

# *The BALLAD of PECKHAM RYE*

*Muriel Spark*

DANCING  
TONIGHT

SALOON  
BAR

RES  
ADE

BAR  
↓

SURPLUS STOCK

SALE

CAFE



BAR



# THE BALLAD OF PECKHAM RYE

BY  
MURIEL SPARK

MACMILLAN

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When Dougal Douglas comes to live in Peckham Rye and to work for Meadows, Meade and Grindley, textile manufacturers, the lives of many people there undergo a change; and when he decides to work for their rivals, Drover Willis's, textile manufacturers, as well, the lives of people undergo a change there too. In fact, wherever he goes Dougal is the agent of change and disturbance. In particular, he is responsible for the legend of the young man who walked out at his wedding.

In the dance-halls of Camberwell, in the back streets of Peckham, in the residences on Denmark Hill and even on the Rye itself, the comic-satanic influence of Dougal Douglas is felt. Especially it is felt by Humphrey Place, refrigerator engineer, who later says 'No' at the altar rail; Dixie Morse, typist, who has 'No' said about her on that occasion; Mr. Druce, managing director of Meadows, Meade and Grindley, who has not spoken to Mrs. Druce for five years and has a taste for going up and down in lifts; Miss Merle Coverdale, head of the typing pool, who feels that she is 'living a lie'; Nelly Mahone, prophet, who lapsed from her religion on religious grounds; and Miss Belle Frierne, his landlady, who has known all Peckham in her youth. Among many others affected are Collie Gould and Trevor Lomas, leaders of their gang, Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder, Elaine Kent, process-controller, Odette Hill, uptwister, Raymond Lowther, packer, and Lucille Potter, gummer.

*The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is a novel of constant movement, written with brilliance, wit and perception. Muriel Spark's genius for combining truth with dazzlingly funny fantasy has never been better displayed — and readers of *Memento Mori* and her earlier books will know how good that is.

*Books by Muriel Spark*



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THE MANDELBAUM GATE

For  
ROBIN  
with love

## *Chapter One*

‘GET AWAY from here, you dirty swine,’ she said.

‘There’s a dirty swine in every man,’ he said.

‘Showing your face round here again,’ she said.

‘Now, Mavis, now, Mavis,’ he said.

She was seen to slam the door in his face, and he to press the bell, and she to open the door again.

‘I want a word with Dixie,’ he said. ‘Now, Mavis, be reasonable.’

‘My daughter,’ Mavis said, ‘is not in.’ She slammed the door in his face.

All the same, he appeared to consider the encounter so far satisfactory. He got back into the little Fiat and drove away along the Grove and up to the Common where he parked outside the Rye Hotel. Here he lit a cigarette, got out, and entered the saloon bar.

Three men of retired age at the far end turned from the television and regarded him. One of

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them nudged his friend. A woman put her hand to her chin and turned to her companion with a look.

His name was Humphrey Place. He was that fellow that walked out on his wedding a few weeks ago. He walked across to the 'White Horse' and drank one bitter. Next he visited the 'Morning Star' and the 'Heaton Arms'. He finished up at the 'Harbinger'.

The pub door opened and Trevor Lomas walked in. Trevor was seen to approach Humphrey and hit him on the mouth. The barmaid said, 'Outside, both of you.'

'It wouldn't have happened if Dougal Douglas hadn't come here,' a woman remarked.

He was standing at the altar with Trevor, the best man, behind him. Dixie came up the aisle on the arm of Arthur Crewe, her stepfather. There must have been thirty-odd guests in the church. Arthur Crewe was reported in the papers next day as having said: 'I had a feeling the wedding wouldn't come off.' At the time he stepped up the aisle with Dixie, tall in her flounces, her eyes dark and open, and with a very little trace round the nose of a cold.

She had said, 'Keep away from me. You'll



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catch my cold, Humphrey. It's bad enough me having a cold for the wedding.'

But he said, 'I want to catch your cold. I like to think of the germs hopping from you to me.'

'I know where you got all these disgusting ideas from. You got them from Dougal Douglas. Well, I'm glad he's gone and there won't be him at the wedding to worry about in case he starts showing off the lumps on his head or something.'

'I liked Dougal,' Humphrey said.

Here they were, kneeling at the altar. The vicar was reading from the prayer book. Dixie took a lacey handkerchief from her sleeve and gently patted her nose. Humphrey noticed the whiff of scent which came from the handkerchief.

The vicar said to Humphrey, 'Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?'

'No,' Humphrey said, 'to be quite frank I won't.'

He got to his feet and walked straight up the aisle. The guests in the pews rustled as if they were all women. Humphrey got to the door, into his Fiat, and drove off by himself to Folkestone. It was there they had planned to spend their honeymoon.

He drove past the Rye, down Rye Lane roundabout to Lewisham, past the Dutch House and

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on to Swanley, past Wrotham Hill and along the A20 to Ditton, where he stopped for a drink. After Maidstone he got through the Ashford bypass and stopped again at a pub. He drove on to Folkestone, turning left at the Motel Lympne, where yellow headlamps of the French cars began to appear on the road as they had done before. He stayed in the hotel on the front in the double room booked for the honeymoon, and paid double without supplying explanations to the peering, muttering management.

‘Outside,’ said the barmaid. Humphrey rose, finished his drink with a flourish, regarded his handsome hit face in the mirror behind the barmaid, and followed Trevor Lomas out into the autumn evening, while a woman behind them in the pub remarked, ‘It wouldn’t have happened if Dougal Douglas hadn’t come here.’

Trevor prepared for a fight, but Humphrey made no move to retaliate; he turned up towards the Rye where his car was parked and where, beside it, Trevor had left his motor-scooter.

Trevor Lomas caught him up. ‘And you can keep away from round here,’ he said.

Humphrey stopped. He said, ‘You after Dixie?’

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‘What’s that to you?’

Humphrey hit him. Trevor hit back. There was a fight. Two courting couples returning from the dusky scope of the Rye’s broad lyrical acres stepped to the opposite pavement, leant on the railings by the swimming baths, and watched. Eventually the fighters, each having suffered equal damage to different features of the face, were parted by onlookers to save the intervention of the police.

After Humphrey had been sent away from the door, and the matter had been discussed, Dixie Morse, aged seventeen, daughter of the first G.I. bride to have departed from Peckham and returned, stood in her little room on the upper floor of 12 Rye Grove and scrutinised her savings book. As she counted she exercised her pretty hips, jerking them from side to side to the rhythm of *Pickin’ a Chicken*, which tune she hummed.

Her mother came up the stairs. Dixie closed the book and said to her mother through the closed door, ‘Quite definitely I’m not taking up with him again. I got my self-respect to think of.’

‘Quite right,’ Mavis replied from the other room.

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'He wasn't ever the same after he took up with Dougal Douglas,' Dixie said through the wall.

'I liked Dougal,' Mavis replied.

'I didn't like him. Trevor didn't like him,' Dixie said.

Hearing the front-door bell, Dixie stood attentively. Her mother went down and said something to her stepfather. They were arguing as to who should go and answer the door. Dixie went out on the landing and saw her stepbrother Leslie walking along the ground-floor passage in the wrong direction.

'Leslie, open that door,' Dixie said.

The boy looked up at Dixie. The bell rang again. Dixie's mother burst out of the dim-lit sitting-room.

'If it's him again I'll give him something to remember me by,' she said, and opened the door. 'Oh, Trevor, it's you, Trevor,' she said.

'Good evening, Mavis,' Trevor said.

Dixie returned rapidly to her room to comb her black hair and put on lipstick. When she came down to the sitting-room, Trevor was seated under the standard lamp, between Mavis and her stepfather, waiting for the television play

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to come to an end. Trevor had a strip of plaster on his face, close to the mouth.

The play came to an end. Mavis rose in her quick way and switched on the central light. Her husband, Arthur Crewe, smiled at everyone, adjusted his coat and offered Trevor a cigarette. Dixie set one leg across the other, and watched the toe of her shoe, which she wriggled.

‘You’ll never guess who came to the door this evening.’

‘Humphrey Place,’ said Trevor.

‘You’ve seen him?’

‘Seen him — I’ve just knocked his head off.’

Dixie’s stepfather switched off the television altogether, and pulled round his chair to face Trevor.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘you did right.’

‘*Did* right,’ said Dixie.

‘I *said* did. I didn’t say done. Keep your hair on, girl.’

Mavis opened the door and called, ‘Leslie, put the kettle on.’ She returned with her quick little steps to her chair. ‘You could have knocked me over,’ she said. ‘I was just giving Dixie her tea; it was, I should say, twenty past five and there was a ring at the bell. I said to Dixie, “Whoever can that be?” So I went to the door, and lo and

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behold there he was on the doorstep. He said, "Hallo, Mavis," he said. I said, "You just hop it, you." He said, "Can I see Dixie?" I said, "You certainly can't," I said. I said, "You're a dirty swine. You remove yourself," I said, "and don't show your face again," I said. He said, "Come on, Mavis." I said, "Mrs. Crewe to you," and I shut the door in his face.' She turned to Dixie and said, 'What about making a cup of tea?'

Dixie said, 'If he thinks I would talk to him again, he's making a great mistake. What did he say to you, Trevor?'

Mavis got up and left the room, saying, 'If you want anything done in this house you've got to do it yourself.'

'Help your mother,' said Arthur Crewe absently to Dixie.

'Did he say whether he's gone back to the same job?' Dixie said to Trevor.

Trevor put a hand on each knee and gave a laugh.

Dixie looked from the broad-faced Trevor to the amiable bald head of her stepfather, and started to weep.

'Well, he's come back again,' Arthur said. 'What you crying for?'

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'Don't cry, Dixie,' Trevor said.

Dixie stopped crying. Mavis came in with the tea.

Dixie said, 'He's common. You only have to look at his sister. Do you know what Elsie did at her first dance?'

'No,' said Mavis.

'Well, a fellow came up to her and asked her for a dance. And Elsie said, "No, I'm sweating".'

'Well, you never told me that before,' Mavis said.

'I only just heard it. Connie Weedon told me.'

Trevor gave a short laugh. 'We'll run him out of Peckham like we run Dougal Douglas.'

'Dougal went of his own accord, to my hearing,' Arthur said.

'With a black eye,' Trevor said.

Round at the old-fashioned 'Harbinger' various witnesses of the fight were putting the story together. The barmaid said: 'It was only a few weeks ago. You saw it in the papers. That chap who left the girl at the altar, that's him. She lives up the Grove. Crewe by name.'

One landlady out of a group of three said, 'No, she's a Dixie Morse. Crewe's the stepfather. I know because she works at Meadows Meade

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in poor Miss Coverdale's pool that was. Miss Coverdale told me about her. The fellow had a good position as a refrigerator engineer.'

'Who was the chap that hit him?'

'Some friend of the girl's, I daresay.'

'Old Lomas's boy. Trevor by name. Electrician. He was best man at the wedding.'

'There was I,' sang out an old man who was visible with his old wife on the corner bench over in the public bar, 'waiting at the church, waiting at the church.'

His wife said nothing nor smiled.

'Now then, Dad,' the barmaid said.

The old man took a draught of his bitter with a tremble of the elbow and a turn of the wrist.

Before closing time the story had spread to the surrounding public bars, where it was established that Humphrey had called at 12 Rye Grove earlier in the evening.

Even in one of the saloon bars, Miss Connie Weedin heard of the reappearance of Humphrey Place, and the subsequent fight; and she later discussed this at length with her father who was Personnel Manager of Meadows, Meade & Grindley, and at present recovering from a nervous breakdown.

'Dixie's boy has come back,' she said.



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‘Has the Scotch man come back?’ he said.

‘No, he’s gone.’

Outside the pub at closing time Nelly Mahone, who had lapsed from her native religion on religious grounds, was at her post on the pavement with her long grey hair blown by the late summer wind. There she commented for all to hear, ‘Praise be to God who employs the weak to confound the strong and whose ancient miracles we see shining even in our times.’

Humphrey and Dixie were widely discussed throughout the rest of the week. The reappearance of the bridegroom was told to Collie Gould, aged eighteen, unfit for National Service, who retold it to the gang at the Elephant; and lastly by mid-morning break at Meadows Meade the occurrence was known to all on the floor such as Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder, Annette Wren, trainee-seamer, Elaine Kent, process-controller, Odette Hill, uptwister, Raymond Lowther, packer, Lucille Potter, gummer; and it was revealed also to the checking department and many of the stackers, the sorters, and the Office.

Miss Merle Coverdale, lately head of the typing pool, did not hear of it. Mr. Druce, lately Managing Director, did not hear of it. Neither did Dougal Douglas, the former Arts man, nor his