

Hemlock and after



Ronald Six

Angus Wilson

HEMLOCK AND AFTER

By the same author

THE WRONG SET
SUCH DARLING DODOS
EMILE ZOLA
FOR WHOM THE CLOCHE TOLLS
THE MULBERRY BUSH
ANGLO-SAXON ATTITUDES
A BIT OFF THE MAP
THE MIDDLE AGE OF MRS ELIOT

Hemlock and After

By
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TO
ANTHONY
MOST GRATEFULLY

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EPILOGUE

The events of the novel take place in the summer of 1951.
The principal characters in order of their appearance are:

BERNARD SANDS – a novelist

ELLA SANDS – his wife

MRS. CURRY – a lady of many interests

JAMES SANDS – their son, a barrister

SONIA SANDS – his wife

MRS. RANKINE – a local lady

HUBERT ROSE – an architect

NICHOLAS – the small son of James and Sonia Sands

BERTHE – a French nurse

ERIC CRADDOCK – employed in a bookseller's shop

RON WRIGLEY – a Cockney boy living in the country

MRS. WRIGLEY – his mother

ELIZABETH SANDS – a journalist, the daughter of Bernard Sands

BILL PENDLEBURY – a writer, brother of Ella Sands

ISOBEL SANDS – a lecturer in English, sister of Bernard Sands

LOUIE RANDALL – a lecturer in Statistics

CELIA CRADDOCK – a lady from Virginia living in Esher,
mother of Eric

ALAN CRADDOCK – a school inspector, her son

TERENCE LAMBERT – a stage designer

SHERMAN WINTER – a theatrical producer

EVELYN RAMAGE – a hostess

CHARLES MURLEY – a civil servant

SIR LIONEL DOWDING – a gentleman of influence

REV. BILL MACGRATH – a clergyman

MR. GREENLEES – a young poet

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE PROPHET AND THE LOCALS

OF all the communications that Bernard Sands received on the day of his triumph the one which gave him the greatest satisfaction was the Treasury's final confirmation of official financial backing. He looked back over his long years of struggle and victory, against authority in all the guises which the literary world could lend it—publishers, editors, critics, cultural committees, the reading public—and noted with a certain surprise that he had almost come to take his ultimate ascendancy for granted. The earliest victories, of course, had cost him the most in self-discipline and in intellectual determination. For a Grand Old Man of Letters it had become fairly plain sailing; even, he reflected with satisfaction, for a Grand Enfant Terrible, though he instantly reminded himself of the histrionic dangers—the knickerbockered, bearded, self-satisfied, quizzing air—of the position he had won in English life. If he had forced from the public and the critics respect and hearing for his eternal questioning of their best-loved 'truths', he must never allow them to feel they were indulging the court jester. They should continue to take from him exactly the pill they did not like, and take it without the sugar of whimsy. Beneath his lined, large-featured face a certain bony determination asserted itself as he thought with satisfaction of his proved strength and independence; the habitual irony of his large dark eyes was replaced by an unusual serenity. If on occasion he mistrusted his own powers, it was not a mistrust that he intended others to share.

All the same, the Treasury letter was a pleasant reminder of the esteem in which he was held. To meet authority at its most impersonal level had been a new experience for him, and he

had felt a certain interested speculation in how far his deep convictions would carry him against the world of Kafka's 'they'. And now *that* little bogey had been exorcized with the rest! He turned once more to the letter and savoured the phraseology that satisfied by its unfamiliarity his constant thirst for new facets of human behaviour.

"Dear Sands," he read, "I am pleased to be able to tell you that official agreement has now been given to the grant for Vardon Hall. The subsidy is, as we agreed, provided for a trial period of three years, at the end of which it will be subject to review; but we accept your view that during this period of probation the committee should be autonomous. In agreeing to this, we have, of course, taken account of the fact that the authorities of the various Universities and private bodies which have lent their support to the scheme have accepted the same conditions. I understand that their agreement is based upon the memorandum that you addressed to us on May 12th of this year. As we anticipated in our last conversation, there was little disagreement with your general advocacy of the need for financial aid being given to younger writers, or with your particular arguments in favour of the purchase and maintenance of Vardon Hall as a centre to provide leisure and support for them. You were right, however, in believing that there would be greater opposition to your view that the Hall should be managed by the writers themselves and to your insistence that the committee should act only as an advisory body; in the last resort, however, feeling was quite unanimous that your own position and authority overrode any doubts that might be felt on this score. I hear that this was also the feeling of the Universities and the Arts Council. Your memorandum, in short, has been accepted in its entirety.

"The letter of protest from various local bodies, which you anticipated, was received. They were acting on behalf of a Mrs. Curry who wished to purchase Vardon Hall for use as a hotel. You may be interested to know that this protest has not been entertained.

"May I conclude by adding my personal wishes for success. After our conversations of these last months, I have inevitably

been deeply impressed by the importance which you attach to the scheme in relation to the future of English letters.

"Yours sincerely, Stephen Copperwheat."

So much, thought Bernard, for Mr. Copperwheat with whose curiously official personality relations had at first been so prickly. It was, nevertheless, very gratifying to an anarchic humanist to have the State eating out of his hand, even when the fodder was taken with such primness.

The sound of his wife's voice broke the satisfaction of his mood. Watching her descend the stairs—her eyes blinking, her hands trembling slightly—he felt an exceptional hatred of the neurotic misery which cut her off from the rest of the world. He would have been so happy to have had her share in his triumph.

Despite his knowledge that she could not really participate, "Ella, my dear," he cried, "even the Circumlocution Office has come round. The Barnacle Tites have decided to do me honour."

Ella's furrowed face twitched as she tried to focus on his words. "Have they, dear?" she said uncomprehendingly. "I'm not surprised." Then, making a supreme effort, she added, "Is it to do with Vardon Hall?"

"Yes," he said. "We're assured of the Government grant." Searching for links of memory, "It's foolish, I know," he said, "to feel so pleased, but in a way it's the first new field for so long in the barren stretches of eminence's desert. Do you remember the first notices of *Nightmare's Image* and how I could hardly take 'prep' from the excitement of it?"

But it was clear that Ella's mind could not easily return to his first novel, to the slavery of the preparatory school.

"Don't let us keep the local gentry waiting," Bernard cried hastily, a little too loudly. "The least I owe my son is his freedom to show me off to the country-gentlemen commuters. They need a Roman holiday."

At the return of the accustomed bitterness to Bernard's voice, his wife seemed about to speak, but although her lips trembled a little, she made no sound and followed him out of the front door.

As the car sped past the trim yew hedge and the carefully distanced hollyhocks of Mrs. Curry's cottage, Bernard received a blurred glimpse of her mountainous figure, seated in a cane chair

on the wide front lawn—a gigantic moored airship swaying and billowing in the light summer breeze, all a pretty pastel mauve that only emphasized the soft, cushiony flesh around it, with no satisfactory point of definition for the eye save the famous crown of red-gold hair. He felt rather than saw that she bowed a stately, old-world inclination of her swollen, baby-faced head, and guessed at the hard, sweet smile of her round, outsize blue eyes. His victory over Vardon Hall had ended, perhaps for ever, that more intimate wave of the little, fat, dimpled and beringed hand. It gave him great satisfaction that the speed of the car prevented his returning the greeting.

“For all the phoniness of that woman’s personality,” he said to his wife, “she is in some way genuinely evil. Apart, I mean, from all that play-acting psychic nonsense she puts across to frighten people.” He regretted the observation as soon as he had made it. Any suggestion of forces that were not clearly definable was one of the hundred topics that had still to be avoided in talking to Ella, although her breakdown was conventionally regarded as having come to an end six years ago.

He need, in fact, have had no anxiety. Ella was far too pre-occupied with the terror of driving the car. The doctor had insisted that she should do anything for which she felt an inclination. “She’ll find her own way back to life,” he had said solemnly; “but, whatever you do, don’t let the alarms of affection scare her off the roads she chooses.” She had no inclinations, no wishes, could find no roads to choose. However, she did feel an urgent need not to be fussed over, to be left alone; and to simulate desires of some kind seemed the best means of maintaining isolation from her nearest and dearest. The momentary expression of a wish to drive the car again—such feelings and wishes ran through Ella’s head all day in constantly changing patterns—had apparently given great pleasure to her family, the more so since the irrational guilt which they felt for her distress could in some degree be expiated by the panic that, at one time or another, they all experienced from her erratic driving. To the car, then, she was committed; and if, at times, her terror made her regret bitterly this particular road to life, she cared too little for life itself to face the bother that a public revocation would involve.

Bernard could only guess at this. Glancing for a moment at the strained, weather-beaten skin round her tight-drawn lips, the lined temples across which strands of her sun-bleached hair had straggled, he recalled telegraphically his knowledge of her inner unhealed anguish, his own complete impotence before her agony. It would, indeed, have pleased some of his critics and rivals to note that a novelist so eminent for his psychological insight should be so completely without a key to his own wife's terrors. Ella had retreated into an underground cave whose pale, albinoid flora and fauna were less real than the vast shadows they cast on the high rocky walls around her. So much he could visualize and no more. Eventually, he hoped, these pretence escapes, these illusory signs of recovery would turn into reality for her, as her gardening had, perhaps, already done. The psychiatrist would then claim chance as a well-planned victory, another of the little empirical successes that might yet make psycho-analysis the science it pretended to be. This whole reflection came to him in the code word 'Ella'; for of any memory of her before her breakdown he had now only quite occasional visions.

Satisfied that his wife had not heard his injudicious remarks, he settled down to consider the growing apprehension of evil that had begun, this summer, to disrupt his comprehension of the world. Vera Curry, an elephant figure of Mabel Lucie Attwell chubbiness before her vulgar, picturesque tea-cosy cottage, was a cinch, of course, for a symbol. Nevertheless, it was not only the dramatic contrasts of her appearance—that alone would only have been ludicrous; nor could this evil be entirely explained by her lust for money and her more sympathetic, if more repulsive, lust for men. There was beyond all this a sprawling waste of energy in malice for its own sake that could not be quite satisfactorily dismissed as thwarted power. It was not only accumulating disgust at the endless malevolence which fell in honeyed, lovey-dovey words of beauty from her cupid's-bow lips that made him feel her to be a natural destroyer, pitted against life itself. Hypocrisy, though deeply distasteful to him, was not a necessary companion of his new conception of evil. He had felt it also recently in Sherman Winter, whose stock-in-trade in the theatre world was unconcealed bullying; and in others. He

smiled as he thought of the recent reviews of his novel, *The Player Queen*. "Without losing any of his sense of life's irony, without sacrificing his honest acceptance of human tragedy and failure, Mr. Sands has at last won to a wider view of life, a realization that the real conflict lies beyond the contemporary scene. . . ." And old Grendall with his "Refreshing, if unexpected, source of renewed hope and affirmation in living. Mr. Sands has given a sadly needed testimony to the endurance of the human spirit, and he will reap his reward by finding a place in that great traditional stream of the English novel, in which the humour and the pathos of humanity are forever embodied." Even intelligent James Ramsay had capitulated. "Insistence upon values," he had written, "is now so à la mode that one inevitably anticipates insincerity, all the more sickening because it is too often unconscious. *The Player Queen* is happily at times both spiteful and frivolous, but it has, too, a note of certainty that is reflected in a more complete mastery of style." And all this, Bernard reflected with amusement, proceeded from an irrational preoccupation with evil that was probably the result of nervous anxiety. "Anyhow," he declared aloud, "I'm not going to become a Catholic, so they can put that in their pipes and smoke it." He anticipated with pleasure the disappointment they would all feel at his outmoded libertarian management of Vardon Hall. There would be none of the neo-authoritarianism, none of the imposition of dogmatic spiritual values upon the writers, for whom he had fought to secure Vardon Hall against all bidders as a comfortable and secure refuge in which to practise their art. Yet some such autocratic imposition of his personality upon the younger generation would no doubt have delighted the literary world as a fitting apogee to the career of an erstwhile humanist who had now won through—how they delighted in such Buchmanite phraseology—to a fuller, richer sense of values. Very well, he decided, he would give them not just plain liberal humanism, but something of the anarchy which had so fascinated him in his youth. He thought with relish of their future chagrin, and then reflected wryly that it would be no doubt the young writers themselves who would regret the lack of standards or dogma which he would offer them. Nor would it be only the intellectual young who would wish him