

Penguin Modern Classics

Jean Cocteau

Les Enfants Terribles



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LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES

Jean Cocteau, the poet, was a member of the French Academy after 1955 and was honoured with a doctorate by Oxford University in 1956. Born at Maisons-Lafitte in 1889, he was educated at the Lycée Condorcet. Regarding all his works as an extension of poetry in different media – film, theatre, novel, verse, criticism, or line – he first published a play, *Parade*, in 1917. He soon established a reputation which was at once imaginative, impish, morbid, and shocking, and a proportion of his work is based on themes of Greek mythology. Translation of his work into English has, on the whole, been slow, but 1957 saw English versions of *Thomas L'Imposteur* (1923), *Opium* (1930), and *Portraits-Souvenirs* (1935); *Les Enfants Terribles* was filmed in 1950, and his films *Orphée* (from a play of 1926) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* have also been seen in London. In all, his publications number about sixty. *Les Enfants Terribles* is his first work to appear in Penguins. He died in 1963.

JEAN COCTEAU

Les Enfants Terribles

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Part One

THAT portion of old Paris known as the Cité Montiers is bounded on the one side by the rue de Clichy, on the other by the rue d'Amsterdam. Should you choose to approach it from the rue de Clichy, you would come to a pair of wrought iron gates: but if you were to come by way of the rue d'Amsterdam, you would reach another entrance, open day and night, and giving access, first to a block of tenements, and then to the courtyard proper, an oblong court containing a row of small private dwellings secretively disposed beneath the flat towering walls of the main structure. Clearly these little houses must be the abode of artists. The windows are blind, covered with photographers' drapes, but it is comparatively easy to guess what they conceal: rooms chock-a-block with weapons and lengths of brocade, with canvases depicting basketfuls of cats, or the families of Bolivian diplomats. Here dwells the Master, illustrious, unacknowledged, well-nigh prostrated by the weight of his public honours and commissions, with all this dumb provincial stronghold to seal him from disturbance.

Twice a day, however, at half past ten in the morning and four o'clock in the afternoon, the silence is shattered by a sound of tumult. The doors of the little Lycée Condorcet, opposite number 72b rue d'Amsterdam, open, and a horde of schoolboys emerges to

occupy the Cité and set up their headquarters. Thus it has re-assumed a sort of medieval character – something in the nature of a Court of Love, a Wonder Fair, an Athletes' Stadium, a Stamp Exchange; also a gangsters' tribune cum place of public execution; also a breeding-ground for rags – rags to be hatched out finally in class, after long incubation, before the incredulous eyes of the authorities. Terrors they are, these lads, and no mistake – the terrors of the Fifth. A year from now, having become the Fourth, they will have shaken the dust of the rue d'Amsterdam from their shoes and swaggered into the rue Caumartin with their four books bound with a strap and a square of felt in lieu of a satchel.

But now they are in the Fifth, where the tenebrous instincts of childhood still predominate: animal, vegetable instincts, almost indefinable because they operate in regions below conscious memory, and vanish without trace, like some of childhood's griefs; and also because children stop talking when grown-ups draw nigh. They stop talking, they take on the aspect of beings of a different order of creation – conjuring themselves at will an instantaneous coat of bristles or assuming the bland passivity of some form of plant life. Their rites are obscure, inexorably secret; calling, we know, for infinite cunning, for ordeal by fear and torture; requiring victims, summary executions, human sacrifices. The particular mysteries are impenetrable, the faithful speak a cryptic tongue; even if we were to chance to overhear unseen, we would be none the wiser. Their trade is all in postage stamps and marbles. Their tribute goes to swell the pockets of the demi-

gods and leaders; the mutter of conspiracy is shrouded in a deafening din. Should one of that tribe of prosperous, hermetically preserved artists happen to pull the cord that works those drapes across his window, I doubt if the spectacle thereby revealed to him would strike him as copy for any of his favourite subjects: nothing he could use to make a pretty picture with a title such as *Little Black Sweeps at Play in a White World*; or *Hot Cockles*; or *Merry Wee Rascals*.

There was snow that evening. The snow had gone on falling steadily since yesterday, thereby radically altering the original design. The Cité had withdrawn in Time; the snow seemed no longer to be impartially distributed over the whole warm living earth, but to be dropping, piling only upon this one isolated spot.

The hard muddy ground had already been smashed, churned up, crushed, stamped into slides by children on their way to school. The soiled snow made ruts along the gutter. But the snow had also become the snow on porches, steps, and house-fronts: featherweight packages, mats, cornices, odds and ends of wadding, ethereal yet crystallized, seemed, instead of blurring the outlines of the stone, to quicken it, to imbue it with a kind of presage.

Gleaming with the soft effulgence of a luminous dial, the snow's incandescence, self-engendered, reached inward to probe the very soul of luxury and draw it forth through stone till it was visible, till it was that fabric magically upholstering the Cité, shrinking it and transforming it into a phantom drawing-room.

Seen from below, the prospect had less to recom-

mend it. The street lamps shed a feeble light upon what looked like a deserted battlefield. Frost-flayed, the ground had split, was broken up into fissured blocks, like crazy pavement. In front of every gully-hole, a stack of grimy snow stood ominous, a potential ambush; the gas-jets flickered in a villainous north-easter; and the dark holes and corners already hid their dead.

Viewed from this angle, the illusion produced was altogether different. Houses were no longer boxes in some legendary theatre but houses deliberately blacked out, barricaded by their occupants to hinder the enemy's advance.

In fact the entire Cité had lost its civic status, its character of open mart, fair-ground, and place of execution. The blizzard had commandeered it totally, imposed upon it a specifically military role, a particular strategic function. By ten minutes past four, the operation had developed to the point where none could venture from the porch without incurring risk. Beneath that porch the reservists were assembled, their numbers swollen by the newcomers who continued to arrive singly or two by two.

'Seen Dargelos?'

'Yes . . . No . . . I don't know.'

This reply came from one of two youths engaged in bringing in one of the first casualties. He had a handkerchief tied round his knee and was hopping along between them and clinging to their shoulders.

The question had come from a boy with a pale face and melancholy eyes – the eyes of a cripple. He walked with a limp, and his long cloak hung oddly, as if concealing some deformity, some strange protuberance or

hump. But nearing a corner piled with school haversacks, he suddenly flung his cloak back, exposing the nature of his disability: not a growth, but a heavy satchel eccentrically balanced on one hip. He dropped it, ceased to be a cripple; the eyes, however, did not alter.

He advanced towards the battle.

To the right, where the footpath joined the arcade, a prisoner was being subjected to interrogation. By the spasmodic flaring of a gas lamp he could be seen to be a small boy with his back against the wall, hemmed in by his captors, a group of four. One of these, a senior boy, was squatting between his legs and twisting his ears, to the accompaniment of a series of hideous facial contortions. By way of crowning horror, the monstrous ever-changing mask confronting the prisoner's was dumb. Weeping, he sought to close his eyes, to avert his head. But every time he struggled, his torturer seized a fistful of grey snow and scrubbed his ears with it.

Circumnavigating the group, threading a path through shot and shell, the pale boy went on his way.

He was looking for Dargelos, whom he loved.

It was the worse for him because he was condemned to love without forewarning of love's nature. His sickness was unremitting and incurable – a state of desire, chaste, innocent of aim or name.

Dargelos was the Lycée's star performer. He throve on popular support and equally on opposition. At the mere sight of those dishevelled locks of his, those

scarred and gory knees, that coat with its enthralling pockets, the pale boy lost his head.

The battle gives him courage. He will run, he will seek out Dargelos, fight shoulder to shoulder by his side, defend him, show him what mettle he is made of.

The snow went flying, bursting against cloaks, spattering the walls with stars. Here and there, some fragmentary image stood out in stereoscopic detail between one blindness and the next; a gaping mouth in a red face; a hand pointing – at whom? in what direction? . . . It is at him, none other, that the hand is pointing: he staggers, his pale lips open to frame a shout. He had discerned a figure, one of the god's acolytes, standing on some front door steps. It is he, this acolyte, who compasses his doom. 'Darg . . .' His cry is cut off short; the snowball comes crashing on his mouth, his jaws are stuffed with snow, his tongue is paralysed. He has just time to see the laughter, and within the laughter, surrounded by his staff, a form, the form of Dargelos, crowned with blazing cheeks and tumbled hair, rearing itself up with a tremendous gesture.

A blow strikes him full on the breast. A heavy blow. A marble-fisted blow. A marble-hearted blow. His mind fades out, surmising Dargelos upon a kind of dais, supernaturally lit; the arm of Dargelos nerveless, dropping down.

He lay prostrate on the ground. A stream of blood flowed from his mouth, besmearing chin and cheek and soaking into the snow. Whistles rang out. Next moment the Cité was deserted. Only a few remained



beside the body, not to succour it but to observe the blood with avid curiosity. Of these, one or two soon made off, not liking the look of things, shrugging, wagging their heads portentously; others made a dive for their satchels and skidded away. The group containing Dargelos remained upon the steps, immobilized. At length authority appeared in the shape of the proctor and the college porter and headed by a boy, Gérard, whom Paul had hailed upon entering the battle, and who had run to fetch them after having witnessed the disaster. Between them the two men took up the body; the proctor turned to scan the shadows.

‘Is that you, Dargelos?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Follow me.’

The procession started.

Great are the prerogatives of beauty, subduing even those not consciously aware of it. Dargelos was a favourite with the masters. The proctor felt the whole baffling business to be excessively annoying.

They bore the victim into the porter’s lodge, where the kindly porter’s wife did her best to bathe him and restore him.

Dargelos stood in the doorway, backed by a throng of curious faces. Gérard knelt beside his friend, tearfully clasping his hand.

‘Tell me what happened, Dargelos,’ said the proctor.

‘There’s nothing to tell, Sir. Some of the chaps were chucking snowballs. I chucked one at him. It must have been a jolly hard one. It hit him smack in the chest and he went “Ho!” and fell down. At first I

thought his nose was bleeding from another snowball that had hit him in the face.'

'A snowball wouldn't crack a person's ribs.'

'Sir, Sir!' cried the boy who answered to the name of Gérard. 'He put a stone inside that snowball.'

'Is that true?' inquired the proctor.

Dargelos shrugged his shoulders.

'Haven't you anything to say?'

'What's the use.... Look, he's opening his eyes. You'd better ask him.'

The victim was beginning to show signs of life. Gérard slipped an arm under his head and he lay back against it.

'How are you feeling?'

'Sorry....'

'There's no need to apologize. You're ill, you fainted.'

'I remember now.'

'Have you any idea what made you faint?'

'A snowball hit me in the chest.'

'A snowball? Why should that make you faint?'

'It's the only thing that hit me.'

'Your friend has given me to understand that this particular snowball had a stone in it.'

The patient saw Dargelos shrug his shoulders.

'Gérard must be cracked,' he said. 'You're cracked. It was just an ordinary snowball. I was running, I expect I sort of blew up.'

The proctor breathed a sigh of relief.

Dargelos seemed about to take his leave, then changed his mind and advanced a few paces in the direction of the victim. But when he reached the