Howatch

OF FORTUNE

Volume 1

SIMON AND SCHUSTER • NEW YORK

Published by Simon and Schuster
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Simon & Schuster Building
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10020
SIMON AND SCHUSTER and colophon are registered trademarks
of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Susan

THE WHEEL

In memory of my uncle, Jack Watney, 1916–1983

Contents

PART ONE

ROBERT

1913

I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship the very people she is striving to cheat, until she overwhelms them with unbearable grief at the suddenness of her desertion. . . .

—Boethius
The Consolation of Philosophy

PART ONE

ROBERT

1013

1

I

How SEDUCTIVE are the memories of one's youth! My cousin Ginevra once said she would never forget dancing with me beneath the chandeliers at Oxmoon while the orchestra played "The Blue Danube." Women are such incurable romantics. I was a romantic myself once but I recovered. A rational disposition must necessarily preclude a romantic outlook on life, and only the failures of this world can afford to dispense with a rational disposition.

No one could have called me a failure. I have always recoiled from the second-rate; whenever I compete I have to come first, and every time I come first I take another step away from that disaster I can never forget, that catastrophe which followed my dance with Ginevra, my own Ginette, beneath the chandeliers at Oxmoon while the orchestra played "The Blue Danube."

However as a rational man I could hardly mourn an adolescent tragedy like a lovesick swain sighing for some lost Arcadia. I admit I still had my maudlin moments, but they seldom survived sunrise, breakfast and the leading article in *The Times*. Recovering from an ill-starred romance is, after all, to anyone of sufficient willpower and self-respect, purely an attitude of mind.

I reminded myself of this proven fact when I opened *The Times* on that May morning in 1913, perused the leading article on the Marconi scandal and then found I could not remember a word I had read. To skim uncomprehendingly through an article on financial machinations is pardonable; nothing can be more boring than high finance at its most convoluted. But to skim uncomprehendingly through an article on the idiotic financial machinations of Isaacs and Lloyd George suggested an absence of mind amounting almost to derangement. I was involved in politics, particularly in Liberal politics. I greatly admired Asquith, the Prime Minister, but Lloyd George,

his Chancellor of the Exchequer, was the Welshman in whom I felt a special interest. To find my attention now wandering from the latest headlines in his history was disturbing in the extreme, and after making a mental note to find a new mistress without delay I applied myself to reading the article again. A prolonged abstinence from carnal satisfaction—never a desirable state of affairs—had evidently resulted in a depression which was affecting my powers of concentration, and remedial measures had to be taken without delay.

At this point my man Bennett glided into the room with the morning's post. I sighed with relief. Now I could postpone asking myself why I had lost interest in carnal matters; now I could avoid examining the shining surface of my well-ordered private life for blemishes which logic dictated could not and should not exist. With alacrity I cast aside *The Times*, picked up the paper knife and slit open the envelopes which lay waiting to divert me.

I divided the contents into four piles; invitations, personal notes, bills and rubbish; all business correspondence was delivered to my chambers downstairs. The invitations were wearisome but most of them would have to be accepted. A rising young barrister with unlimited ambition must seize every opportunity to meet the people who matter, but how much more entertaining life would be if the people who mattered had more to recommend them! However, boredom on social occasions is an inescapable hazard for the overeducated, and for the overambitious it must be endured with what my mother would no doubt have called Christian resignation.

So much for the invitations. The personal letters included a typically dreary offering from my mother herself—my mother was a good woman but with a provincial cast of mind—an obsequious scrawl from one of my numerous tiresome siblings, but still nothing from my father. That was a pity but evidently he was too busy to escape to London for one of his "little sprees." The remainder of my correspondence, I saw as I unfolded writing paper of varying degrees of opulence, consisted of *billets-doux*. If I had been vain I would have found such attentions flattering but I knew well enough that these society women saw me only as a myth in my barrister's wig and gown. No woman had ever seen me as I really was, no woman except my cousin Ginevra long ago in that lost paradise we had shared at Oxmoon.

So much for the personal letters. I turned to the bills and found them unpleasant but not unreasonable. I was not given to wild extravagances which I considered to be the mark of an inferior intellect. I neither gambled nor showered overpriced gems on music-hall girls. Even when I was not living like a monk I never kept a mistress; my mistresses were kept, usually in great style, by their complaisant husbands. Soon, I knew, I would have to marry in order to further the political career I intended to have, but since I naturally intended to marry money my bank account would hardly suffer when I made the required trip to the altar. I intended to marry into the aristocracy too, but not the impoverished aristocracy, no matter how charming its feminine rep-

resentatives might be. Man cannot live on charm alone, and an ambitious man cannot live on anything less than wealth, good social connections and substantial political influence. One must be rational about such matters, and being rational need not mean being cold. I had every intention of being fond of my future wife, whoever she might be, and I had every confidence that we would do tolerably well together. Marrying for love might be romantic but I considered it the hallmark of an undisciplined private life. Romance is the opiate of the dissatisfied; it anesthetizes them from the pain of their disordered second-rate lives. I was neither disordered nor second-rate and so I had no need of opiates, just as I no longer had any need of my cousin Ginevra, my own Ginette, now fifteen years married and still living happily ever after in New York.

So much for the bills. Turning to the rubbish I discovered not only circulars and begging letters but also passionate outpourings from disturbed females who apparently thought I wanted to wreck my future political career by making a speech in favor of women's suffrage. I consigned all these effusions to the wastepaper basket, filed the invitations, bills and personal letters in the appropriate pigeonholes of my desk and took a deep breath. My day was about to begin. My life was in perfect order. I was healthy, wealthy and supremely successful and if I were not happy I was a fool.

I was not a fool, therefore I had to be happy.

I *was* happy. Life was exciting, glittering, a perpetually coruscating challenge. First I had to go downstairs to consult my clerk, talk to my fellow attorneys, glance through the new briefs that had arrived. Then I would take a cab to the Old Bailey where I was in the midst of defending a most charming woman who had promised me tearfully that it had been sheer coincidence that she had bought arsenic three days before her husband had died such an unpleasant death; I could not believe this but the jury would—by the time I had finished with them. Later I would dine out. The McKennas were giving a political dinner party and I had heard Lloyd George was to be present; my young hostess Pamela would make much of me and to repay her I would be debonair and charming, stifling my yawns as the ladies rattled on interminably about the wedding of Princess Victoria Louise. But after the ladies had withdrawn and the port was circulating the real business of the evening would begin.

We would talk of politics; I would keep respectfully silent as Lloyd George discussed Welsh Disestablishment—but if he were to ask me for my opinion I would, of course, have a few well-chosen words prepared. Then no doubt someone would say what a bore the suffragettes were and someone else would say what a bore most women were anyway, and Lloyd George and I would look at each other, two Welshmen in the land of our masters, and wonder how English gentlemen ever summoned the effort to reproduce themselves.

Then the port would go round again and we would talk of Turkey and

Bulgaria and the Kaiser and the Dreadnoughts until propriety forced us to join the ladies in the drawing room and talk of Caruso, Melba and the rising price of pre-Raphaelite paintings. However I would escape before eleven; someone was sure to invite me to Brooks's or some other club, but I would have to retire to my chambers and burn the midnight oil in order to ensure that I won my case on the morrow. By the time I went to bed I would be exhausted, too exhausted to lie awake and think maudlin thoughts, but when I awoke at six another enthralling day would be waiting for me—for I was so lucky, always fortune's favorite, and I had everything I had ever wanted, everything but the life I longed to lead with the woman I could never have, but what did such sentimental aspirations matter when I was so happy, success personified, forever coming first and winning all the way along the line?

I told myself I could not be unhappy because it was logically impossible. But then I remembered those Greek philosophers, all eminently sane and rational, arguing with inexorable logic towards a truth which turned out to be not a truth but an absurdity. Zeno had proved everything in the world was fixed and unchanging, Heraclitus had proved everything in the world was changing continuously, and both men had provided impeccable arguments to support their points of view. But reality, as Democritus had later tried to show, had all the time lain elsewhere.

I saw a chaotic world of infinite complexity where reason was impotent, and instinctively I recoiled from it. I had long since decided that a successful life was like a well-ordered game governed, as all games were, by rules. One grew up, learned the rules, played one's chosen game and won. That was what life was all about. Any fool knew that.

But what was the nature of my chosen game? And how had I wound up in this particular game in the first place? And suppose it was the wrong game? And if it was the wrong game then what was the point of winning it? And if winning was meaningless what was my life all about? And if I had no idea what my life was all about, did this mean my life was in a mess and if my life was in a mess did this mean I was a failure? And what exactly had I failed to do and how could I repair the omission when I had no idea what I had left undone?

The telephone rang in the hall.

"I'm not in!" I shouted to Bennett as he emerged from the pantry.

The ringing ceased as Bennett addressed himself to the instrument. Presently I heard him say, "One moment, Mr. Godwin, I thought he'd left but it's possible—"

I sprang to my feet and sped to the hall.

"Papa?" I said into the mouthpiece as Bennett yielded his place to me. "Is something wrong?" There was no telephone at Oxmoon, and I thought such an unexpected communication might herald news of a family disaster, but I

was worrying unnecessarily. My father's letter telling me of his imminent visit to London for a "little spree" had gone astray; he had arrived late on the previous evening at his club, and finding no note from me awaiting him there he was now telephoning to ask when we could meet.

"—and I've got the most extraordinary news, Robert—"

For one aghast moment I wondered if my mother was pregnant. My parents had an obsession with reproducing themselves and were the only couple I knew who had celebrated their silver wedding anniversary with such undisciplined zest that an infant had arrived nine months later to mark the occasion.

"—and I wonder if I should tell you over the telephone or whether I should wait till I see you—"

"My God, it's not Mama, is it?"

"What? Oh no, she's fine, in capital form, sent you her love and so on—"

"Then what is it? What's happened?"

"Well, it's about Ginevra. She—hullo? Robert?"

"Yes, I'm still here. Go on."

"What?"

"What's the news about Ginette?"

"Well, there's no need to shout, Robert! I may be on the wrong side of fifty now but I'm not deaf!"

"God Almighty, I swear I shall go mad in a moment. My dear Papa, could you kindly tell me with as much speed as possible—"

"It's Ginevra's husband. He's dead, Robert. She's coming home."

II

In my dreams I always said to her, "Take me back to Oxmoon, the Oxmoon of our childhood. Take me back to Oxmoon and make it live again."

How seductive indeed were the memories of my youth, and the older I grew the more alluring they became to me until they assumed the gilded quality of myth. If romance is the opiate of the dissatisfied, then surely nostalgia is the opiate of the disillusioned, for those who see all their dreams come true and find themselves living in a nightmare. The present may be ungovernable, crammed with questions that have no answers, and the future may be unimaginable, obscured by doubt and bewilderment, but the past thrives with increasing clarity, not dead at all but running parallel to the present and often seeming, in my memory, more real than the reality of my daily life in 1913.

At the beginning of my life there were my parents, who were hardly more than children themselves, and at Oxmoon with my parents was this grubby

little girl who talked to me, pinched me, played with me, slapped me, helped me to walk and generally made herself useful. She was somewhat stout and vain as a peacock; she was always standing on tiptoe to examine her ringlets in the looking glass. For the first few years of my life I found her full name impossible to pronounce, but she was gracious and permitted me to use an abbreviation, a favor that was never granted to anyone else.

I seem always to have known she was not my sister. "You're not my sister, are you?" I said to her once, just to make sure, and she exclaimed, "Heavens, no—what an idea!" and was most offended. She knew I disliked sisters. Later she explained to me, "I'm Bobby's cousin," although when I asked her how that could be possible when my father was so much older than she was, she snapped, "Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies," which meant she had no idea.

I thought that if this story was true she should call my father "Cousin Bobby" but in truth my father, still resurrecting his bankrupt estate from the grave, hardly had the time to concern himself with a minor detail of family etiquette. Later when my mother had recovered from the nightmare of her first years at Oxmoon she became more strict about what she called "doing the done thing," but even then Ginette usually forgot to address her guardian as "Cousin" so the exact nature of the relationship between us was never stressed.

Eventually I discovered that her father and my grandfather had been half-brothers; her father, the child of a second marriage, had been the younger by twenty years, a circumstance that meant he belonged more to the generation of his nephew, my father, than to the generation of his half-brother, my grandfather. He had spent his early childhood at Oxmoon and in later life long after he had removed to the English Midlands, he and my father had remained good friends. My father had even borrowed money from him when the reconstruction of the Oxmoon estate was begun, so presumably the ties of affection which united them had remained strong; that those ties survived unimpaired despite the borrowing of money was demonstrated when my great-uncle drew up a will in which he named my father the guardian of the infant Ginevra. Within a month he had died of typhoid, and his young widow, who must have been a tiresome creature, went into a decline and eventually managed to starve herself to death on the nearest picturesque chaise longue.

I was nine months old when Ginette came to live with us, and Oxmoon was barely habitable at the time. My parents pretended to occupy the entire house but in fact lived in three rooms on the ground floor. However despite my parents' straitened circumstances it never crossed their minds that they might make some other provision for Ginette and they always treated her as if she were their daughter. No doubt my father's affection for her father

made any other course of action unthinkable to him, while my mother too would have felt bound by an absolute moral duty.

"Poor little me!" said Ginette later when she reflected on her predicament. "But never mind, all the best heroines are beautiful orphans, abandoned to their fate, and the one thing that's certain about my situation is that I'm going to be a heroine when I grow up."

"Can I be a hero?"

"Well, I suppose you can try. But you'll have to try very hard."

I can remember that moment clearly. My parents had by that time reoccupied the whole house, but we had left the nurseries to escape from the smell of boiled milk and wet nappies and were heading for the kitchen garden to rifle the strawberry beds. Ginette wore a white pinafore with an egg stain on it, and there were holes in both her stockings. She must have been about eight years old.

"I don't think you're at all likely to be a heroine," I said, aggrieved by her pessimism on the subject of my heroic potential.

"Why, what impertinence! Here I am, being constantly noble by devoting all my time to you even though you're two years younger and a boy and do nothing but drive me wild! The truth is that if I wasn't a heroine I wouldn't do it. I think I'm wonderful."

We gorged ourselves on the strawberries in silence, but eventually I said, "Heroes have to marry heroines, don't they."

"Of course. But actually I don't believe I'll marry anyone. Think of all the nasty smelly babies one would have to have!"

We shuddered.

"Friendship's best," I said, "and friendship's forever because no baby can come along to spoil it." And when I grabbed her hand she laughed and we ran off down the path together to our secret camp in the woods.

We had decided while my sister Celia was an infant that babies were undesirable. Unfortunately in our family a new baby arrived every eighteen months but to our relief they all, apart from Celia, failed to survive. Charlotte lived a year but succumbed to measles. William breathed his last within a week of his birth and Pamela faded away at the age of six months. Only Celia flourished like a weed, whining around our ankles and trying to follow us everywhere, but I took no notice of her. I was the male firstborn and I came first. That was a fact of nursery life, as immutable as a law of nature.

"First is best, isn't it?" I said to my father as we walked hand in hand through the woods past the ruined Norman tower, and he smiled as he answered, "Sometimes!"—which, as I knew very well at the age of eight, meant "Yes, always."

"First is best, isn't it?" I said to my mother in the housekeeper's room after my eighth birthday when she decided to increase my pocket money by a

ha'penny a week. In the affable atmosphere generated by this gesture I had decided the time was ripe to seek reaffirmation of my privileged status.

"What, dear?"

"I said first is best, isn't it?"

"Well, that depends," said my mother. "I was the second in my family and I always thought *I* was the best—but then my father spoiled me abominably and gave me ideas quite above my station. In fact I think that for a time I was a very horrid little girl indeed."

That was when I first realized the most disconcerting difference between my parents: my father told me what I wanted to hear and my mother told me what she felt I ought to hear. Resentment simmered. I sulked. When Lion was born a month later I knew straight away that I was outraged.

I waited for him to die but soon I realized that this was not the kind of baby who would oblige me by fading away into the churchyard at Penhale. I tried to ignore him but found he was not the kind of baby, like Celia, who could be ignored. He was huge and imperious. He roared for everyone's attention and got it. My mother began in my opinion to behave very foolishly indeed. I felt more outraged than ever.

"Robert dearest," said my mother after overhearing my declaration to Olwen the nursemaid that I had no intention of attending the christening, "I think it's time you and I had a little talk together."

My mother was famous for her "little talks." Her little talks with servants were conducted in the housekeeper's room and her little talks with children were conducted upstairs in the large bedroom that belonged by tradition to the master and mistress of the house. My mother had a table there where she did her sewing, but when she had an arduous interview to conduct she always sat at her dressing table and pretended to busy herself with rearranging the pots, jars and boxes lined up below the triple looking glass. My mother seldom glanced directly at her victims while she spoke, but watched them constantly in the cunningly angled reflections.

"Now, Robert dearest," she said, emptying a jar of pins and beginning to stick them with mathematical precision into a new pincushion, "I know quite well you think of yourself as a little prince in a fairy tale, but because I love you and want the best for you"—a quick glance in the mirror—"I think it's time someone told you a few home truths. The first truth is that you're not a prince, and the second truth," said my mother, turning to look at me directly, "is that this is no fairy tale, Robert."

She paused to let me digest this. I contented myself with assuming my most mutinous expression but I took care to remain silent.

"I thought life was a fairy tale once," said my mother, resuming her transformation of the pincushion. "I thought that until I was sixteen and came to Oxmoon—and then, when I found myself face to face with what really went on in the world, I felt angry with my parents for failing to prepare me for it.

However," said my mother, glancing into the far mirror, "now is hardly the time for me to talk to you about the ordeal your father and I endured at the hands of his mother and Mr. Bryn-Davies. You're too young. Suffice it to say that the world is a very wicked place and that one has to be very resolute to lead a decent orderly life—and you do want to lead a decent orderly life, don't you, Robert? People who have no self-discipline, who are perpetual slaves to all their weaknesses, are inevitably very unhappy indeed. In fact I would go so far as to say," said my mother, pinning away busily, "that tragedy inevitably lies waiting for Those Who Fail to Draw the Line."

"Yes, Mama." It took a great deal to cow me but I was cowed—not by this familiar reference to drawing the moral line but by the mention of the Great Unmentionable, my grandmother and Mr. Bryn-Davies. Even though I was only eight years old I knew that Oxmoon had not always been a pastoral paradise where little children wandered happily around the kitchen garden and feasted at the strawberry beds.

"So we must always reject morally unacceptable behavior," said my mother, tipping the rest of the pins from the jar and aligning them between two scent bottles, "and one kind of behavior that is morally unacceptable, Robert, is jealousy. Jealousy is a very wicked emotion. It destroys people. And I won't have it, not in this house—because *here I have my standards,*" said my mother, facing me again, *"and here I Draw the Line."*

I opened my mouth to say, "I'm not jealous!" but no words came out. I stared down at my shoes.

"There, there!" said my mother kindly, seeing I had fully absorbed her homily. "I know you're a good intelligent boy and I now have every confidence that you'll behave well towards Lionel—and towards Celia—in the future."

I retired in a rage. When I found my father I said, "Mama's been very rude to me, and if you please, sir, I'd be obliged if you'd tell her not to be so horrid in future." But my father said abruptly, "I won't hear one word against your mother. Pull yourself together and stop behaving like a spoiled child."

I ran away and hid in a basket in the wet laundry. I realized that my father, who normally never said a cross word to me, had been suborned into sternness by my mother, while my mother, normally affectionate enough, had been rendered hostile by her irrational desire to place the infant on an equal footing with me. I felt I was being subjected to a monstrous injustice. Vengeance should be mine; I decided to repay.

Leaving the wet laundry, I prowled around the house to the terrace and found two of the estate laborers installing a new pane of glass in the dining-room window. The previous pane had been cracked when a sea gull had flown into it in an indecent haste to return to the coast which lay a mile away beyond Rhossili Downs. When the laborers had retired I remained, eying the