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June in her Spring

Colin MacInnes was born in London in 1914 and brought up in Australia. He began to write after leaving the army in 1945, at first concentrating on radio scripts for the B.B.C., of which he wrote some 1,500. He has contributed essays to many journals, among them *The Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*, and to such magazines as *Twentieth Century*, *Encounter*, *Spectator*, *Partisan Review*, and the *Cahier des Saisons*. His other books include: *To the Victor the Spoils* (1950), *City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959), *Mr Love and Justice* (1960), and *England, Half English* (1961).





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Colin MacInnes

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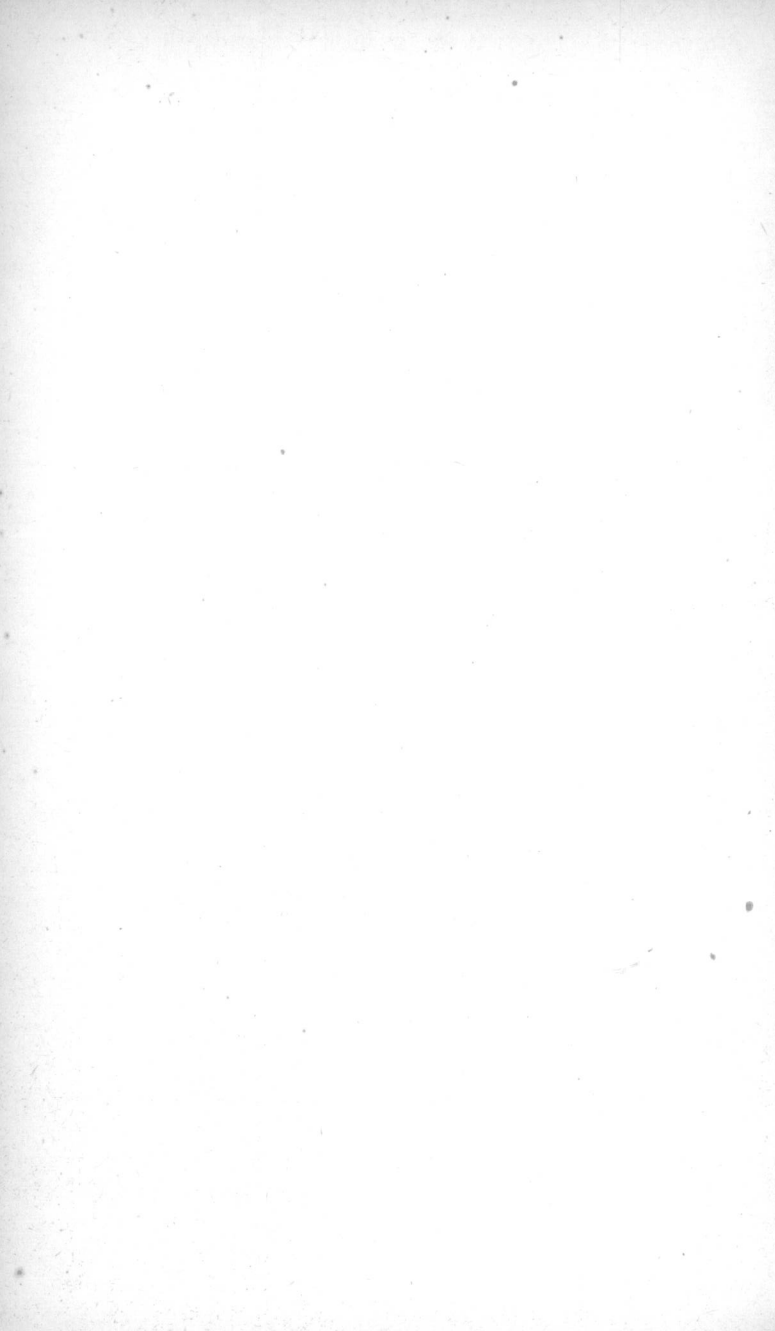
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To Mayou Iserentant



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1 · Into the Gymkhana

When June climbed up the bank out of the river, she found she'd forgotten her towel; so she stripped among the eucalyptus and stood rubbing her body in the morning sun. It beat down hard on her, but she was brown already and no longer feared it. As she rubbed she whistled a popular song: then suddenly stopped. A flat-billed head came floating down the river leaving a discreet angular wake. Just opposite her, it nosed to the bank and looked this way and that; then out of the water there reared a fat furry body with webbed fins and a stubbed tail. The creature shook itself and crouched among the reeds. 'Platypus, hi platypus,' June called to it softly across the stream. But it didn't turn round to look at her and scuttled out of sight.

She felt a great pang that it hadn't understood her affection and respect. Then, filled with excitement, she slipped on her dress and sandals, rolled her underclothes in her hand and ran up the track to tell someone at Sunset Gorge what she had seen.

(The Gorge was so called because June's great-grandfather Aaron, who pioneered the station, had reached the cliffs overlooking the river at that time of day. Rising in the stirrups on the horse that had carried him from Ballantyne, he'd said, 'Here's where I'll rear sheep and a family,' or words to that effect.)

June ran across the lawn to her Dad who was polishing the Buick on the drive outside the front veranda. 'Oh Dad, oh Dad, guess what I've just seen!' Mr Nathan Westley gazed at her, still polishing. 'Dad, do listen to what I've got to say for once.'

'I'm listening.'

'I've seen my first orthinorhyncus.'

'We'll have to send you back to school, June. It's ornith-orhyncus.'

'What does it matter? I've finished with school for good! Now I can say what I like. And isn't it miraculous? How long is it since you last saw a platypus yourself?'

Mr Westley stopped rubbing. He looked into the middle distance. 'About ten years ago, I should say.'

'When I was only six?'

'Or thereabouts.'

'And Arthur only eight.'

'Since your brother's two years older than you, that follows, June.'

'Dad, put down that chamois leather, give me a kiss and tell me something. Why do you talk like a dry old stick when we all know you've got a heart of gold?'

'Because I'm a sad man.'

'You've no reason to be sad. You've got me and Arthur and Mum and the station – what more do you want?'

'I want peace of mind.'

'Don't look so dismal, Dad, you worry me. And you haven't kissed me. That's better. Seeing a platypus brings luck, doesn't it?'

'Gently, June. So they say.'

'Well, I give all my luck to you! How about that? Every bit of it, except a bit I'll keep for Arthur when he comes. I've got all the luck I need myself. I'm a lucky person, I tell you.'

Mr Westley lifted away her arms because he feared love as much as he yearned for it. 'About Arthur,' he said. 'Your mother and I want you to help us, June, now you've come back to live with us here. We want you to help us keep an eye on Arthur when he gets here for his holidays.'

'Me keep an eye on Arthur? I've got about as much in-

fluence over him as I have over that platypus, which was nil, as I told you.'

'He's fond of you, June.'

'That doesn't mean I've got any influence on him. No one can handle Arthur. Hasn't he been slung out of two schools? Oh, don't look so gloomy, Dad, it's only because he's a boy and so young.'

'You seem to admire his folly.'

'I don't say I admire him. I merely say it's natural for a boy of Arthur's age to hate school like poison. There's no harm in Arthur, I tell you. It's just that he's mad as a hatter, as everybody knows full well.'

Mr Westley began to polish his car again.

'Oh cheer up, Dad, for heaven's sake. Give me another kiss and I'm going in to make myself gorgeous for the gymkhana.'

She kissed him across the car, embracing the bonnet with her body and his dry neck with her arms, then ran up the veranda steps where she turned round and shouted, 'This is going to be one of the most wonderful days of my life. The platypus proves it.'

Mr Westley sighed out loud. He sighed for his youth he'd never had (when he was young he'd not realized it until his youth had gone), and he sighed for his daughter's hope and confidence. Without belief, he clasped his hands on the bonnet she'd caressed, and said a prayer. 'May June be blinded from reality,' he prayed. Then he pushed the chamois leather under the back seat - but cut his hand in doing so. He lifted the seat and found it was a tyre lever, freakishly sharpened on one side, that had cut him.

He now heard the rhythmical honking of a horn, and down the track came a station-wagon, driven by Cleopatra Canterbury, June's best and dearest friend, though a year her senior. Cleopatra sprang out and waved: standing in brown breeches and a white linen shirt, she looked like a soft drink advertisement. Her face and figure were as lovely as they were insensi-

tive, her body was restless with animal energy, and she radiated the friendliness of a girl whose Dad and Mum had never refused a request three times repeated. 'Oh Mr Westley,' she cried out. 'Good morning, isn't it hot, where's June?'

'Indoors: up in her bedroom, I suppose. You remember the way.'

'A year since I've seen her, I just can't wait. Why have you kept her down in the south so long?'

'Because the school there was better and it's cooler, and she was among her mother's friends and family.'

'But a year, Mr Westley! I've almost forgotten how she looks. And what was the use of writing letters to someone you're not sure you remember?'

'I've missed her too, Cleopatra. One moment, my dear - how are your own mother and father?'

'They were rounding up the horses with the boys before I left. They tried to rope me in but I said "No, I can't wait to see June." Dad's chief judge at the gymkhana, did you know?'

'He is each year, isn't he?'

'True enough. But every year he threatens to resign on account of the riots that take place when it's over. Those Ballantyne roughs! Still, Dad can handle them, and he's got the boys for a bodyguard.'

Cleopatra banged the wire-netting door of the veranda, banged the front door inside, threw down her leather gloves on the cool floor of the hall and galloped up the stairs to June's room. She burst in and found June standing naked in front of a full-length mirror. 'June,' she cried, 'you're not fit to be seen. But Gawd, you've certainly developed. Slip something on and I'll give you a great big hug.'

They kissed each other excitedly, romping about, then tenderly all of a sudden, remembering a thousand outings at Boundary the Canterburys' station) and Sunset Gorge; and thinking of the loneliness and longing that possessed them both at times but which they forgot when they were together.

'That's enough of that,' said Cleopatra. 'Just let's have a look at you once again, though.'

June undid the dressing-gown and the girls stood in front of the mirror side by side. 'Well, all I can say is,' Cleopatra told her, 'I'm considered by some to be the belle of the district, but now I've quite definitely got a rival.'

'Oh, come off it. Cleopatra. Look at your height and your hair and then there's your face. What about my face? What can I do about it?'

'Forget your face. The boys don't look at faces all that much. I tell you, June - you've come back to us a woman. All the district will be after you. My young brothers will, anyway, I can guarantee you that. Not that I can honestly recommend them.'

'How's Boy?'

Cleopatra stuck her hands in her front pockets. 'He's forgotten you, June. I hate to tell you, and when I mentioned my brothers, I hadn't him in mind. Now he's turned eighteen and grown a mo, no woman under twenty means a thing to him. And don't call him Boy any more, it drives him mad. No. I meant Geoffrey and the nippers. Their eyes will pop out of their heads when they behold you.'

'I wrote to Boy,' said June, 'but he never answered.'

'There you are, you see.'

'He asked me to write. When last I was up.'

'But he didn't reply, and that goes to show.'

June thought of the photograph of Boy Canterbury in cricket flannels which her mother had cut out of the district *Argus* and sent her at school. It had consoled her for many things. Now she felt older.

'Oh cheer up, June, just wait till you see him and you'll know how little you're missing. He's grown into the skite of the district, and even poor old Dad gets worried at his bump-tious behaviour. Besides: isn't it time you inquired into my love life a little more fully?'

June wiped away a real tear and smiled at Cleopatra as her mother, Mrs Daphne Westley, came bustling into the room. 'Girls, girls, whatever is the meaning of this? If we don't all leave at once, we'll never be at the gymkhana in time for the opening.'

Mrs Daphne stood on the threshold with her hands raised and her friendly body, now plump beyond control of will, projecting forward. And on her face was that expression which always said, 'You must be glad to see me as I am to see you!' and, 'How can it be otherwise than as I say, since I always say exactly what I feel?'

'Finish your dressing, June dear,' her mother smiled and cried, 'and come with me, won't you, Cleopatra, for I've something very special I want to show you.'

Mrs Westley led her down the massive stairs, tripping and chattering ahead, but stopped and turned in the dim hall and said to Cleopatra, 'You came over on horseback with your elder brother, dear? Is he out there?'

'No, Mrs Westley. I came over on my ownsome in my runabout. The boys are riding the horses in with Dad direct.'

'Oh yes. . . . And your brother's bringing June's horse into the gymkhana for her?'

'Yes, and we're grateful to her for lending us her nag while she's been away. . . .'

Mrs Westley still smiled and shook her head and said, 'Well, there was really no one here to ride it . . .' then took Cleopatra's arm and led her on to the side veranda, which overlooked a dramatic vista of the river and the gorge. 'Here's an iced lime-juice for you, Cleopatra. And look! This is the latest snapshot of our Arthur.'

Cleopatra examined it with the drink held in her other hand. After a silence she said, 'It's always struck me, Mrs Westley, how like to June he is and yet unlike.'

'Oh? Well, he's a boy and she's a girl.'

'No, no. I mean feature by feature they're similar, but Arthur hasn't Juney's sense and character.'

'Now, really! To say that of a boy who's as fond of you as Arthur is.'

'I don't think he's all that fond of me, Mrs Westley,' said Cleopatra, kind but frowning. 'You may be right, but all I can say is, he's never proved it.'

Mrs Westley smiled again quite vaguely and half closed her eyes; but opened them wide when her husband slid through the door from the inner room.

'Arthur is fond of everybody and nobody,' he said. 'The car is ready, dear, and June's driving in with Cleopatra, so shall we be off?'

Mr and Mrs Westley sulked as the Buick climbed the moist road up the gorge, overhung with dripping tree-fern, drenched with the scent of gums. But once on the stony plateau and the straight dirt track that led across the endless paddocks to Ballantyne, Mr Westley anticipated his wife as she was about to speak out her mind. 'No,' he said. 'You must not try to throw Cleopatra Canterbury and Arthur together.'

'And for heaven's sake, why not? Young people never find the way to each other unaided.'

'That may have been so in our case, but it is by no means always necessarily so.'

'If you'd said that to me when we were younger, Nathan, I'd have left you.'

'Yes. You'd have said you would.'

'You speak to me cruelly when all I consider is the happiness of our boy: *our* boy, Nathan, I'd remind you. Cleopatra is perfectly fitted for him in every way: age, interests and our properties are the biggest in the district and adjacent.'

'Cleopatra's a decent girl, and I won't let Arthur near her, if I can help it, till he learns how to behave himself, if ever he does.'