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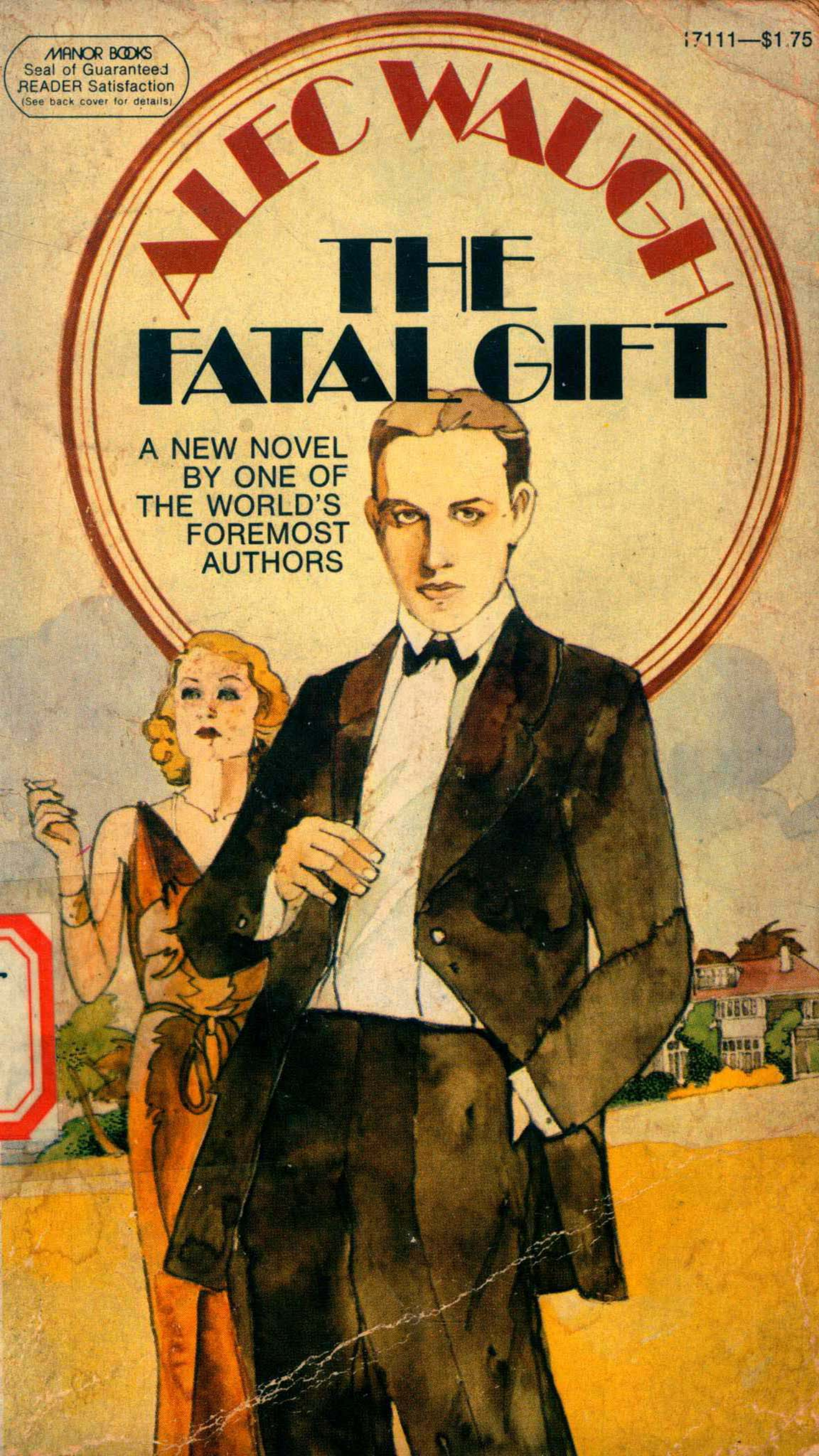

THE FATAL GIFT

ALEC WAUGH

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THE DARK, PASSIONATE BEAT OF THE CARNIVAL

The couple paused and turned to face each other in the dark courtyard under our balcony. They didn't see us and began to dance, scarcely moving their feet, following the rhythm with their bodies. She raised her arms and folded them about his neck. His hands slid down her back in a slow caress. He held her close, his hips rotated to the music. She responded in a slow, slow roll. His hands lowered to her haunches; the dark fingers spread against her skirt, tightening their hold on her. They moved like one body till they were almost motionless, quivering against each other . . . .

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FOREWORD

This is a work of fiction, the life-story of the second son of an obscure but affluent English peer, who was born in 1903. It is told in the first person and the narrator, the 'I', is myself. No actual events have been dramatised, with one exception. My brother Evelyn did in 1924 bring a girl to Oxford and take her, dressed up as a man, to an undergraduate 'binge' which was raided by the proctor and his bulldogs. The subsequent story of that lady—a fortunate and happy one—was entirely different from that of Judy.

I have introduced one or two real people by their actual names. My hero going up to Oxford in October, 1922, would certainly have met Evelyn and Brian Howard, in New York in 1930–31 he would have been seeing Claud Cockburn, and as a staff officer in Cairo in 1942 he would probably have met Robin Maugham. I could see no point in finding pseudonyms for them.

Nor did I see any point in finding a pseudonym for Dominica. The island is unique and this particular story could only have happened there. In Dominica my hero would have met Elma Napier, John Archbold and Stephen Haweis, so I have written about them as I would have done, and indeed have done, in a travelogue. I think this is legitimate in a novel, and I hope the reader will not be confused.

It is, I repeat, a work of fiction.

ALEC WAUGH

1

It was raining, as I had guessed it would be. Though the month was April, Dominica is the wettest island in the Caribbean. Its mountains attract the rain. It has over three hundred rivers. I opened my umbrella as I came down the gangplank. I hurried across the tarmac. A hand, waved from the verandah, reassured me; though it was six years since we had met, I had never ceased to regard Raymond Peronne as one of my closest friends, and I had expected that my air letter announcing that a professional need for copy was to bring me once again to Dominica, would be answered by such a cable as the one I got, 'Thrilled your visit come as soon as you like stay as long as you like.' But I had not known whether he would be fit enough to undertake the two hours drive over the mountains. That was why the waved hand reassured me. He was in good health.

He was awaiting me beyond the customs shed beside a low red Alfa-Romeo two-seater; a car admirably suited to the island's steep, sharp curves; a car, too, that striking a note of unostentatious affluence, was typical of its owner. Tall, upright, elegant, Raymond Peronne was as handsome now in his seventieth year as he had been when I met him first as an undergraduate at Oxford.

His clothes were as appropriate as his car: dark green slacks, a white linen jacket, patterned in green by broad, thin-lined squares; a white silk shirt with, at his throat, a dark green polka-dot cravat. His panama hat was bound by a bright madras. As he crossed from the parking lot, his face was lit by the smile that was peculiarly his own, a welcoming smile that both accepted and dismissed the manifold chances and changes of the world. In essentials he had not altered in half a century, and his welcome was typically casual.

'You've come at the right time for the mangos. I expect you remembered that,' he said.

Mangos are wonderful in Dominica; so are most fruits for

that matter, grapefruit in particular. Rose's Lime Juice started there.

'I'm in time for the Cassia too,' I said.

Its brilliant yellow stabbed the dark green of the countryside. Till I had visited Dominica I had not realised how many shades of green there are. The mountains that surrounded us as we drove, looked like a single solid background with one shade of green mingling with another, as on a painter's palette. But I knew through many trips on foot how that seemingly solid background was split by valleys, so that a house that seemed only a mile away was separated from you by a succession of deep gorges.

The sun broke through the clouds and a rainbow curved above the mountain road.

I looked about me with fond recollective eyes.

'I hadn't forgotten how beautiful it is,' I said.

He smiled.

'All the same, I'm surprised at your coming here for copy. I should have thought that you'd have found more in St Lucia and Grenada, with all those new hotels.'

'But that's precisely why I'm here. I wanted to see the one island that has missed the tourist boom.'

Dominica had missed it because, although one of the larger islands, it has no beaches on the leeward coast and bathing on the windward side is dangerous. It holds no attractions for the package tourist.

'That's so,' he said. He seemed satisfied with my explanation, and there was no reason why he should not be. The writer's quest for copy is an unassailable alibi. Why should he suspect that my presence here was due, not to an editor's whim, but to a son's curiosity. 'I've got to find out what's biting the old boy,' his son, who is also my godson, had insisted. 'Why won't he come back to England? Has he got some ghastly illness and is ashamed to see us? Is he mad with me about my marriage, though he pretended not to be? Is he tied up with some fearful floosie? Has he gone broke? I've got to know. You're the one person who can go there without making him feel suspicious. The estate will foot your bill. We've got to know.'

Already I had found the answer to one of my godson's questions. Clearly Raymond had not contracted some disfiguring tropical complaint.

I acted in terms of my rôle of a professional writer in search of copy.

'I've given myself two weeks here,' I said. 'I want to see all I can.'

Twenty-five years back, in a piece called 'Typical Dominica', I had tried to explain the particular magic that this island has held for so many and such diverse eccentrics. I wrote of three friends in particular, Elma Napier, Stephen Haweis and John Archbold. Elma Napier was the daughter of the Sir William Gordon-Cumming who had been involved in the Tranby Croft baccarat scandal. She had settled on the north-east corner of the island. She had become involved in local politics and had been elected to the Legislative Council. She had written several books. Stephen Haweis was a scholar and a painter who had lived the life of a recluse after losing most of his money in the 1929 Wall Street Crash. John Archbold was a youngish, rich American, who had come to the island on a cruise shortly before the war. He had meant to leave that night, but a sudden unaccountable impulse had moved him to stay on and purchase an estate. A typical Somerset Maugham situation, but Archbold was not a beachcomber. He had developed his estate as a sound business proposition. His presence on the island contributed substantially to its congeniality and prosperity.

I asked about them. 'I can't expect to find Stephen here,' I said. He had been very frail on my last visit.

Raymond shook his head. 'He checked out three years ago, but Elma's fine. She celebrated her eightieth birthday the other day. She finds it difficult to get about, but those blue eyes haven't lost their sparkle. We're going out to lunch next week; Daphne's fine too.' Daphne was Elma's daughter and a fond friend of mine. 'She runs a bar restaurant in town. One great piece of luck. John Archbold's here, in cracking form. We're dining there tomorrow. Maybe you won't find things so very different,' he concluded.

Certainly his own home was not. Six miles north-east of

Roseau, Overdale stood back from the Imperial Road, a two-storeyed wooden villa that had been built on the foundations of an old plantation house. The ruined tower of a sugar mill stood behind it. In front was the stonework of a low garden wall, with large curved flower pots at its corners. Between it and a curved 'welcoming arms' entrance a ragged lawn was shaded by a widespread mango tree. A verandah ran round the house. Bougainvillea, purple and rust red, trailed over it and between the upper windows. The house stood above a valley. The jungle between the house and the stream was a tangle of trees and plants, bananas and bamboos, from which four coconut palms towered. There was no formal garden. The short drive from the road was lined with crotons. The west wall of the house sheltered and protected a miniature orchid house. 'I've got some rather remarkable flowers,' Raymond said, 'but they're hidden away in corners. They are for the house. One doesn't sit about in gardens here.'

It was nearly forty years since I had come here first. It had altered as little in that time as had Charminster, his home in England. In neither case had there been any necessity to improve or add.

From my window I could see across the waters the majestic outline of Martinique, where a hundred and ninety years ago Rodney, in a one-day battle, had saved the British Empire. It was the same room that I had had on my last visit, a bare room with practical wooden furniture, its white walls decorated by the work of local painters—a flower design in oils by Daphne's husband, Percy Agar, and a water-colour landscape by Stephen Haweis—I have its twin sister in my flat in Tangier.

As I came downstairs I looked round the hall for signs of a woman's presence—a floppy hat, a shopping basket. I did not see any. It looked as though I had found the answer to the second item in his son's questionnaire.

My punch was awaiting me. I had drunk passion fruit occasionally, but simply, as I have drunk orange juice at breakfast. I had never taken it in as a punch. It was rich and sweet. Nutmeg scattered on the surface enriched the flavour

of the rum. It tasted like a dessert, but I could feel its strength.

After a single sip I raised my glass to Raymond.

'In not so long now we shall have known each other for half a century.'

He had come to Oxford in the October of 1922. My brother Evelyn, as he has told in his autobiography, had come up a term late for his year, in the preceding January. In November, he arranged for me a small party of his special friends—Harold Acton, Peter Quennell, John Sutro, Robert Byron, Christopher Hollis, Hugh Molson, Anthony Bushell, Claud Cockburn, Terence Greenidge, Richard Pares. About a dozen, and every one of them is well known today. I found them all likable and lively. But the one who struck me most was Raymond, not only for his good looks, though they were remarkable: he was tall, long-legged, broad-shouldered, with reddish hair, grey eyes, a long straight nose, rather a wide mouth, very white teeth which you only noticed when he smiled, a clear complexion, indicative of health. Yes, he was strikingly good looking, with two particularly striking traits: one, a characteristic that was to stay with him all his life—an air of effortless composure in which was implicit the assumption that living was on the whole an agreeable business. At ease with himself, he put others at their ease. Enjoying life, he liked everyone who contributed to the sum of it. That was his first distinctive characteristic. The second, which also stayed with him all his life, was his air of masculine maturity. This was not so noticeable later because he shared it with many others; but in Oxford, in that set, it was practically non-existent.

As many autobiographies have witnessed since, there was in that set a strong homosexual undertone. Most of them had led at school celibate monastic lives. Any deviation had been punished by expulsion. A conspiracy of silence had been maintained. Then suddenly the Public School sixth-former became an undergraduate to whom everything was permitted. Most of them passed through a homosexual phase which in the majority of cases was completely shed when

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they entered adult life. In that respect Raymond was markedly different from his contemporaries. He never passed through that phase.

This difference was of considerable irritation to several of them, particularly to Brian Howard. In recent years Brian has appeared in a number of memoirs and a large biography of him has been issued, *Portrait of a Failure*. Before he died by his own hand, when he was close on sixty, he had exhausted the patience of nearly all his friends. Many people considered him the original of Ambrose Silk in *Put out More Flags* and Anthony Blanche in *Brideshead Revisited*. In part he was. In *A Little Learning* Evelyn described him as having, at the age of nineteen, 'dash and insolence . . . a kind of ferocity of elegance that belonged to a romantic era of a century before his own.'

He was petulantly irritated by Raymond's absorption in the other sex. 'It's maddening,' he said. 'I could have been crazy about him, oh, but my dear how crazy. But what do you think happened: at the age of fourteen, fourteen I ask you, he was seduced, and by his aunt; by his aunt. I ask you. He hasn't looked back. What chance for little me?'

I cannot remember what we talked about, Raymond Peronne and I, at that first meeting, but I do remember having in his company a curious sense of being where I belonged. I have since learned that he gave that same sensation to many others.

Afterwards I asked Evelyn who he was. 'A younger son,' he told me. 'His father's a Baron, Peronne of Charminster; the brother was killed in the war, but that brother had a son, which rules Raymond out.'

'I've never heard the name.'

'Nobody has. It's a Huguenot family: took refuge in the Netherlands, came over with William of Orange: that's how it got ennobled: rested on its laurels ever since. His father's as obscure as any eighth peer could be. But he's rich, all right, which is as well for Raymond.'

'Isn't Raymond very bright?'

'He's bright enough.'

'Then why should it be so lucky for him to be rich?'

'Because he doesn't have to force himself into a career that may prove uncongenial. There are so many openings for a young man with ability, with connections and with money.'

'Such as?'

'You know—so many things.'

I did not, but I let it pass.

'Raymond can afford to wait,' Evelyn went on. 'He doesn't have to accept the first good offer that comes his way.'

'I hope I'll be seeing more of him.'

'You will. He'll be around.'

Evelyn was right. He was. I myself went up to Oxford every term, and Evelyn's friends were constant visitors at Underhill, my father's house in Hampstead. Raymond was one of the most regular. I saw as much of him as I did of anyone during 1923. But we did not become more than close acquaintances until the hilarious occasion in the following January when Evelyn brought down a female to an Oxford 'blind'.

Her name was Judy Maine. She was then in her early twenties, prettyish, little, with brown, bobbed hair. In retrospect I see her as typical of all those young girls who invaded London after the war: eager, idealistic, resolved to put the world to rights. She might have been a character out of an early Aldous Huxley novel, *Crome Yellow* or *Antic Hay*. She had read Marx and Freud. Dostoievsky was her bible. She had taken a degree in history in a provincial university, Reading or Bristol, I cannot remember which. She supplemented a parental allowance with a succession of odd jobs for idealistic projects which tended to fold or reduce their staff within a few weeks of her joining them. She was a member of the 1917 club, of which Ramsay Macdonald was the first President, and she despised everything that the Victorian age stood for, the age whose 'selfishness and shortsightedness were responsible for the war': she had come up to London resolved to rid herself of the inhibitions that had frustrated her maiden aunts. That project at least she had achieved.

She had a minute flat at the top of a converted house in Bloomsbury. Its divan was piled high with cushions, its

walls were lined with sagging bookshelves; it had orange curtains.

I had met her at the Caves of Harmony, a club in Charlotte Street run by Elsa Lanchester and Harold Scott that figures in *Antic Hay*, and that once a week gave dances which were enlivened by a cabaret: Morris dancing, character songs and one-act plays.

At the end of the Christmas Vac. I had taken Evelyn there, asking Judy to join us. They made friends quickly. In those days I played Rugby football every Saturday. 'In two weeks' time,' I said, 'we're playing Reading University. Why don't I come on and stay the night at Oxford.'

'I'll give a party for you. It'll be a good way of getting the new term started.'

'What wouldn't I give,' she said, 'to have Gyges' ring and go to an Oxford blind.'

'There's no need for Gyges' ring. You can come on your own.'

'A girl isn't allowed in College after dark.'

'You could dress up as a man.'

It was a typical Evelyn fantasy and we devoted quite a while to the discussion of how she should be dressed. She was slim, but she was not unrounded. It was finally decided that plus fours, being voluminous, would provide the best disguise.

I was not of those who had profited from the release of Judy's Victorian inhibitions. We met irregularly, but most weeks we had a telephone conversation. Towards the end of the week she was to ask, 'Do you think that Evelyn's serious about my going up to Oxford?'

'I shouldn't have thought so, why?'

'I heard from him today. He wanted to know what train I'd catch.'

'Evelyn's one for carrying a joke through.'

'Would he be surprised if I turned up?'

'I think so, yes.'

'What would he do?'

'He'd pretend that he knew all the time you'd come.'

'Would he be annoyed?'

'He'd respect you for taking up his dare.'

'I've a very good mind to go.'

'You do just that.'

But I did not believe for a moment that she would. I could not have been more surprised at being met at Oxford by Evelyn, Raymond and an object that it took me several seconds to identify as Judy. She was appalling. She looked barely human. The plus fours hung below her calves, barely an inch above her ankles. The coat, of a different material, could have gone round her twice. Instead of a collar and tie she wore one of the high-necked pullovers that were just coming into fashion; it hung in thick folds over her bosom; her hair was contained within a cycling cap. An untidy, improbable composition, but what made it grotesque was the unhealthiness of a face washed clean of make-up. I have heard people described as 'the kind of thing you find under a stone'. That is exactly how she looked. She filled me with nausea. I could barely look at her. But to my astonishment she was having an entirely different effect on Raymond.

We dined at the George. Raymond was the host. He was in the highest spirits. He was responsible for her make-up and was delighted with his achievement. 'Doesn't she look wonderful? I thought her something of a dream when she got off the train this morning, but now there's all the difference in the world: I don't know how she'll ever have the heart to be a girl again.'

In the restaurant she had had of course to take off her cap. Her hair was plastered down with brilliantine. Caked on the back of her neck, it increased her air of unhealthiness. I could not think why the management did not turn her out.

All this happened in 1924, but I have never seen in a whole half century since anything that looked so degenerate. Nothing, however, could diminish Raymond's delight in her appearance. I had never seen him so ecstatic. He plied us with wine. The party became very gay, so gay that by the time that we had reached our port, I had begun to see Judy through Raymond's eyes. 'There's no one like her, is there,

there couldn't be anyone so special.' Special, well, she certainly was that. There was no one like her. I let my glass be refilled. By the time we left the hotel, I, too, was in an anapaestic mood.

Evelyn's party was being held in a graduate's rooms in King Edward Street. There were about ten guests. Bottles of burgundy stood along the mantelpiece; there was some tawny port, and a bottle of cognac. Everyone had already dined, but there was a cheddar cheese, three loaves of bread, a dish of butter and a fruit cake.

The party soon became extremely noisy. I kept as far away from Judy as I could, but my eyes were on her. Evelyn, too, kept away from her, but he played his part as host, bringing up one guest after another to be introduced. 'It's going all right, isn't it?' he whispered conspiratorially. Judy certainly was having a high time. Her eyes were bright; her laughter constant. Raymond never left her side and presently a puzzled guest came over to me. 'What's the matter with Raymond?' he enquired.

'Nothing as far as I know. Why?'

'He's suddenly gone "pi". I was telling quite a harmless story, spattered, I must admit, with a number of four-letter words, but *au fond* a perfectly harmless story, if you follow me. Suddenly Raymond said, "I must ask you not to use that kind of language." What's biting him?'

I chuckled inwardly. It was precisely to hear that kind of language that Judy had wanted Gyges' ring. She was getting what she had come for. It was ironic that Raymond should be trying to protect her aural innocence. As the evening progressed I found myself able to look at her with less dismay. Her cheeks were flushed now and she looked less unhealthy, but her presence was certainly surprising those of the guests who were not in the secret.

'Who on earth is that extraordinary creature Raymond's sponsoring?' I was asked.

'A jockey,' I said. 'Didn't you know he was a racing man?'

'Ah, that accounts for it.'

A few minutes later I was hoping that this explanation would satisfy a more stringent, more perceptive examination.

Suddenly the noise of the party was interrupted by a banging on the door.

'What is this impertinence?' demanded Evelyn. But it was not an impertinence. It was the proctor with his bulldogs. A voice demanded 'silence'.

'I need your names, please, gentlemen, and the names of your colleges.' The bulldogs came round taking names.

'Alec Waugh,' I said. 'I live in London. I am staying at the George.' They took name after name. Finally they reached Judy. They looked her up and down. Would the bulldogs accept her? She lowered the pitch of her voice. 'Mr Stanley Maine, London, staying at the Randolph.' They took her particulars and then moved on. 'Mr Terence Greenidge, Hertford College.' It was a great relief, yet I felt that it implied some criticism of the contemporary *mores* that so repellent an object could pass as a man.

At last, the last name was taken. The proctor spoke: 'I will ask all members of the University to return immediately to their colleges.' The bulldogs watched the members of the University leave the room; Evelyn as he passed me whispered, 'Breakfast at the Randolph nine o'clock. Tell Mr Maine.'

It was a cheery breakfast, though Judy was concerned about her hosts. 'Is this going to get you into trouble? I'd hate it if that happened.'

Raymond shrugged. 'There isn't much that they can do, provided that you're looking likely to make a reasonable showing in the schools. How do you stand with your college, Evelyn?'

'I have my private war with Cruttwell.'

Cruttwell was the Dean of Hertford. Evelyn was to deal with this private war in *A Little Learning*.

'Crutters will be pleased,' he said. 'It will be extra ammunition for the final showdown.'

That showdown was to come in the following September when Evelyn got a bad third in Mods, had his scholarship taken away, and started the period of his life that he entitled 'in which our hero's fortunes fall very low'. But all that was

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