THE WRONG SET

and other stories

by

Angus Wilson

RECOMMENDED BY THE BOOK SOCIETY

THE WRONG SET

THE WRONG SET

and other stories

by

ANGUS WILSON

LONDON
SECKER & WARBURG
1961

MARTIN SECKER & WARBURG LTD.
7 John Street, Bloomsbury, London, W.C.1.

First published March 1949
Reprinted April 1949
Reprinted June 1949
Reprinted December 1950
Reprinted 1957
Reprinted 1961

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY BUTLER & TANNER LTD., FROME AND LONDON

To

BENTLEY AND IAN

in gratitude

"Mother's Sense of Fun" and "Crazy Crowd" were first published in *Horizon* and "Real-politik" in *The Listener*.

CONTENTS

Fresh Air Fiend

IT had rained heavily the night before and many of the flowers in the herbaceous border lay flattened and crushed upon the ground. The top-heavy oriental poppies had fared worst; their hairy stalks were broken and twisted, and their pink and scarlet petals were scattered around like discarded material in a dressmaker's shop. But they were poor blowsy creatures anyway, thought Mrs. Searle, the vulgar and the ostentatious survive few blows. Nevertheless she chose sticks and bast from the large trug which she trailed behind her, and carefully tied the bent heads, cutting off the broken ones with the secateurs. It was at once one of the shames and one of the privileges of gardening, she thought, that one was put in this godlike position of judgment, deciding upon what should live and what should be cast into outer darkness, delivering moral judgments and analogies. It was only by a careful compensation, an act of retribution, such as preserving the poppies she had condemned, that she could avoid too great an arrogance. She fingered the velvety leaves of the agrostemma sensuously, there were so few flowers of exactly that shade of rich crimson, and how gloriously they lay against their silver foliage. There should be more of them next year—but less, she decided, of the scarlet lychnis, there was nothing more disappointing than a flower spike on which too few blooms appeared. Ragged, meagre and dowdy for all their bright colours, like the wife of the Warden of St. Jude's. How depressing that one still remembered that dispiriting little woman

sitting there talking in her slight North country accent, and dressed in that absurd scarlet suit.

"Your signature on this petition, Mrs. Searle, would be such a help. If we University women can give a lead. . . . I mean we've all too easily decided that war is inevitable, it's only by thinking so that we make it, you know." "Of course", she had found herself answering mockingly "who can understand that better than I? You don't remember the last war, but I do. Those hundreds of Belgians, each without a right arm. Oh! it was terrible". The ridiculous little woman had looked so puzzled that she had been unable to resist embroidering. "Don't you know Belgium then?" she had said. "Not a man there to-day with a right arm, and very few with right eyes. Those were all gouged out with hot irons before the Kaiser himself. To make a Roman holiday, of course". The woman had gone away offended. Silly little creature, with all her petitions she had been most anxious to prove her ardour in the war when it came, although of course like everyone in Oxford she had been perfectly safe. How they had all talked of the terrible raids, and how they had all kept out of them. At least she had preserved her integrity. "Thousands killed brutally in London last night" she had said to the Master "and everyone of us preserved intact. What a glorious mercy!" They thought she was mad, and so she was, of course, judged by their wretched middle class norm. "I hereby faithfully swear once more" she said aloud "that I will make no compromise, and I utterly curse them from henceforth. May no wife of any fellow in either of the major Universities be fecund, nor may the illicit unions of research students be blessed", and she added maliciously "May the stream of sherry so foolishly imported by this present government be dried up, so that there may be no more 'little

sherry parties'." It was monstrous when things of importance—spirits for example—were in short demand—though what such jargon really meant one was at a loss to understand—that such frivolities as sherry parties should be indulged.

Suddenly she could hear that other voice inside her speaking slowly and distinctly, counting in the old, familiar fashion—two bottles of gin in the trunk in the attic, two in the garden shed, one in the bureau, she had the key to that, and then one in the bottom of her wardrobe with the shell mending box. The bureau one was a bit risky, Henry occasionally used that, but with the key in her possession . . . six bottles in all. I'll send Henry down with that girl to the pub for a drink before lunch and they'll be out walking this afternoon, she decided. It had seemed as though the girl's presence would make things difficult, Henry had obviously hoped so when he had invited her, but by retiring early and leaving them to talk it had been managed. . . .

The voice shut off and Mrs. Searle gave zealous attention to the flowers once more. The clumps of lupins were massed like an overpainted sunset—anchovy, orange and lemon against skyblue—only the very top of their spikes had been bent and hung like dripping candles. The crests of the delphiniums were broken too, and the petals lay around pale iceblue and dark blue like scattered boat race favours. Mrs. Searle shrank back as she surveyed the tall verbascums; their yellow flowers were covered in caterpillars, many of which had been drowned or smashed by the rain, their bodies now dried and blackening in the hot sun. "Miss Eccles, Miss Eccles" she called "are you good with caterpillars?"

A very tall young woman got up from a deck chair on the lawn and moved lopingly across to the flower bed;

the white linen trousers seemed to accentuate her lumbering gait and her ungainly height; her thin white face was cut sharply by the line of her hard, vermilion lipstick; her straight, green-gold hair was worn long at the neck. "I'll see what I can do, Mrs. Searle" she said, and began rapidly to pick off the insects. "But you *are* good with caterpillars" said Miranda Searle. "It's a gift, of course, like being good with children. I'm glad to say that I hold each in equal abhorrence. Don't you think the verbascum very beautiful? I do, but then it's natural I *should* like them. I share their great quality of spikiness". If you were covered with caterpillars, thought Elspeth Eccles, I wouldn't budge an inch to remove them, I should laugh like hell. She had always believed that absolute sincerity was the only basis for human relationships, and she felt convinced that a little truth telling would work wonders with Mrs. Searle's egotistical artificiality, but somehow she shrank from the experiment of telling her hostess what she really thought of her spikiness, there was no doubt that for all her futility and selfishness she was a little daunting. It was the difference of age, of course, and the unfair superiority of riches, but still she preferred to change the topic. "What are those red and blue flowers with the light foliage?" she asked. "Linum" replied Mrs. Searle. "You know—'Thou wilt not quench the burning flax, nor hurt the bruiséd reed', only that doesn't sound quite right". "It certainly seems a little meaningless" commented Elspeth. "Oh! I should hope so" said Mrs. Searle. "It's religious. You surely wouldn't wish a religious sentiment to have a meaning. It wouldn't be at all edifying. I doubt if it would even be proper". Elspeth smiled to herself in the conviction of her own private creed. "No, it's the phrase 'bruiséd reed' that I detest" said Mrs. Searle. "It reminds me too much of 'broken

reed'. Have you ever been in the W.V.S.?" she went on. "Oh blessed generation! Well, *I* have. Henry made me join the Oxford W.V.S. during the war, he said it was my duty. A curious sort of duty, I did nothing but serve cups of sweet dishwater to men with bad teeth. But what I was thinking of was the way all the women talked in clichés—throughout the winter they described themselves as 'chilly mortals', and whenever anyone failed to do some particularly absurd task, as I frequently did, they called them 'broken reeds'. But I am keeping you from your work, Miss Eccles" she went on "and Henry will never forgive that. It must be wonderful for you both to have a common interest in so many vulgar people. Though perhaps in the case of the Shelley circle, as I believe it's called—it is Shelley you're working on?"—It was the seventh time in five days that she had asked the question, Elspeth noted—"as I say in the case of the Shelleys it is more their priggish refinement than their vulgarity that revolts me".

"Perhaps it's their basic honesty you dislike" said Elspeth. "Very likely" said Mrs. Searle "I hadn't realized that they were particularly honest. But if that were so, of course, I should certainly dislike it. How very nice it must be to know things, Miss Eccles, and go about hitting nails on the head like that. But seriously, you mustn't let me keep you from the Shelleys and their orgy of honesty". On Elspeth's assurance that she would like to remain with her, Mrs. Searle suggested that they should go together to gather gooseberries in the kitchen garden.

Elspeth watched her depart to collect a basin from the house. It was difficult, she thought, to believe that people had once spoken of her as the "incomparable Miranda". Of course the very use of such names suggested an

affected gallantry for which the world no longer had time, but, apart from that, the almost Belsen-like emaciation of figure and features, the wild, staring eyes and the whispy hair that defied control hardly suggested a woman who had inspired poets and tempted young diplomats; a woman whose influence had reached beyond University society to the world of literary London, rivalling even Ottoline Morrell herself. A faint look of distressed beauty about the haggard eyes, an occasional turn of the head on that swanlike neck were all that remained to recall her famed beauty, and even these reminded one too much of the Lavery portraits. No, decidedly, she thought it was all too easily described by one of Mrs. Searle's own favourite words—"grotesque". Of the famous charm too, there were only rare flashes, and how like condescension it was when it came, as in some ornate fairy story of the 'nineties when the princess gives one glimpse of heaven to the poor poet as her coach passes by. That may have been how Rupert Brooke and Flecker liked things, but it wouldn't have done to-day. That crabbed irony and soured, ill natured malice, those carefully administered snubs to inferiors and juniors, could that have been the wit that had made her the friend of Firbank and Lytton Strachey? It seemed impossible that people could have tolerated such arrogance, have been content with such triviality. It was unfair, probably, to judge a galleon by a washed up wreck. There was no doubt that at some period Miranda Searle had strayed, was definitely *détraquée*. Even her old friends in Oxford had dropped her, finding the eccentricity, the egotism, the rudeness insupportable. But to Elspeth it seemed that such a decline could not be excused by personal grief, other mothers had had only sons killed in motor accidents and had lived again, other women had been

confined to provincial lives and had kept their charity. It was monstrous that a man of the intellectual calibre of Henry Searle, a man whose work was so important should be chained to this living corpse. She had heard stories already of Mrs. Searle's secret drinking and had been told of some of the humiliating episodes in which she had involved her husband, but it was not until this visit to their Somerset cottage that she had realized how continuous, how slowly wearing his slavery must be. On the very first night she had heard from her bedroom a voice raised in obscenities, a maundering whine. She had guessed—how right she had been—that this was one of the famous drinking bouts. It had enabled her to see clearly why it was that Henry Searle was slowly withdrawing from University life, why the publication of the last volume of Peacock's letters was delayed from year to year, why the projected life of Mary Shelley remained a dream. It was her duty, she had decided then, to aid him in fighting the incubus, her duty to English letters, her return for all the help he had given to her own labours. But how difficult it was to help anyone so modest and retiring, anyone who had evaded life for so long. She had decided, at last, that it would be easier to start the other end, to put the issue fairly and squarely before Mrs. Searle herself. If there was any truth in the excuse of her defenders, if it was in fact the shock of her son's sudden death, then surely she could be made to see that the living could not be sacrificed to the dead in that way. And yet, and yet, one hesitated to speak, it was the last day of the visit and nothing had been said. "It's now or never, Elspeth Eccles" she said aloud.

"My dear, Miss Eccles" her hostess drawled. "How this cheers me! To hear you talk to yourself. I was just beginning to feel daunted. Here she is, I thought, the

representative of the 'hungry generations'—straightforward, ruled by good sense, with no time for anything but the essential—and they're going to 'tread me down'. How can I? I thought, with all my muddled thinking and my inhibitions—only the other day that new, young physics tutor was telling me about them—how can I resist them? It seemed almost inhuman! And then I hear you talking to yourself. It's all right, I breathe again. The chink in another's armour, the mote in our brother's eyes, how precious they are! what preservers of Christian charity!" "That doesn't sound a very well-adjusted view of life" said Elspeth, in what she hoped was a friendly and humorous voice.

"Doesn't it?" said Miranda. "So many people say that to me and I'm sure you're all quite right. Only the words don't seem to connect in my mind and I do think that's so important, in deciding whether to think a thing or not, I mean. If I don't connect the words, then I just don't have the thought. And 'adjusted' never connects with 'life' for me, only with 'shoulder strap'."

With her wide brimmed straw hat, flowing sleeved chiffon dress, and her constantly shaking long earrings, Mrs. Searle looked like a figure at the Theatrical Garden Party. Laying down the box of Army and Navy Stores cigarettes which was her constant companion, she began rapidly to pick the gooseberries from the thorny bushes.

"Put them all into that bowl will you" she said, a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. "I want Mrs. Parry to make a fool so we shall need a good number of them."

"Why do you need more to make a fool?" asked Elspeth. "Because of the sieving," said Miranda shortly and contemptuously.

The two women picked on in silence for some minutes.