudguard of the taxi. It was such a dark day that the neon sign above the lintel of the door had been flashing on and off since breakfast; the puddles winked crimson. Later, after he had visited the house Meredith said that only brothels went in for red lights.

Spat upon by the rain, Stella covered her head with her hands; she knew she was watched from an upstairs window. Earlier that morning Lily had sat her down at the kitchen table and subjected her to the curling tongs. The tongs, fading in mid-air from rust to dull blue, had snapped at the locks of her hair and furled them up tight against her skull. Then, released in fits and starts, the singed curls, sausage-shaped, flopped upon the tacked-on collar of her velvet frock.

'In the grave,' Stella had said, 'my hair and nails will continue to grow.'

Lily had pulled a face, although later she intended to repeat the remark for the benefit of the commercial traveller with the skin grafts. He, more than most, even if it was a bit close to the bone, would appreciate the observation. To her way of thinking it was yet another indication of the girl's cleverness, a further example, should one be needed, of her ferocious, if morbid, imagination.

Uncle Vernon paid off the cab right away. The arrangement had been struck the night before after a turbulent discussion in which Stella had declared she'd prefer to die rather than tip the driver. 'I'll go on the tram instead,' she said.

'It'll rain,' Uncle Vernon told her. 'You'll arrive messed up.'

She said she didn't care. There was something inside her, she intimated, that would become irretrievably sullied if she got involved with the business of tipping.

'You just give him sixpence,' Uncle Vernon had argued. 'Ninepence at the most. I can't see your difficulty.'

To which Stella had retorted that she found the whole transaction degrading. In her opinion it damaged the giver quite as much as the receiver.

'Well, don't tip him, you fool,' Uncle Vernon had countered. 'Just chuck the exact amount through the window and make a run for it.'

Debating anything with the girl was a lost cause. She constantly played to the gallery. No one was denying she could have had a better start in life, but then she wasn't unique in that respect and it was no excuse for wringing the last drop of drama out of the smallest incident. Emotions weren't like washing. There was no call to peg them out for all the world to view.

Mostly her behaviour smacked of manipulation, of opportunism. He'd known people like her in the army, people from working-class backgrounds, who'd read a few books and turned soft. If she had been a boy he'd have taken his belt to her, or at least the back of his hand.

All that costly nonsense of keeping the landing light burning into the small hours. Lily said it was because she remembered that business of the night lights – for God's sake, the child had been nine months old. He put it down to that poetry she was so fond of, all those rhymes and rhythms, those couplets of melancholy and madness that inflamed her imagination. Nor was he altogether sure she was afraid of the dark. Why, during the blackout, when the whole city was drowned in black ink, she had often gone out into the backyard and stood for an hour at a time, keening under the alderbush. And what about the time he had come home on leave and she had somehow slipped out of the shelter and he and the air-raid warden had found her crouched against the railings of the cemetery, clapping her hands together as the sugar warehouses on the Dock Road burst like paper bags and the sparks snapped like fire crackers against the sky?

She had always been perverse, had always, in regard to little things – things which normal people took in their stride – exhibited a degree of opposition that was downright absurd. He hadn't forgotten her histrionics following the removal of the half-basin on the landing. She had accused him of mutilating her past, of ripping out her memories. He'd had to bite on his tongue to stop himself from blurting out that in her case this was all to the good. There were worse things than the disappearance of basins. It had brought home to him how unreliable history was, in that the story, by definition, was always one-sided.

Nor would he forgive in a hurry the slap-stick scene resulting from the felling of the alder bush in the dismal back yard, when she had run from the basement door like a madwoman and flung herself between axe and bush. Ma Tang from next door, believing he was murdering the girl, had shied several potatoes at him from the wash-house roof. Ma Tang's father, who was put out to roost at dawn with his scant hair done up in a pigtail, had sent his grandson for the police.

The basin had been a liability. More than one lodger, returning late at night and caught short, had utilised it for a purpose not intended. As for the alder bush, a poor sick thing with blighted leaves, it was interfering with the drains. On both occasions, and there had been many others, Stella's face had betrayed an emotion so inappropriate, assumed an expression of such false sensibility, that it was almost comic. Perhaps it wasn't entirely assumed; there had been moments when he could have sworn she felt something.

For her part, Lily had tried to wheedle Stella into letting Uncle Vernon accompany her to the theatre. She implied it was no more than his due. If he hadn't known Rose Lipman's brother when they were boys growing up rough together in Everton, Stella wouldn't have got a look-in. And it wasn't as though he would be intrusive. He was a sensitive man; even that butcher in Hardman Street, who had palmed him off with the horsemeat, had recognised as much. He would just slope off up the road and wait for her, meekly, in Brown's Café.

'Meekly,' Stella had repeated, and given one of her laughs. She'd threatened to lock herself in her room if he insisted on going with her. Her door didn't boast such a thing as a lock, but her resolution was plain enough. She said she would rather pass up her chance altogether than go hand in hand towards it with Uncle Vernon. 'I'm not play-acting,' she assured him.

Stung, though she hadn't allowed him her hand for donkey's years, not since he had walked backwards and forwards from the infant school on Mount Pleasant, he had rocked sideways in his wicker chair beside the kitchen range and proclaimed her selfish. A sufferer from the cold, even in summertime, he habitually parked himself so close to the fire that one leg of the chair was charred black. Lily said he had enough diamond patterns on his shins to go without socks. The moment would come, she warned him, when the chair would give up the ghost under his jiggling irritation and pitch him onto the coals.

'Keep calm,' she advised, 'it's her age.'

'I'm forced to believe in heredity,' he fumed. 'She's a carbon copy of bloody Renée.' It wasn't true, the girl didn't resemble anyone they knew.

When he shoved Stella into the cab he hesitated before slamming the door. He was dressed in his good clothes and there was still time for her to undergo a change of heart. She stared straight ahead, looking righteous.

All the same, when the taxi, girdled by pigeons, swooshed from the curb she couldn't resist peering out of the rear window to catch a last glimpse of him. He stood there under the mushroom of his gamp, exaggeratedly waving his hand to show he wished her well, and too late she blew him a grudging unseen kiss as the cab turned the corner and skidded across the tramlines into Catherine

Street. She had got her own way but she didn't feel right. There's a price to pay for everything, she thought.

Uncle Vernon went back indoors and began to hammer a large cup hook into the scullery door. Hearing the racket, Lily came running, demanding to know what he was doing. He was still wearing his tank beret and his best trousers. 'It's to hang things from, woman,' he said, viciously hammering the screw deeper into the wood, careless of the paint he was chipping off the door.

'Like what?' she said.

'Like tea towels,' he said. 'What did you think? Would you prefer it if I hung myself?'

Lily told him he needed his head examining.

The journey into town took less than ten minutes; it was a quarter past three by the Oyster Bar clock when Stella arrived in Houghton Street. She jumped out of the taxi and was through the stage door in an instant. If she had given herself time to think, paused to thank the driver or comb her hair, she might have run off in the opposite direction and wasted her moment forever.

‘Stella Bradshaw,’ she told the door-keeper. ‘The producer expects me. My Uncle knows Miss Lipman.’

It came out wrong. All she had meant to say was that she had an appointment with Meredith Potter. While she was speaking, a thin man wearing a duffel coat, followed by a stout man in mackintosh and galoshes, came round the bend of the stairs. They would have swept out of the door and left her high and dry if the doorman hadn’t called out, ‘Mr Potter, sir. A young lady to see you.’

‘Ah,’ cried Meredith, and he pivoted on his heel and stood there, the fist of his right hand pressed to his forehead. ‘We’re just off to tea,’ he said, and frowned, as though he’d been kept waiting for hours.

‘I’m exactly on time,’ Stella said. ‘My appointment was for 3.15.’ When she got to know him better she realised he’d been hoping to avoid her.

‘You’d better come through,’ Meredith said, and walked away down the passage into a gloomy room that seemed to be a furniture depository.

The man in the galoshes was introduced as Bunny. He was the stage manager. Stella wasn’t sure whether he was important or not; his mackintosh was filthy. He gave her a brief, sweet smile and after shaking her hand wiped his own on a khaki handkerchief.

In spite of the numerous chairs and the horsehair sofa set at right angles to the nursery fire-guard there was nowhere to sit. The chairs climbed one upon the other, tipping the ceiling. A man’s bicycle with its spokes warped and splashed with silver paint, lay upturned across the sofa. There was a curious smell in the room, a mixture of distemper, rabbit glue and damp clothing. Stella lounged against a cocktail cabinet whose glass frontage was engraved with the outline of a naked woman. I’m not going to be cowed, she thought. Not by nipples.

The stage manager perched himself on the brass rail of the fire-guard and stared transfixed at her galoshes. Meredith lit a cigarette and, flicking the spent match into a dark corner, closed his eyes. It was plain to Stella that neither man liked the look of her.

‘Miss Lipman told me to come,’ she said. ‘I’ve not had any real experience, but I’ve got a gold medal awarded by the London Academy of Dramatic Art. And I’ve been on the wireless in *Children’s Hour*. I used to travel by train to Manchester and when the American airmen got on at Burtonwood they unscrewed the lightbulbs in the carriages. Consequently I can do Deep South American and Chicago voices. There’s a difference, you know. And my Irish accent is quite good. If I had a coconut I could imitate the sound of a runaway horse.’

‘Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have one about me,’ said Meredith, and dropped ash onto the floor. Above his head, skew-whiff on a nail, hung the head of some animal with horns.

‘Actually,’ she amended, ‘I’ve only got the certificate in gold lettering. They stopped making them medals on account of the war.’

‘That damned war,’ murmured Bunny.

‘My teacher wanted me to do something from *Hobson’s Choice* or *Love on the Dole*, but I’ve prepared the telephone bit from *The Bill of Divorcement* instead.’

‘It’s not a play that leaps instantly to the mind,’ Meredith said.

‘Hallo . . . hallo,’ began Stella. She picked up a china vase from the shelf of the cocktail cabinet and held it to her ear.

‘Everyone is always out when you most need them,’ observed Bunny.

‘Kindly tell his Lordship I wish to speak to him immediately,’ Stella said. A dead moth fell out of the vase and stuck like a brooch to her collar. Meredith was undoing the toggles of his coat to reveal a bow tie and a pink ribbon from which dangled a monocle. Save for Mr Levy, who kept the philatelic shop in Hackins Hay, Stella had never known anyone who wore an eye-piece.

‘Tell his Lordship . . .’ she repeated, and faltered, for now Meredith had taken his watch from his vest pocket and was showing it to Bunny. ‘It’s tea-time,’ he remarked. ‘You’d better come along’, and gripping Stella by the elbow he marched her back up the passage and thrust her out into the rain.

It was embarrassing walking the streets three-abreast. The pavements were narrow and choked with people and Meredith often slid away, dodging in an elaborate figure of eight in and out of the crowd. Stella wasn’t used to courtesy and she misunderstood his attempts to shield her from the curb; she thought he was trying to lose her. Presently she fell behind, stumping doggedly along: up, down, one foot in the gutter. Meredith, the hood of his duffel coat pulled high, pranced like a monk ahead of her. She listened as he conducted an intense and private conversation, sometimes bellowing as he strained to be heard above the noise of the traffic. Someone or something had upset Bunny. He seemed to be in pain, or else despair.

‘It’s the hypocrisy I can’t stand.’

‘It always comes as a shock,’ agreed Meredith.

‘It hurts. My God, it hurts.’

‘If you remember, I had a similar experience in Windsor.’

‘My God, how it hurts.’

‘You poor fellow,’ shouted Meredith, as a woman trundling a pram, laden with firewood, prised them apart.

On the bomb site beside Reeces Restaurant a man in a sack lay wriggling in the dirt. His accomplice, dressed only in a singlet and a pair of ragged trousers, was binding the sack with chains. When he stood upright the blue tail of a tattooed dragon jumped on his biceps.

‘I shall die under it,’ said Bunny.

They had tea on the second floor of Fuller’s Café. Mounting the stairs, Stella had started to cough. She had discreetly wiped her lips on Lily’s handkerchief and studied it, just in case it came away spotted with blood. She had known Meredith was watching. She could tell he was concerned by the urgent manner in which he propelled her through the door.

When Bunny removed his mackintosh the belt swung out and tipped over the milk jug on the table nearest to the hat stand. The pink cloth was so boldly starched the milk wobbled in a tight globe beside the sugar bowl. Bunny didn’t notice. The occupants of the table, three elderly ladies hung with damp fox furs, apologised.

Stella said she needed to keep her coat on.

‘You’re drenched,’ protested Meredith.

‘It’s not important,’ she said. Dressing that morning neither she nor Lily had bargained on her frock being seen. It was her best frock, her party frock, but the velvet attracted the dust. Time enough to buy new clothes, Lily had said, when and if she got the job.

As Meredith advanced between the tables a little shiver of excitement disturbed the room. The women, the afternoon shoppers, recognised him. There was a hitching of veils, a snapping of handbags,

as they slipped out powder compacts and began to titivate; pretending not to notice, they were all eyes. The manageress made a point of coming over to explain there had been a run on confectioneries. Stella boasted she was in control of two Eccles cakes. Mr Potter had only to say the word and they were his. 'How very kind,' he murmured.

'I'm not hungry,' said Stella, and stared into the distance as though she glimpsed things not visible to other people. Almost immediately she adjusted her lips into a half smile; often when she thought she was looking soulful Uncle Vernon accused her of sullenness. She felt ill at ease and put it down to Meredith's monocle. One eye monstrously enlarged, he was studying the wall beyond her left shoulder. She tried to say something, but her tongue wouldn't move. It was disconcerting to be struck dumb. Ever since she could remember she had chatted to Lily's lodgers. Most of them had spoken proudly of their homes, of the twin beds with matching valances; the sort of vegetables that grew best on their allotments. They had flourished hazy snapshots of wives with plucked eyebrows, of small children in striped bathing costumes messing about in rock pools. A few, in drink, had overstepped the mark and attempted to kiss her; one had succeeded, in the hall when she was pulling the dead leaves off the aspidistra. Though she had made a face and afterwards scrubbed her mouth on the roller towel she hadn't minded. None of them had ignored her.

'How can I shut my eyes to it?' moaned Bunny. 'Disloyalty is unforgivable.'

'I don't agree,' said Meredith. 'There are worse things. Malice, for instance.' The monocle jumped from the bone of his brow and bounced against his shirt front.

'I know a man,' Stella said, 'who never closes his eyes. He can't, not even when he's asleep. His aeroplane crash-landed in Holland and his face caught fire. They peeled skin from his shoulders in fashion new eyelids, but they didn't work.' She opened her own eyes wide and stopped blinking.

'How interesting,' said Meredith.

'When his sweetheart came to visit him she threw him over and omitted to return the ring. Afterwards she sent him a letter saying she knew she was a bad lot but she was afraid the eyelids would get passed on to the children. He says the worst thing is people thinking he looks fierce when on most days he's weeping inside.'

'Oh hell,' Bunny said. Scales of Eccles cake drifted from his shocked mouth.

Meredith appeared to be listening, but Stella could tell his mind was wandering. She had the curious feeling she reminded him of someone else, someone he couldn't put a name to. Earlier she had thought him insipid: his complexion too fair, his expression too bland. He had taken so little notice of her that she suspected he was perceptive only about himself. Now, in the slight flaring of his nostrils, the distainful slant of his head, she saw that he judged her naive. But for the discoloration of those tapering, nicotine-stained fingers drumming the tablecloth, she might have been afraid of him.

For a moment she considered giving way to another fit of coughing; instead she began to tell him about Lily and Uncle Vernon and the Aber House Hotel. She had nothing to lose. It was obvious he wasn't going to give her the opportunity to recite her set piece from *The Bill of Divorcement*.

She admitted it wasn't exactly an hotel, more of a boarding-house really, in spite of the new banner Uncle Vernon had installed two years ago. The sign had flickered over the door when Lily bought the house, and as the hotel was already known by that name in the trade it would have been foolish to change it. Lily had painted the window-frames and door cream, but the travellers walked past bemused at the alteration, and Uncle Vernon reverted to red. Lily thought it looked garish. Originally Lily and her sister Renée had intended to run the business together, only Renée soon put the kibosh on the intention by skedaddling off to London. She wasn't a great loss to the enterprise. Nobody denied she had style, but who needed style in a back street in Liverpool? The travellers, faced with the

pictures in the hall, those taffeta cushions squashed against the bed heads, began to drop away. Several regulars, including the soap man with one arm and the cork salesman with the glass eye, were seen lugging suitcases of samples into Ma Tang's next door.

'What sort of pictures?' enquired Bunny.

'Engravings,' Stella said, 'of damsels in distress with nothing on, tied to trees without an explanation. Besides, her voice got on their nerves. It was too ladylike. She came back once and it was a mistake. After that trouble with the night lights, when the neighbours reported her, her days were numbered.'

'What did the neighbours report her for?' asked Bunny. He wasn't the only one intrigued by the conversation. The women at the next table were sitting bolt upright, heads cocked.

'Things,' Stella said. 'Things I can't divulge.' She looked at Meredith and caught him yawning. 'Later on, Uncle Vernon stepped into the breach. He's the power behind the throne. He says I'll do least harm if I'm allowed to go on the stage.'

Bunny professed to like the sound of Uncle Vernon. He said he was evidently a man of hidden depths and it was clear Stella took after him rather than her mother.

'Oh, but you're wrong,' she protested. 'It must be my mother, for Uncle Vernon's nothing to me.'

Meredith was still yawning. There was a glint of gold metal in his back teeth as he took a ten-shilling note out of his wallet and waved it at the waitress.

Excusing herself, Stella went to the ladies' room where she made a show of washing her hands. In the mirror she could see the reflection of the attendant, red curls trapped in a silvery snood, slumped dozing on an upright chair beside the toilet door. There was no more than five pence in the pink saucer on the vanity table. It was not enough to pay for a share in a pot of tea for three, not with a tip and two cakes, and how could she slide it into her pocket without being heard?

Which was better, Meredith taking her for a gold-digger, or being arrested for theft? She supposed she could faint. Mrs Ackerley had taught her how to make her muscles go limp, and to act a wardrobe. Meredith was hardly likely to demand a contribution to the bill if she was laid out on the floor. But then she might fall awkwardly, exposing her suspender tops like a streetwalker. I'm my own worst enemy, she thought. Uncle Vernon had offered her money but she had turned up her nose.

She managed to slip three pennies up her sleeve, heart thumping, before she lost her nerve and trailed out into the café to find the two men, coats on, waiting for her by the exit.

In the street Meredith said they would meet again when the season started. Bunny would be in charge of her. 'But you've not seen me act,' she said, startled; already she had reconciled herself to a career at Woolworth's. He raised his eyebrows and said he rather thought he had. He told her the theatre secretary would be in touch in due course. She blushed when he shook her hand.

'I look forward to meeting you again,' said Bunny gallantly. He kissed her cheek and offered to hire a taxi.

'I've some shopping to do,' she said. 'I'll pick one up later. Uncle Vernon never travels by cab because he finds tipping degrading. Isn't that foolish? Thank you very much for the tea.'

It was no longer raining, and patches of cold sunlight punctured the clouds. She ran over the road though she had just spotted someone important to her, and continued to race half way up Bold Street before stopping to look back. A tram, impeded by a coal cart, blocked her view; yet when it had rattled on she imagined she spied Meredith, hood pulled over his head, striding along Hanover Place in the direction of the river. Deep down she knew it wasn't him. For the rest of my life, she thought, I shall glimpse you in crowds.

She walked on up the hill towards St Luke's where she fancied her grandfather had once played the

organ. There were purple weeds blowing through the stonework of the smashed tower hanging giddy steps beneath the sky. Uncle Vernon called it an eyesore; he couldn't see why the corporation didn't demolish the whole edifice and finish off what the Luftwaffe had begun. She'd argued that the church was a monument, that the shattered tower was a ladder climbing from the past to the future.

Now she realised the past didn't count and that her future had nothing to do with broken masonry. Love, she told herself, would be her staircase to the stars and, moved as she was by the grand ring of the sentiment, tears squeezed into her eyes.

At the top of the hill, on the corner by the Commercial Hotel, she telephoned mother, using the three pennies pinched from the saucer in Fuller's Café. The sun was already beginning to set, bruising the sky above the Golden Dragon.

'I don't feel guilty,' she confided. 'There are some actions which are expedient, wouldn't you agree? Besides, nobody saw me.'

Mother said the usual things.

The stage was so poorly lit it was impossible to see into the corners. The fire curtain had been lowered in an attempt to keep the worst of the dust from the auditorium. A solitary man sat astride a pain-bespattered bench sawing a length of wood. When he shoved his arm the shadow of his saw raced ahead and broke off like a blade. Geoffrey and Stella spoke in whispers, as though in church.

‘It’s deeper than I expected,’ Geoffrey said.

‘And muckier,’ said Stella who, left to herself, might have conjured a blasted heath out of the darkness, an aircraft hangar, an operatic, book-furnished study in which Faustus could sell his soul to the Devil. She was distracted by Geoffrey who was trying to tug a lock of his hair down over his forehead. It was one of his mannerisms. His hair, being coarse and crinkly, sprang back the moment it let go. Almost at once Stella tiptoed to the back of the stage and returned through the sliding door to the prop room. Geoffrey was a thorn in the flesh.

She had thought when she was summoned to work in the theatre that she was one of a chosen few. Finding Geoffrey included in the roll-call of honour shook her illusions. He was nineteen, three years older than herself. A nephew of Rushworth, chairman of the governing board, he had recently left a military academy after firing a gun at someone he wasn’t supposed to.

Geoffrey and Stella were both called students. George, the property master, said they were really assistant stage managers, but this way it meant the theatre didn’t have to pay them. Geoffrey wore a paisley cravat and walked with his hands clenched into fists as though he still strutted a parade ground. He kept throwing up words whose meaning Stella more or less understood but would never have had the nerve to thread into a conversation. She was shaky on pronunciation.

For instance, button-holing Bunny, whose eyelids quivered with boredom, Geoffrey said that in his opinion T.S. Eliot was a poet *manqué*. He went so far as to recite several obscure lines:

Declines. On the Rialto once.
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs. The boatman smiles . . .

It was a rum quotation. Of course Stella knew he wasn’t referring to the Rialto cinema on Upper Parliament Street, but she couldn’t help smiling. Uncle Vernon had piles.

Geoffrey went even further and said that any man who squandered his energies on behalf of a Bar was incapable, a priori, of speaking with authority. Stella wondered whether Geoffrey was anti-Semitic. No one but a bigot, after what had happened, would lump rats and Jews together.

It was odd Geoffrey sounding clever on account of words when in other respects he was clearly pig ignorant. If George addressed him directly, face to face, Geoffrey stepped backwards with his chin in the air like a girl taking umbrage. When George brewed up the tea and handed it round, Geoffrey wiped the rim of the mug with his handkerchief, and sometimes the handle. He didn’t care if George saw him. Nor had he an ounce of curiosity. Stella had coughed on and off for half an hour in the snack bar of the News Theatre in Clayton Square and he hadn’t once asked her if she was in line for consumption.

All the same he threw her off balance. Uncle Vernon had always given her to understand she was

brighter than most. His business acquaintance, Mr Harcourt, an old boy of the Liverpool Collegiate in spite of landing up in toilet rolls, had backed his assumption. But for George she might have sunk under the weight of her new-found ignorance.

It was George rather than Bunny who took charge of her. Bunny was there, padding up and down the stone passages in his galoshes, but he was too occupied to pay her and Geoffrey much attention. It was left to George to explain that Meredith was away in London with the set designer, choosing costumes for the opening production. Until then, in the hope that Meredith would stumble across her, Stella had wasted the best part of three days hunched on the stairs turning over the pages of a library edition of Shakespeare's tragedies. She had combed her hair so often in anticipation she imagined it had grown thinner.

It was George who informed her that the actors wouldn't be arriving for another ten days. One or two of the junior members might sidle in to enquire about digs, but she needn't expect to spot Richard Ives, the leading man, or Dorothy Blundell, his opposite number, until the very last moment. St Ives and Miss Blundell, along with Babs Osborne, the character juvenile, had been in last season's company. It was unusual in repertory to be engaged for a second term, although before the war P.L. O'Hara, by public demand, had returned three years running. Not that St Ives could hold a candle to P.L. O'Hara. Had he wanted, and the hostilities not intervened, O'Hara might have come back for a fourth season.

'What's a character juvenile?' asked Stella, and George said it was any girl not handsome enough to be a straight juvenile. He didn't look her in the eye, but she wasn't offended; she had always known which category she belonged.

St Ives and Dorothy Blundell shared the same digs, though there was nothing going on between them. Since playing the Queen to his King in the 1938 production of *Richard II*, Miss Blundell had carried a torch for P.L. O'Hara. She was wasting her time. In life, as in the play, she had never been more than an appendage. According to George, Dotty Blundell was an unrequited woman.

St Ives preferred to woo touring actresses appearing at the Royal Court or the Empire. Having loved them, it was convenient the way they left him. Last year he'd clicked with the lead in *Rose Marie*, a soprano with legs that wouldn't have disgraced a piano stool and twin infants being bottle-fed by her Mum in Blackburn.

'I saw it,' cried Stella, greatly excited, remembering Lily's birthday treat, and Uncle Vernon turning queasy in the second interval following high tea in the Golden Dragon.

'Rose Marie' had misunderstood St Ives's intentions. Her tour had moved on to the Hippodrome in Leeds and on the Sunday, starting at dawn and driven by a trombonist in the orchestra who was sweet on her, she had motored all the way back to Liverpool. The trombone player, thinking they'd returned to collect a ration book left with the landlady, had remained outside in Faulkner Square, puffing on a cigar. He'd wound up the window when the bells of the Anglican cathedral began to ring for morning service and missed altogether the commotion inside the boarding-house. The penny having dropped, St Ives and a woman he swore was his Auntie from Cardiff were discovered in matching pyjamas, he in the top and she in the bottoms – 'Rose Marie' took a screwdriver, normally used to poke the fire from the gas jets on the cooker, and attempted to stab him in the groin. St Ives had got into hot water over it with Rose Lipman; she'd said he could have gone down with blood poisoning and jeopardised the season. Babs Osborne was the paramour of a Polish ex-fighter pilot who was now big in scrap metal.

'He's romancing,' said Geoffrey. 'I've met his sort before. He's just trying to make out he's pallo with them all.'

‘The cooker bit sounds authentic,’ argued Stella. ‘You don’t mention fat for nothing.’

She felt at ease with George. He had lent her a dark blue overall to guard her clothes from the dust. It covered almost completely the mustard-coloured slacks and jumper that Lily had bought her. Once running back across the square from Brown’s café with a fried-egg sandwich for Bunny, she had bumped into Uncle Vernon. He had been to St John’s market to buy a lump of pork and looked beaten.

‘What are you got up like that for?’ he had demanded, outraged at her appearance.

‘It’s a sort of uniform,’ she said. ‘It’s obligatory.’

The next day, seeing her dressed in such workmanlike attire, Bunny had disconcertingly handed her a measuring rule and a stub of chalk and instructed her to work out the dimensions of a door, stage right, which would feature on the set of *Dangerous Corner*. He had talked mysteriously of an angle of forty-five degrees. Half an hour later, returning to the wings and finding the boards unmarked, he had sought Stella out in the prop room. She was making a great show of sand-papering the wheels of the bicycle perched on the sofa. ‘Anything wrong?’ he said. He was very pale and his lips looked swollen.

‘I don’t know what you mean about dimensions,’ she said.

‘What particular bit defeats you?’ he asked patiently.

‘All of it,’ she admitted. ‘I’ve never got the hang of feet and inches.’ She knew by his expression, the clamp of his dry mouth, that he was annoyed. ‘I’m not being awkward,’ she said. ‘It’s just that I had a disturbed schooling.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ he retorted, and sent her upstairs to fetch Geoffrey down from the paint-frame. Geoffrey laid a newspaper on the stage to protect the knees of his cavalry-twill trousers and finished the task in two minutes flat.

‘It’s not that I thought the job demeaning,’ Stella assured George. ‘Uncle Vernon says I haven’t the humility to find anything beneath me.’

There and then George made her measure the rail of the fire-guard. Twice the rule snapped back and drew blood. ‘There must be a better way of learning something,’ whined Stella, sucking her fingers. ‘Get away,’ said George, whose own knowledge of such things had been acquired through pain.

At fourteen he had gone straight from St Aloysius’s school to shift scenery at the Royal Court. If he slopped whitewash onto the floor the stage manager clouted him over the ear with the brush and, if he forgot to grease the rag in which the tools were rolled, at curtain fall he had sixpence docked from his wages. When he cut short a length of timber the master carpenter brought the saw down on his knuckles.

Having learnt all he could, George had given in his notice and applied up the road to the Repertory Company. His very first job had been in that celebrated production of *Richard II* in which P.L. O’Har had performed the King. The designer, who was later blown to smithereens at Tripoli, had wanted the deposed Richard ranting and roaming beneath the underground arches of a palace ‘. . . I have been studying how I may compare this prison where I dwell unto the world . . .’ and George, a man accustomed to sleeping eight to a room, the condensation weeping down the cellar walls, the baby coughing itself into the Infirmary, had sketched out a confined space, a simple box-like structure just roomy enough for a man to stand up in.

The local newspaper had commented in its review: ‘The King’s face, petulant, wilful, caught in the noose of light from the number one flood, floated in darkness . . . when Exton entered and struck we brought Richard down, such was the power of the set, the shadow of the prison bars rearing like spears against the backcloth, there was not a woman in the stalls worthy of her sex who could refrain from weeping.’

Then the war came, and George joined the Merchant Navy. Two years later his ship was torpedoed twenty-four hours out of Trinidad. He spent nine days adrift in an open boat, croaking out Christmas

carols and spitting up oil.

Stella was used to such stories. Every man she had ever met told tales of escape and heroism and immersion. They had gone down in submarines, stolen through frontiers disguised as postmen, limped home across the Channel on a wing and a prayer. The commercial travellers pushed back sleeves and rolled up trouser legs to point at scars; they tapped their skulls to show where the shrapnel still lodged.

George's chief officer had collapsed in the boat. They tried to lay him flat, but he was so badly buried he was trapped upright with his fingers stuck to the gunnel. George had scraped the skin free with his teeth. The cobweb of a hand, like a woman's lace glove, clung to the wood until the salt spray dashed it away.

'How awful,' said Stella dutifully. George was rocking over the fireguard and smiling. It was astonishing to Stella how fondly men remembered their darkest hours.

P.L. O'Hara had risen to the rank of captain in the Royal Navy. In 1944 he'd sent George a postcard of an old man tapping his way up a village street somewhere in the Cotswolds. The card was pinned to the wall beneath the moose, alongside the yellowing cutting of the review of *Richard II*.

'I wish I'd seen the play,' said Stella, kindly.

Geoffrey said it was absurd to think the designer had taken the slightest heed of any suggestion put forward by the likes of George. And furthermore, if Captain Bee's Knees O'Hara was the great actor he was cracked up to be, why hadn't he been snapped up by Hollywood instead of returning year after year to the provinces?

'Why don't you like George?' asked Stella, when they were upstairs, on the third floor, cleaning out the extra's dressing room.

'But I do,' he protested. 'He has considerable native intelligence.'

'He's not a nigger,' she said, and noticed how he winced. He was wearing a pair of woollen mittens discovered in a cupboard; he was afraid of dirt. He was washing the long mirror with a scrunched-up page of the *Evening Echo* dunked under the running tap of the basin and his mittens were sopping wet.

'You'd be better off without them,' she advised. Her own hands were black with newsprint. She couldn't quite reach the corners of the glass and was stretching on tiptoe across the dressing-table when Geoffrey put his arm round her shoulders. It wasn't an accident; he was breathing too hard. She was about to shrug him away when she thought of Meredith. Rehearsing with Geoffrey would make it easier when the time came for Meredith to claim her. Penetration, from what she had gathered from library books, was inescapably painful unless one had played a lot of tennis or ridden stallions, and she hadn't done either. Despite his Gestapo monocle, Meredith, as a man of the world, might be persuaded off if she screamed. Hastily swallowing the liquorice George had given her earlier that morning, she swivelled round, eyes shut, and waited.

Ignoring her lips, Geoffrey nuzzled her ear. Even if it had been Meredith she didn't think she would have found it very exciting. She was reminded of the time she'd taken part in *Children's Hour* and they'd showed her how to simulate a rising storm by panting sideways into the microphone.

She began to stroke Geoffrey's harsh hair. It was a womanly gesture witnessed often enough on the screen at the cinema. She supposed it was maternal rather than sensual; it was what women did for babies, to make them feel secure and stop their heads from wobbling.

She was glad her ears were clean. Every fortnight, on bath night, Lily probed them with a kirby-grip. Uncle Vernon said it was a dangerous thing to do. Stella could be perforated. Squirming, she left off cradling Geoffrey's head and brought her hand down to separate her stomach from his. It was disgusting really, linking men with babies.

Something with the texture of an orange, peeled and sticky, bumped against her wrist. She couldn't

suppress crying out her distaste, any more than she could help envying Geoffrey his lack of inhibition. On occasions, when visiting the doctor for some minor ailment, she had even felt it immodest to stick out her tongue. She didn't dare look down in case she glimpsed that object bobbing against her overall.

It's no use, she thought. I'll have to practise on someone else. It would be fearful enough to be up against something as dreadful as that belonging to a beloved, let alone attached to a person once despised. Punching Geoffrey in the chest she broke free from his arms and leapt upwards to swipe the cobweb from the ceiling. She was shaking all over and yet she felt much fonder of him now that he behaved so rudely. Even his hair looked different, less annoying.

'I know I give the wrong impression,' Geoffrey said, when they had finished cleaning the dressing room. 'I know you think I'm a snob.'

'You are,' she said, 'but it's no longer an issue.' It was the truth. If he had a need to shine it was all right by her. He could spout his foreign words until the cows came home; he wasn't a stranger any more.

'I like old George,' he insisted. 'Really I do. Trouble is, he stinks.' And he went downstairs to drape his mittens in front of the coals.

Stella stayed behind, dipping her nose like a pecking hen into the front of her jumper to sniff herself. She hadn't known George smelled, or rather that the sour whiffs of stale tobacco and unwashed clothing constituted an unacceptable reek. Stink had an awful sound, on a par with putrefaction.

She raised her head and stood there, her hand cupped over her nose to trap the scent of her skin, and all at once she inhaled some forgotten, familiar odour of the past. It wasn't a bad smell: something between wood smoke and a house left empty. Her lips parted to give it a name but the word got lost before it was uttered, and all that remained was the sweet brilliantine caught on her fingers and her own breath smelling of the liquorice that George had given her.

It was inconvenient, Stella coming home and wanting a bath. As Uncle Vernon pointed out, it was only Wednesday.

'I don't care what day it is,' she said. She was so set on it she was actually grinding her teeth.

It meant paraffin had to be fetched from Cairo Joe's chandler's shop next door to the Greek Orthodox church, and then the stove lugged two flights up the stairs and the blanket nailed to the window with tacks. In the alleyway beyond the back wall stood a row of disused stables and a bombed-out house with the wallpaper hanging in shreds from the chimney-breast, and sometimes women, no better than they ought to be, lured men into the ruined shadows.

'You'll freeze,' Lily threatened, having run upstairs in her coat and hat to lay out the family towels and returned, teeth chattering, like Scott on his way to the Pole.

'You're a fool to yourself,' said Uncle Vernon. He'd put two and two together and come up with Stella's monthlies. There wasn't any other reasonable explanation, and anyone with an ounce of sense knew it was courting disaster to get into water at such a time.

Then there was the business of lighting the geyser, never easy on the best of days, let alone unscheduled. A loss of nerve, a miscalculation of timing between the release of the gas and the striking of the match could blow them all into eternity. 'Can't it wait until next week?' he implored, catching his breath on the first landing with the stove in his arms and the loofah, stiff as a smoked kipper, slotted for convenience through the braces of his trousers. 'No,' rasped Stella, 'it can't.'

When he'd fixed the 'Bath in use' notice on the door and gone stumping disapprovingly down the stairs, she pulled aside the blanket and peered into the yard. There was a high wind blowing a ne

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