

# THE BELL

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## CHAPTER 1

DORA GREENFIELD left her husband because she was afraid of him. She decided six months later to return to him for the same reason. The absent Paul, haunting her with letters and telephone bells and imagined footsteps on the stairs had begun to be the greater torment. Dora suffered from guilt, and with guilt came fear. She decided at last that the persecution of his presence was to be preferred to the persecution of his absence.

Dora was still very young, though she vaguely thought of herself as past her prime. She came of a lower middle-class London family. Her father had died when she was nine years old, and her mother, with whom she had never got on very well, had married again. When Dora was eighteen she entered the Slade school of art with a scholarship, and had been there two years when she encountered Paul. The role of an art student suited Dora. It was indeed the only role she had ever been able whole-heartedly to play. She had been an ugly and wretched schoolgirl. As a student she grew plump and peach-like and had a little pocket money of her own, which she spent on big multi-coloured skirts and jazz records and sandals. At that time, which although it was only three years ago now seemed unimaginably remote, she had been happy. Dora, who had so lately discovered in herself a talent for happiness, was the more dismayed to find that she could be happy neither with her husband nor without him.

Paul Greenfield, who was thirteen years older than his wife, was an art historian connected with the Courtauld Institute. He came of an old family of German bankers and had money of his own. He had been born in England and attended an English public school, and preferred not to remember the distinction of his ancestors. Although his assets were never idle, he did not speak of stocks and shares. He first met Dora when he came to lecture on medieval wood-carving at the Slade.

Dora had accepted his proposal of marriage without hesi-



tation and for a great many reasons. She married him for his good taste and his flat in Knightsbridge. She married him for a certain integrity and nobility of character which she saw in him. She married him because he was so wonderfully more grown-up than her thin neurotic art-student friends. She married him a little for his money. She admired him and was extremely flattered by his attentions. She hoped, by making what her mother (who was bursting with envy) called a 'good marriage', to be able to get inside society and learn how to behave; although this was something she did not put clearly to herself at the time. She married, finally, because of the demonic intensity of Paul's desire for her. He was a passionate and poetic suitor, and something exotic in him touched Dora's imagination, starved throughout her meagre education, and unsatisfied still amid the rather childish and provincial gaieties of her student life. Dora, though insufficiently reflective to suffer from strong inferiority feelings, had never valued herself highly. She was amazed that Paul should notice her at all, and she passed quickly from this amazement to the luxurious pleasure of being able so easily to delight this subtle and sophisticated person. She never doubted that she was in love.

Once married and installed in the Knightsbridge flat, in the midst of Paul's unique collection of medieval ivories, Dora set about the business of being happy, at first with success. But as time went on, she discovered that it was not so easy as she had imagined to grow into being Paul's wife. She had been beckoned on by a vision of Dora the cultivated woman; but after a year of being Mrs Greenfield she was already finding her ideal too difficult and was even beginning to dislike it. Paul had assumed that she would wish to give up her art studies, and she had given them up with some regret. But since she was lazy, and had in any case shown few signs of talent, she was also relieved. Paul, whose courting had upset the régime of his work, now safely wed resumed his studies with the single-mindedness which Dora so much admired. During long hours when Paul was at the Courtauld or the British Museum Dora found time on her hands. She endeavoured to keep the flat, where she did not dare to disturb

any object, meticulously clean. She made long preparations for dinner parties for Paul's friends; on such occasions Paul usually did the cooking. She enjoyed these things, but without feeling that they were really what she wanted to do. The elated confidence which Paul's love had given her at first began to ebb. It seemed to her that Paul was urging her to grow up, and yet had left her no space to grow up into. He wanted to teach her everything himself, but lacked the time and the patience to do so. Though a natural devourer of the women's magazines and an indefatigable tester of 'accessories', she did not even know how to dress herself any more. She abandoned the big skirts and the sandals. But after annoying Paul with a number of mistakes, she purchased one or two safe expensive outfits, which she thought extremely dull, and then stopped buying clothes altogether. Nor was she easily able to spend her money on anything else because of a haunting uncertainty about her taste. She began to suspect that Paul thought her the tiniest bit vulgar.

She liked Paul's friends though they alarmed her. They were all very clever and much older than her and had clever wives who alarmed her even more. They treated her with a protective bantering condescension. She discovered that one or two of them were under the impression that she had been a ballet dancer, and this seemed to her significant. She was invited with Paul to their houses but never got to know them well. When one man, a violinist, had taken a more personal interest in Dora and had delighted her by asking about her childhood, Paul had been very jealous and unpleasant, and they had not seen the man again. Before their marriage Paul had warned Dora that they were likely to quarrel; but he had added that when one was really in love fighting was half the fun of being married. The quarrels, which began soon enough, brought no pleasure to Dora. They left her humiliated and exhausted.

Dora began to see more of her old friends, especially Sally, a girl slightly younger than herself, who was still at the Slade. She began to feel, half apologetically and half defiantly, that she was still very juvenile. It used to delight her that the art students all called Paul 'Sir'; now it seemed up-

setting. Sally asked her to join a party going to the Slade dance. Paul detested dances. After some pleading she went alone, and arrived back at six in the morning. Dora was unable to be exact about time or anything else. Paul greeted her with a scene whose violence terrified her. From this moment on she began to be afraid of him. Yet withal she did not judge him. A certain incapacity for 'placing' others stood her here in the lieu of virtue. She learned to coax him or to withstand him mutely, cherishing herself, and although she conspicuously lacked self-knowledge, became in the face of this threatening personality increasingly aware that she existed.

Paul wanted children, or at least a child, in the decisive and possessive way in which he wanted all the objects which he drew into his life. The sense of family was strong in him and he preserved an ancestral nostalgia for the dignity and ceremonial of kinship. He yearned for a son, a little Paul whom he could instruct and encourage, and finally converse with as an equal and even consult as a rival intelligence. Dora however was alarmed at the thought of children. She felt in no way prepared for them; though it was typical of the paralysis which affected her dealings with Paul that she made no effort to prevent conception. Had she been able to examine her lot more dispassionately she might have felt that a child would give her an independence and a status in Paul's *entourage* which she now sadly lacked. It was in her to become a prompt and opinionated mother to whom even Paul would defer. As a child-wife she irritated him continually by the vitality for which he had married her: motherhood would have invested her no doubt with some more impersonal significance drawn from the past. But Dora had no taste for such genealogical dignities, and deliberately to commit herself thus was not in her nature. Though so much under Paul's sway, she depended, like some unprotesting but significantly mobile creature, upon the knowledge of her instant ability to whisk away. To have to abandon this animal readiness by becoming two people was a prospect that Dora could not face. She did not face it. Although to the pain of Paul and his friends the expression 'let's face it', acquired in her student days, was still frequently on her lips, she was not in fact ca-

pable, at the moment, of confronting her situation at all.

That Paul was a violent man had been clear to Dora from the start. Indeed it was one of the things which had attracted her to him. He had a sort of virile authority which her boyish contemporaries could never have. He was not exactly handsome, but had a strong appearance with almost black dry hair and a dark drooping moustache which made Dora think of him as Southern. His nose was too large and his mouth inclined to harshness, but his eyes were very pale and snake-like and had fluttered other hearts at the Slade besides Dora's. She had liked to see in him something taut and a little ruthless, especially when he had been at her feet. She had enjoyed her role of a teasing yet pliant mistress; and Paul had delighted her by the revelation of a sophisticated sexuality and a fierceness of passion which made the friendlovers of her student days seem insipid. Yet now she began to see his power with a difference. She was at last disturbed by the violent and predatory gestures with which he destroyed the rhythms of her self-surrender. Something gentle and gay had gone out of her life.

After a while Dora stopped telling Paul everything that she did during the day. She saw friends whom she knew he would dislike. Among them was Noel Spens, a young reporter, who was in fact a slight acquaintance of Paul's, and whose accurate mockery of her husband Dora accepted with vehement protests, knowing it eased something in her heart. Dora did not approve of her behaviour. But the temptation to escape from Paul's elegant and untouchable flat to go drinking with Noel or Sally was simply too great. Dora drank more and enjoyed it. As she was too careless to be a successful deceiver Paul soon became suspicious. He laid traps into which she fell, and there were angry words. Seriously upset, he oscillated between brutality and sentimentality in a way which Dora found frightening and disgusting. She felt ashamed of her erratic behaviour and promised amendment. But the taste for company wherein, as she felt, she could be herself was now too strong. Incapable of consistency or calculation she moved frankly and apologetically from one policy to another and back again.

She saw more of Noel Spens and his circle of easy-going hard-drinking friends. She began to develop, in ways very different from what she had once intended, a certain sophistication. At home, Paul flayed her with reproaches which she knew to be just. She tried to explain to him why she was unhappy, but she was incoherent and he exasperated. Paul knew exactly what he wanted. He told her, 'I want to do my work and be married to you. I want to fill your life as you fill mine.' She felt herself brow-beaten by the energy of his purpose and humiliated by his refusal to understand her complaints. As she was unused to judging others with precision or analysing them in her thoughts she could neither satisfy Paul nor defend herself. At last, obeying that conception of fatality which served her instead of a moral sense, she left him.

She went at first to her mother, with whom she soon quarrelled. When Paul was convinced that she had really gone he sent her a meticulous and characteristic letter. 'You realize I have no legal obligations. But I have arranged for forty pounds a month to be paid into your bank account until such time as you come to your senses and return to me. I don't want you to live in penury. On the other hand, you can hardly expect me to support you lavishly in a state of demoralized and brutish debauch, and shortly no doubt in adultery. You are fortunate to be able to know that my love for you remains unaltered.' Dora decided to refuse the money but accepted it. She moved into a room in Chelsea. It was not long before she began to have a love affair with Noel Spens.

When Dora first escaped from Knightsbridge and from the routine of evening bickering with Paul she felt intense relief. But she soon realized she had no other life to escape into. She became vaguely dependent on Noel Spens, who turned out to be a gentle and considerate person. Noel said to her, 'Darling, come live with me and be my love, on condition that you keep it in mind that I am the most frivolous man in the world.' Dora knew he said this just to calm her nerves, but she was grateful all the same, and her nerves were calmed. She lived in an atmosphere of factitious and self-conscious

frivolity, picturing herself as an irresponsible Bohemian. That she had deeply hurt Paul she tried not to remember. Memory was something for which Dora had little use. But she was too conventional a person not to feel painfully guilty and embarrassed at her situation. She struggled to recapture her gaiety. She began to feel frightened that Paul would come and drag her back violently or make a scene with Noel. Paul did not in fact pursue her, but wrote her regular weekly letters of reproach. She felt in these letters, with a certain despair, the demonic energy of his will bent always upon her. She knew he would never give her up. She passed the summer drinking and dancing and making love and spending Paul's allowance on multi-coloured skirts and sandals and jazz records. Then in early September she decided to go back to him.

Paul had been in the country since July. He was working, he told her, in one of his letters which she had never answered, on some fourteenth-century manuscripts of enormous interest which belonged to an Anglican convent in Gloucestershire. He was the guest of a lay religious community which lived beside the convent. It was a beautiful place. Dora who, though touched by his faithfulness, just glanced his letters quickly through to see if they contained threats and tore them up at once so as not to have to see his handwriting any longer, had gathered very little about where he was except the name. The convent was called Imber Abbey, and the house where Paul was staying was called Imber Court. So it was to this address that Dora wrote her laborious letter, half penitent and half aggrieved, to announce that she was proposing to return to her husband.

She received by return of post from Paul a cold and business-like note saying that he would expect her on Tuesday, she should catch the 4.56 stopping train from Paddington and would be met by car at Pendelcote. He enclosed the key of the flat, in case she had lost hers. Would she kindly bring his Italian sun hat and dark glasses, and also the blue note-book which she would find in the top drawer of his desk. Dora, who had been moved by her own letter, felt that not enough was being made of the occasion. She had ex-

pected Paul to come running up to London to receive her. She had not expected to be summoned curtly into the country. Alarm overtook her too at the thought of meeting Paul again in such strange surroundings. What, in any case, was a lay religious community? Dora's ignorance of religion, as of most things, was formidable. She had never in fact been able to distinguish religion from superstition, and had given up her own practice of it when she discovered that she could say the Lord's Prayer quickly but not slowly. She lost such faith as she had without pain and had not had occasion to re-consider the matter. She wondered if Paul took part in the religion down there. They had been married very grandly, though amid some ironic glances from Paul's friends, in church. For Paul had followed his father and grandfather in wishing to anglicize himself as much as possible where matters of class and religion were concerned. It had taken Dora some time to realize this, and when she had done so it increased for her the unreality of their relationship. Moreover the contempt of Paul as a Christian was even harder to bear than his contempt as a *savant*, since that aspect of him was for poor Dora even less penetrable. Did Paul believe in God? Dora did not know. As her thoughts now conjured up the reality of Paul and as her imagination played at last upon the fact that he had really existed all through this strange interval, and had continued his life, thinking about her and judging her, her heart sank utterly. She decided not to go.

She returned to her former resolve after discussions with Sally, who disliked Noel, and had always been, Dora suspected, rather sweet on Paul, and with Noel, who was by now thoroughly worried about Dora's state of mind and about what was to be done with her. Dora fetched the things from Knightsbridge, with a fast-beating heart as she opened the door of the flat and saw the familiar accusing scene, florid and unchanged, except for the dust and the smell of absence. She collected some of her own clothes at the same time. Her flight had been not totally unpremeditated but quite unorganized. By the time Tuesday came, fear of seeing Paul again overwhelmed all other emotions. She cried all the way to Paddington in Noel's car.

It was a relentlessly hot day. They arrived in good time for the 4.56 but the train was already in the station and fairly full. Noel found her a corner seat on the corridor side and lifted her large case onto the rack, placing on top of it the paper bag containing Paul's Italian straw sun hat. Dora dropped her smaller canvas bag on the seat and got out on to the platform with Noel. They looked at each other.

'Don't stay,' said Dora.

'Your teeth are chattering,' said Noel. 'At least I assume that's what they're doing. I've never witnessed this phenomenon before.'

'Oh, shut up!' said Dora.

'Cheer up, darling,' said Noel. 'You look the picture of misery. After all, if you hate it you can come away. You're a free agent.'

'Am I?' said Dora. 'All right, all right, I've got a handkerchief. Now please go.'

They stood holding hands. Noel was a very big man with a pale unwrinkled face and pale colourless hair. With his look of gentle awkward bland amiability he was like a large teddy bear. He smiled down upon Dora, wanting to be sympathetic without humouring her mood. 'Write to Uncle Noel, won't you?'

'If I can,' said Dora.

'Come, come,' said Noel. 'Don't be tragic. Above all, don't let those people make you feel guilty. No good ever comes of that.' He put his hands under her elbows and lifted her for a moment off the ground. They kissed. 'Give my love to Paul!'

'Hell. Goodbye.'

Dora got into the train. It was now very full indeed and people were sitting four a side. Before she sat down she inspected herself quickly in the mirror. In spite of all her awful experiences she looked good. She had a round well-formed face and a large mouth that liked to smile. Her eyes were a dark slaty blue and rather long and large. Art had darkened but not thinned her vigorous triangular eyebrows. Her hair was golden brown and grew in long flat strips down the side of her head, like ferns growing down a rock. This was attractive. Her figure was by no means what it had been.



She turned towards her seat. A large elderly lady shifted a little to make room. Feeling fat and hot in the smart featureless coat and skirt which she had not worn since the spring, Dora squeezed herself in. She hated the sensation of another human being wedged against her side. Her skirt was very tight. Her high-heeled shoes were tight too. She could feel her own perspiration and was beginning to smell that of others. It was a devilish hot day. She reflected all the same that she was lucky to have a seat, and with a certain satisfaction watched the corridor fill up with people who had no seats.

Another elderly lady, struggling though the crush, reached the door of Dora's carriage and addressed her neighbour. 'Ah, there you are, dear, I thought you were nearer the front.' They looked at each other rather gloomily, the standing lady leaning at an angle through the doorway, her feet trapped in a heap of luggage. They began a conversation about how they had never seen the train so full.

Dora stopped listening because a dreadful thought had struck her. She ought to give up her seat. She rejected the thought, but it came back. There was no doubt about it. The elderly lady who was standing looked very frail indeed, and it was only proper that Dora, who was young and healthy should give her seat to the lady who could then sit next to her friend. Dora felt the blood rushing to her face. She sat still and considered the matter. There was no point in being hasty. It was possible of course that while clearly admitting that she ought to give up her seat she might nevertheless simply not do so out of pure selfishness. This would in some ways be a better situation than what would have been the case if it had simply not occurred to her at all that she ought to give up her seat. On the other side of the seated lady a man was sitting. He was reading his newspaper and did not seem to be thinking about his duty. Perhaps if Dora waited it would occur to the man to give his seat to the other lady? Unlikely. Dora examined the other inhabitants of the carriage. None of them looked in the least uneasy. Their faces, if not already buried in books, reflected the selfish glee which had probably been on her own a moment