

# GAMES OF CHOICE

*Maurice Gee*



# GAMES OF CHOICE



*by the same author*

THE BIG SEASON (*Hutchinson*)

A SPECIAL FLOWER (*Hutchinson*)

IN MY FATHER'S DEN (*Oxford University Press/Faber*)

A GLORIOUS MORNING, COMRADE

(*Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press*)



# **GAMES OF CHOICE**

**MAURICE GEE**

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (Wellington)**  
in association with Faber and Faber

Oxford University Press, 66 Ghuznee Street, Wellington

OXFORD LONDON GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO  
MELBOURNE WELLINGTON IBADAN NAIROBI  
DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA CAPE TOWN  
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE JAKARTA  
HONG KONG TOKYO DELHI BOMBAY  
CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI

First published in 1976  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
3 Queen Square London WC1

This edition published in 1977 by  
Oxford University Press (Wellington)  
in association with Faber and Faber

© Maurice Gee

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without the prior permission of the Oxford University Press

ISBN 0 19 558024 9

Printed in New Zealand by Wright and Carman

Kingsley Pratt struggled up towards the sound of teacups.

"Is he like this every morning?" Miranda said.

"Like a hibernating bear," said Alison. Indirection was a habit with her. People mistook it for wit. Most impressions of Alison were mistaken. Kingsley took what pleasure he could from his special knowledge—which told him now that Christmas had called into play the techniques of amusement and boredom by which she placed herself above the concerns of family. They were refined to the point where recognition of them was uncertain for anyone but her husband.

"Mm," he said, to let her know he had woken enough to take up his role of audience. He kept his eyes closed tightly.

Miranda's fingers touched his Adam's apple. He felt them with an unnatural precision.

"It's a little animal struggling to get out," she said.

"One can't feel sorry. He could choose how much to drink."

"Daddy in his cups. He was so gloomy. The weight of the world on his poor old shoulders."

Alison laughed, a sound polite and chilly—tinkling off a palate made icy by refrigerated water. But no, she was drinking tea; propped on her courtesan pillows. He opened his eyes to check and shut them quickly. It was as if someone had thrust a match at them and for some moments the image of his wife lay across a field of satiny red.

Miranda took her fingers off his throat. "He's really got a kind face."

"It depends on who you're kind to, doesn't it?"

"Lines. Sad little lines. Marked by life." Her fingers came back, touching his forehead. "It's a nice-shaped head. Sort of aristocratic. Are you sure grandma and grandpa didn't



adopt him? He looks like the son of an earl. A remittance man." Her fingers travelled through his hair and down towards his ear. "Nice ears. Delicate." She tweaked the lobe.

"You can't judge from appearances," Alison said.

"Oh mother, cruel. Now this,"—she tweaked again—"when they're long like this it means you're sexy."

Kingsley raised himself on his elbow. He did not care to be spoken of in this way, especially by his daughter. She thought it scientific to turn people into specimens or cases. Alison's needling was easier to take: a fact of middle-age, like sinus headaches and waking worn-out and the 2 a.m. lavatory visit.

"Merry Christmas," he said. The words made him feel better, brought him a little into the day.

They laughed. "Merry Christmas. Do you want to open your presents?"

"Let me drink my tea."

"You can draw the curtains, Miranda."

Kingsley winced at the light. He turned his back to the windows and carefully tested the heat of his tea. The first sip spread through his body like a healing oil. He was able to hold his eyes open and he smiled at his wife and daughter. They were watching him like a pair of caged owls. Alison, he knew, counted the pain of his wakings against him, as she counted most of his acts against him. Her tally of his imperfections followed the course of his life almost exactly. He had little resentment of this—their marriage had fallen into a state of such disrepair that he allowed her right to judge him as she would. But he wished to have Miranda score things differently. He smiled at her. She had chosen strong-mindedness as her special virtue and had lately come to demand that people behave in a reasonable way. His struggle to wake would be judged not reasonable. Yet her touching of his face had seemed affectionate. She was home from her first year at university and was finding her chosen manner difficult to sustain. He felt pity for her.

After a year that from her own account had been filled with pleasures strictly under control, exposure to her family would bring her down with fevers of emotion. Unless Alison and he made a special effort. He smiled at his wife without hope. She was so far advanced on the course that would free her of him that he found himself able to reach her only by extravagance—loud joke or crudity that forced her for a moment on to his ground. But shocking her now would defeat his purpose—and today was Christmas Day. So he smiled at her with a watery goodwill. (His smiles were so frequent nobody bothered to answer them—they were taken as a nervous tic.)

She took a handkerchief from her bedside drawer and carefully wiped the corners of her eyes. "Go and call your brother, Miranda. We might as well try for a bit of togetherness."

"Malcolm," Miranda called.

"I said go."

"Malcolm, come and get your presents."

Her voice had a tone that made Kingsley think of a stream flowing on pebbles. He was surprised that an image so common-place should carry emotion so well. "Don't shout, dear," he said.

Miranda got off his bed and went down the hall to Malcolm's door. "Come on, little brother. Stop admiring yourself in the mirror."

"Get lost."

"We're waiting to open our presents."

"I wish they liked each other," Kingsley said.

"It's natural. Sibling rivalry."

He looked at her with surprise. She had discovered this term seventeen years before and had used it ever since as though the children's ages had stood still. He found it hard to understand that a woman so clever, so devious, so cool, should also be silly.

"Remember to act surprised," she said. "They're not the most original choosers." She sipped her tea. "And ask her to put her dressing-gown on. I know we're all broad-

mind, but really she's not quite decent at the moment."

Kingsley shrugged. "Young people," he said vaguely. The pleasure he got from seeing his daughter's body was so nearly innocent that the tiny throb of excitement in it seemed not to count as a sin. He marked it as evidence of a complex nature.

"We shouldn't set up tensions," Alison said.

He looked at her but she smiled and sighed, "Christmas are such sticky times. I'll be glad when this one's over. You too?"

"Me too."

"Did you enjoy last night?"

"Too much to drink. And they're such dull bloody people."

"They're your friends, darling."

"Not friends."

"But I agree. Dull they are. I think it's a bit unfair that you have to butter them up."

"I don't exactly butter them up."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"We have to earn a living in this town."

"I know dear. A little bit of compromise. There are still plenty of things you won't do. And they know it. I think you've made some of those people respect you."

With relief he heard Miranda coming back. She put a cup of tea for her brother on the stand between the beds and sat down by her parcels on the foot of Kingsley's bed. Her skin took a faint green colour from the curtains.

Malcolm strode in, looking like a boxer in his striped red and white dressing-gown. He kissed his mother's forehead on the side away from her scar. "Merry Christmas." He sat on her bed and laid his parcels out. "Who starts?" Then he saw Miranda. "What's going on, a strip show?"

"Don't tell me it embarrasses you."

"Make her put something on, mum," he complained.

"I have got something on." She flounced the front of her short night-gown. Kingsley saw the line of her breasts through the fabric.

"Put on your dressing-gown, love," he said.

She swung her feet off the bed. "What a bunch of Victorian frauds." He noticed the satisfaction on her face. She went to great lengths at times to make her parents and brother act in character.

They were opening presents by the time Miranda came back. She handed out hers and they sat pulling ribbons undone, unfolding paper. Kingsley opened his gifts with a mixture of hope and reluctance. It was always like this. The feelings that tied them together were undisclosable, there was shame in their common blood, but in these moments he half expected to take the paper off some object that would perfectly express the feelings they could not speak; even the love he still felt for Alison and the love—he could not doubt it—that she felt for him. There was a weakness in his fingers as he turned the starry paper. Miranda had given him Tabac soap and Yardley's after-shave lotion; Malcolm a box of cigars (he smoked only at Christmas); Alison a novel he had recently enjoyed. He looked at their gifts to each other lying in their laps and wondered if they too felt relief that there had been no revelation.

He opened the drawer beside his bed and took out his presents to his son and daughter. This year he had given them money. They showed the sort of excitement they had not shown since childhood. Malcolm's eyes shone with delight. He folded his cheque and put it in his dressing-gown pocket.

"Thanks, dad. I can use that."

Miranda kissed him. "Lovely. So much nicer than dolls."

"When have I ever given you dolls?"

"What mercenary children we've got," Alison said. She was slowly unwrapping Kingsley's present. When the ring was uncovered she held it on the palm of her hand and turned it over with her finger. Her face began to colour. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Put it on."

But she continued to hold it as though it were something

fragile. Although response of this sort was not rare in her Kingsley always found it surprising. Her delicacy was mainly social. But now she seemed to have found a quality in the ring that wearing would damage. He was moved by her uncertainty.

"Put it on, Allie. It hasn't got a spell on it."

She slipped the ring on to her finger, giving a small sigh, and held her hand out for inspection. She was vain of her hands. Smooth, long-fingered, long-nailed, white in winter, golden in summer, they played an important part in her myth of being special, secret, unfound. The heavy ring with its white silver shaped into angles and planes and egg-shaped stone deeply green stood up like a wizard's castle. For a moment Kingsley thought it might be too heavy for her hand.

Alison flexed her fingers. "It's marvellous. Perfect."

"Is it continental?" Miranda asked.

Alison leaned across from her bed. "Here, let me kiss you."

It was an awkward embrace, half-way between the beds, but Kingsley laughed happily, supporting himself with a hand on the floor. "You have to be an acrobat."

"It's Danish, I'll bet," Miranda said.

Kingsley settled back in his bed. "It was made only ten miles down the road."

"Local? I don't believe it."

"By a German chap called Gunter Spohn."

"What sort of name is that supposed to be?" Malcolm complained.

"I knew it was continental."

"It doesn't matter where it was made, it's beautiful," Alison said. "This stone's like a pool. A fairy pool."

"Gunter Spohn. Is he young?"

"He's older than me. He's got a New Zealand wife and a tribe of young kids who run round naked in the bush all day. They got tired of Auckland so they bought an old house and ten acres of land and they play Mozart symphonies at full

bore all day long with nobody to complain. It's like living on an island."

"And he makes a living out of rings and things?"

"He's a silversmith. A good one. His wife's a potter."

"What's that stone?" Malcolm said.

"Tourmaline."

"How much did it cost?"

"Trust you," Miranda said.

"They're only semi-precious," Kingsley said. "And silver's cheap."

Alison was still admiring the ring—or rather, the ring on her hand. She turned towards her husband and light from the windows fell on the scarred side of her face. The scar was a roughness like papier mâché, a patternless track of puckers and ridges running from temple to jawbone. It had the colour of beeswax. Kingsley had stopped trying to talk her into plastic surgery. The scar had uses, he had come to understand. He was not sure she was using it at the moment, though the contrast between perfection of hand and ring and mutilation of face was one she might be contemplating—putting aside for use.

"The cost's not important. Not with a ring like this. It's a work of art. You're very clever to have found him, Kingsley."

"Will you buy me one next Christmas?" Miranda asked.

"Only I'll do the choosing."

"Miranda," Alison said.

"You never get anything if you don't ask."

"There are probably New Zealanders who can make stuff as good," Malcolm said. He stood up. "Well, if this is over I'm going back to bed."

"Go and find Yehudi for me," Alison said. "I want to show him my ring."

"That damn cat runs when it sees me."

"Don't talk about Yehudi like that. He's one of the family. You go, Miranda. He'll be in the lounge. I want him to see my ring."

Kingsley felt this was over-girlish. She was cool again and was acting pleasure. Yet he knew the ring had delighted her and did not believe the feeling could cease to exist. It had gone from her husband's sight, that was all. She had drawn it into herself and held it privately. He had had a closer intimacy with her an hour after their meeting than he had now after twenty years of marriage.

Miranda came back with Yehudi sprawled on her arm. The cat was a Siamese with smoky fur and eyes that Kingsley had to turn away from—hot and cold at once, and murderous. Miranda put the animal on her mother's bed. Alison took it in her arms and began scratching its throat. Kingsley found her affection for Yehudi disturbing (and the "clever" name embarrassing). There was something aberrant in it, he felt, something at once defensive and triumphant that she had made exempt from her rule of detachment. He would rather have seen her vulnerable through feelings more worth while. Yet their worth, he admitted, was for her to judge. He felt himself criticized.

Alison had bought the cat a collar but had not been able to wait for Christmas and had buckled it on several days before.

"Now we've both got something pretty," she said.

Miranda looked disapproving. (Cats were for catching mice, she had told her mother.) "I suppose we'd better take grandpa's presents up."

"Yes," Kingsley said. "He'll be out of bed by now." He had not thought of his father since waking. "Tell him I'll come up and see him in a minute." His relationship with the old man had become a thing of improvisations.

"Coming, Malcolm?" Miranda said.

"Do we have to? This early?"

"It's Christmas. The time of goodwill. Remember?"

"Go on, son," Kingsley said. "You don't have to do much for him."

"I hope he likes Old Spice," Miranda said.

Malcolm laughed. "It might make him smell a bit better."

"Don't talk about your grandfather like that," Alison said.

"You were the first one to say he ponged."

"I said nothing of the sort. What I said was freshness can be a problem when people get old. Unless they take special care."

"Go up and see him," Kingsley said. "Tell him I'll be up." When they had gone he complained to his wife, "Malcolm's such a boor."

"He's young. Give him time."

"It isn't time he needs. It's a lesson." His son's remark had upset Kingsley. The old man did smell—of clothes worn too long, and tobacco, and something unidentifiable that had an odour like mutton fat—but Malcolm seemed to have no other sense of him. The others, too, suffered this sort of treatment from the boy: he forced them into shapes that had as their single feature some fact that was both mean and undeniable. Kingsley saw how Malcolm diminished himself more than others in this. It seemed that physical pain was the only thing that could move him.

"We should have the old man down more often."

"Is that a Christmas resolution?"

"I know he's difficult . . ."

"I thought we agreed, Kingsley, that we had to help him keep his independence. As a way of keeping his self-respect. That's very important with old people. Now he's got his own television set he won't want to come down here. You know he just lives for television."

"I know . . ."

"You mustn't feel guilty, dear. That's one of your little vices. There's no reason for it. You know you've done more for your father than most sons ever dream of doing."

Kingsley got out of bed. "I'd better go up and see him. You don't mind having him in for Christmas dinner?"

"As Miranda says, it's the season of goodwill."

Kingsley sighed. "I'm glad you like the ring."

"It's very sweet. I think you're very clever."



## 2

*It depends on who you're kind to, doesn't it?*

She had meant of course that his kindness was for himself. But surely that was untrue. Nothing would have pleased him more than to give his life—like Schweitzer, like Father Damien—be a saint. Oh yes, he could see himself, holy among the expensive cars and collar-wearing cats, Saint Kingsley Pratt in habit lined with lambskin, patron saint of his superior suburb, appealed to by planters of hibiscus shrubs and givers of chic dinner parties. “Watch over us, Saint Kingsley. Let our wine be properly chilled and the oysters fresh in our cocktails. Confound our neighbour, who drives a Jaguar. Make his racehorse lose . . .” With a laying on of hands he cured their sons and daughters of unworthy ambitions and rebellious thoughts.

He poured himself a glass of milk and drank it at the kitchen bench. She had been wrong. It did not seem to him that he was especially kind to himself—though the thrusts he made at Kingsley Pratt were somehow less sure, were less particular, than those he made at his neighbours. And he refused to venture on the ground where memory would be a weapon. He used every trick he knew to keep himself from any sort of backward glance at his life. That could only lead to the game of choices, to the dreaming of other ways, which spread him thin. Alison's advice to count his blessings was more appropriate for Christmas morning.

Miranda and Malcolm came down through the vegetable garden; Malcolm in robe and sandals—Roman haircut and patrician air; Miranda bare-footed, hair loose on her back—rather too stern-faced though for a woodland nymph. He felt pride in their cleverness and good looks. Most people would judge these qualities sufficient. Malcolm had his