



The Takeover

A parable of the pagan seventies

Muriel
park



Penguin Books
The Takeover

Muriel Spark was born and educated in Edinburgh, and spent some years in Central Africa. She returned to Britain during the war and worked in the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. She subsequently edited two poetry magazines, and her published works include critical biographies of nineteenth-century figures, and editions of nineteenth-century letters. Her *Collected Poems 1* and *Collected Stories 1* were published in 1967. Since she won an *Observer* short-story competition in 1951 her creative writings have achieved international recognition (they are published in twenty different languages). Among many other awards she has received the Italia Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. She was awarded the O.B.E. in 1967.

Mrs Spark became a Roman Catholic in 1954. She has one son.

Her first novel, *The Comforters*, was published in 1957 and this was followed by *Robinson* (1958), *The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories* (1958), *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Bachelors* (1960), *Voices at Play* (1961), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), adaptations of which have enjoyed long and successful runs on the stage and the screen, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), *The Public Image* (1968), *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971), *The House by the East River* (1973), *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), and *The Takeover* (1976).

Her play *Doctors of Philosophy* was first produced in London in 1962 and published in 1963.

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Chapter One

At Nemi, that previous summer, there were three new houses of importance to the surrounding district. One of them was new in the strict sense; it had been built from the very foundations on cleared land where no other house had stood, and had been planned, plotted, discussed with an incomprehensible lawyer, and constructed, over a period of three years and two months ('and seven days, three hours and twenty minutes,' the present occupant would add. 'Three years, two months, seven days, three hours and twenty minutes from the moment of Maggie giving the go-ahead to the moment we moved in. I timed it. God, how I timed it!')

The other two houses were reconstructions of buildings already standing or half-standing; both had foundations of Roman antiquity, and of earlier origin if you should dig down far enough, it was said. Maggie Radcliffe had bought these two, and the land on which she had put up the third house.

One was intended eventually for her son, Michael; **that was** the farm-house. He was to live in it when he got married.

Maggie herself was never there that previous summer, was reputed to be there, was never seen, had been, had gone, was coming soon, had just departed for Lausanne, for London.

Hubert Mallindaine, in the new-built house, had news of Maggie; had seen, had just missed, Maggie; had had a long discussion with Maggie; was always equipped to discuss knowledgeably the ins and outs of Maggie's life. He had been for years Maggie's friend number one and her central information agent.

The third house had been a large villa in bad repair. It was now in good repair, sitting in handsome grounds, with a tennis court, a swimming-pool, the old lily-pond made wholesome and the lawns newly greened. Maggie could do everything. But it had taken years and years. The Italian sense of time and Maggie's

lack of concentration due to her family troubles and involvements had held things up. But the villa, too, was ready the previous summer. In an access of financial morality, although was quite unnecessary, Maggie had decided to let this house for a monthly rent to a rich businessman. She didn't need the money but it put Maggie in a regular sort of position. Her present husband, Ralph Radcliffe, who also had money and never thought of anything else, had less justification to resent the whole idea when he could be reminded that Maggie was drawing a rent from one of the houses. This was the summer when it was said Maggie's marriage was going on the rocks.

Hubert Mallindaine's terrace had a view of the lake and the Alban hills folding beyond.

Hubert needed the best view: he had so encamped himself in his legend that Maggie had not questioned that he was entitled to the view. His secretaries from their bedrooms also had splendid views.

There were four secretaries that summer: Damian Runciwell, Kurt Hakens, Lauro Moretti, Ian Mackay. Only one, Damian, did the secretarial work.

'We can't stay here all summer, darling.'

'Darling, why not? I hate to travel.'

'Take off those earrings before you open the door to the butcher.'

'Darling, why?'

'Did you remember the garlic?'

'My dear Kurt-o, we do not need garlic today.'

'Ian, we do . . . The salad.'

'Dearie, we have a clove of garlic for the salad. More garlic we do not need today.'

'Oh, get out of my kitchen. Go on. You make me nervous.'

'My boredom,' said Hubert Mallindaine, the master of the house, 'makes you all look so tawdry.' He was addressing the others at the lunch table. 'Forgive me that I feel that way.'

'Feel what you like,' said one of them, 'but you shouldn't say it.'

'The mushrooms are soggy. They have been done in oil. Too

much oil, too. They should have been done in butter and oil. Very little butter, very little oil.'

There was a heatwave so fierce you would have thought someone had turned it on somewhere by means of a tap, and had turned it too high, and then gone away for the summer.

Hubert lay on the sofa in his study and deplored Maggie's comparative lack of chivalry. It was siesta time and his room had been made dark. Hubert decided to talk to Maggie about air-conditioning. But this decision annoyed him. One should not find oneself in the position, he thought, of having to ask, having to wait for the opportunity to talk on practical matters with a woman of no routine. She might progress into the neighbourhood, looking gorgeous, at any moment, without advance notice. She had no sense of chivalry. A protectress of chivalry would not have left him dependent on her personal bounty for little things; Maggie should have made a settlement. Even the house, he thought, as he lay on the sofa at the onslaught of that previous summer, is not in one's own name but in Maggie's. One has no claim to anything. Something might happen to Maggie and one would have no claim. She could be killed in an air crash. Hubert, staring at the ceiling, pulled a hair from his beard, and the twinge of pain confirmed and curiously consoled the thought. It was unlikely that anything would happen to Maggie. She was indestructible.

Chapter Two

'Miss Thin,' Hubert said, 'I wish you would not try to use your intelligence because you have so little of it. Just do as I say. Put them in date order.'

'I thought you would want to keep the personal separate from the professional,' said Pauline Thin belligerently. 'That would be the logical way.'

'There is no distinction between the two so far as I'm concerned,' Hubert said, looking, with a horror that had no connection whatsoever with Pauline Thin, at the great trunkfuls

of old letters still to be gone through. Masses of old, old letters are very upsetting to contemplate, each one containing a world of past trivialities or passions forever pending. The surprise of words once overlooked and meanings newly realized, the record of debts unpaid or overpaid, of boredom unrequited or sweetness forever lost, came rising up to Hubert from the open boxes.

'Put them in chronological order,' Hubert said, 'a bundle for each year, then break each bundle up into months. That's all you have to do. Don't read them through and through, it's a waste of your working hours.'

'Mine not to reason why,' Pauline Thin answered, pulling towards her a pile of letters which she had set on the table.

'Yours is to reason why,' Hubert said. 'You can reason as much as you like if you know how to do it. You're free and I'm free to reason about anything. Only keep it to yourself. Don't waste my time. Don't ask me for the reasons. Just put them in order of dates.'

Hubert walked to the door and went out to the shady verandah overlooking the lake. It was a warm day for March. Spring was ready. He thought maybe he had better try to get on well with the girl and start calling her Pauline. She already called him Hubert without the asking. His nerves were edgy since, at the beginning of the year, a sequence of financial misfortunes had begun to fall upon him, unexpectedly, shock after shock. Hubert thought of these setbacks as 'curious' and 'unexpected' although, he would presently be brought to reflect, they had not been actually unforeseeable and were linked by no stronger force of coincidence than Maggie's second divorce and a new marriage to an Italian nobleman, probably jealous, and to the deterioration of money in general, and the collapse of a shady company in Switzerland where Hubert had put some of his personal money in the hope of making a fortune. He didn't know quite what to do. But he had one resource. Its precise application was still forming in his mind and wandering lonely as a cloud, and meantime he was short of funds.

The very panorama of Nemi, the lake, the most lush vegetation on earth, the scene which had stirred the imagination of Sir James Frazer at the beginning of his massive testament to

comparative religion, *The Golden Bough*, all this magical influence and scene which had never before failed in their effects, all the years he had known the place and in the months he had lived there, suddenly was too expensive. I can't afford the view, thought Hubert and turned ^{his} back into the room.

The sight of Pauline stacking the papers gave him a slight euphoric turn. There, among the letters and documents of his life, he had that one secret resource and he had decided to exploit it. Maggie could never take Nemi away from him because, spiritually if not actually, the territory of Nemi was his.

Actually, of course, not even the house was his. Maggie was . . . Maggie had been . . . Maggie, Maggie . . .

Pauline Thin was reading one of the letters. Sometimes when a letter was undated it was necessary for her to read it for a clue as to its appropriate place in the various piles of correspondence set out on the table. But Pauline was reading with a happy sort of interest and Hubert was not sure that he could afford Pauline Thin's happiness in her work, seeing she was theoretically paid by the hour. He was not sure, because on the one hand she was paid very little by the hour, and, further, she was greatly to be trusted and he relied on her now more than ever; he was not sure, on the other hand, if he could afford her at all, because, moreover, he owed her a lot of hours' pay, the debt increasing every hour in proportion as the likelihood decreased of his ever discharging it.

Hubert glanced back again at Pauline with her tiny face and her curly hair and felt the absence, now, of Ian, the boy from Inverness, and Damian, the Armenian boy with the curious surname of Runciwell who, as secretary, had been ^{the best} the best secretary, and he missed the other two with their petulance and their demands, their talents for cooking or interior ^{to be} design, their earrings and their neck-chains and their tight blue jeans and twin-apple behinds, fruit of the same tree. He felt their absence without specified regret; it was their kind he missed. Their departure was a fact which still paralysed him, belonging to a time so recent and yet so definitely last summer, in the past.

The morning news had announced the death of Noël Coward, calling it 'the passing of an era'. Everything since Maggie's sud-

den divorce and equally sudden Italian marriage last year had been to Hubert the passing of an era. Eras pass, thought Hubert. They pass every day. He felt dejected. He cheered up. Then he felt dejected again.

He glanced back at Miss Thin. She had finished reading the apparently absorbing letter and was bending with her back to him over the table stacking the piles of documents neatly. She was broad in the behind, too large. Where is the poetry of my life? Hubert thought. He retained an inkling that the poetry was still there and would return. Wordsworth defined poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Hubert took a tranquillizer, quite a mild one called Mitigil, and knew he would feel better in about ten minutes. To make sure, he took another. In the meantime a familiar white car turned into the drive and stopped before it reached the door. 'Oh God, it's him,' Hubert said and turning to Pauline Thin he called out, 'Miss Thin, this is a tiresome person. Please hang around and keep on bothering me with letters to sign. Remind me emphatically that I have a dinner date this evening. I'll give him one drink. This man's a pathological pest.'

The girl came out to see who had arrived. A medium-sized thin man in a clerical suit had got out of the car, had slammed the door and was walking towards them, smiling and waving.

'He's a Jesuit,' said Hubert, 'from Milwaukee.'

'I've seen him before,' Pauline said. 'He pesters everyone.'

'I know,' Hubert said, feeling friendly towards Miss Thin. He stepped forward a little way to meet the priest.

'Oh, Hubert, this is wonderful to find you in,' said the priest in a voice that twanged like a one-stringed guitar. 'I just drove from Rome as I wanted to talk to you.'

'How are you?' said Hubert politely. 'I'm afraid I'm going to be a bit pressed for time. If you'd have phoned me I could have made a date for you to come to dinner.'

'Oh, oh, are you going out . . . ?'

'About sevenish,' said Hubert putting on a weak smile. It was then sixish. 'I have to go and change soon' - Hubert indicated his old clothes - 'out of these things. Have you met Pauline Thin? - Pauline, this is Father Cuthbert Plaice.'

'Why, I think I know you, Pauline,' said the priest, shaking her

hand and, it seemed, trying to locate her in his social register.

'I worked for Bobby Lester in Rome,' Pauline said.

'Why, of course! Yes. Well, now you're here?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Hubert, I've got a Jesuit friend down there in the car,' said the priest, 'that I want you to meet. I thought you would like to meet him, he's been studying the ancient ecological cults and in fact he's taken some tape recordings of modern nature-cultists which you have to hear. There are the conscious and the unconscious. It's fascinating. I thought we could have dinner together but anyway I'll just go call him and we can have a drink. I just wanted to tell you before you meet him, you see, that he's on your way-length.' The priest made away towards the car stretching one arm behind him as if Hubert were straining away from him at the end of an invisible cord.

'Bloody pest,' said Hubert to Pauline. 'Why should I give them my drinks? He knows - I've told him - that I can't afford those lavish entertainments any more. And dinner - he wanted to stay with his friend for dinner. He marches in, and one's house isn't one's own. Priests can be very rough people, you know. Such a bore.'

'This one's an awful bore,' said Pauline. 'Bobby Lester couldn't stand him.'

Father Cuthbert was returning with a younger Jesuit of the same size to whom he was talking eagerly.

'Hubert,' he said, when he had reached the verandah, 'I want you to meet Father Gerard Harvey. Gerard has been doing studies of ecological paganism and I've told him all about you. Oh, this is Pauline Thin. She's working for Hubert. I knew Pauline before. She -'

'Come in and have a drink,' said Hubert.

'We can sit right here on the terrace. I want Gerard to see the view. (What marvellous weather!) That's the thing about Italy. You can sit outside in March, and -'

Hubert left them sitting on the terrace and went inside to fetch the drinks. Pauline followed him. 'Do you want me to stay with them?' she said.

'Yes, make a nuisance of yourself. Hang around looking silly so that they can't speak freely. Remember I'm supposed to get

ready for dinner in about half an hour's time. These people need to be house-trained.'

Pauline went out on the terrace and sat down with the two men.

'Have you been in Italy long?' she said to the younger man.

'I've been here six months.'

She looked at her watch. 'Hubert has to go and change very soon,' she said. 'He's got a long drive ahead to arrive for eight. He has some letters to sign first.'

'Oh, where's he going?' said Father Cuthbert.

'You shouldn't ask,' she said.

'Well, now, that's not the way to talk,' said Cuthbert, looking very amazed.

'I guess she isn't a Catholic,' said Gerard soothingly.

'I'm a Catholic,' said Pauline. 'But that's got nothing to do with it. One doesn't tell people all one's business and all one's employer's business.'

Hubert appeared with a tray of drinks. The whisky bottle was one third full and the gin was slightly less. There was a box of ice and a bottle of mineral water.

'It's terrorism,' said Pauline.

'What's this?' Hubert said, setting down the tray.

'Priests,' said Pauline. 'They're terrorists. They hold you to ransom.'

The Jesuits looked at each other with delight. This was the sort of thing they felt at home with, priests being their favourite subject.

'Times have changed,' Hubert said to Pauline, 'since you were at school at the Sacred Heart, I'm afraid.'

'It isn't so long ago,' Pauline said, 'since I was at school. My last years, I went to Cheltenham.'

Father Gerard said, 'What goes on at Cheltenham?'

'Ladies' College,' said Hubert. 'If you look closely, it's written all over her face.'

'What do you have against us?' Father Cuthbert said, shifting about with excitement in his chair as if he were sexually as much as pastorally roused.

'It seems to me,' Hubert said, turning with gentle treachery towards Pauline, 'a bit inhospitable to carry on this conver-

sation.' His Mitigil had started to work. He had put ice in the glasses. 'What will you drink?' he said to the guests.

'Whisky,' said both priests at once. Hubert looked sadly at his whisky bottle, lifted it and poured.

'Hubert,' said Pauline, 'that's all the whisky we have.'

'Yes,' said Hubert. 'I'm having gin. What about you, Miss Thin?'

'Plain tonic,' said Pauline.

The younger priest sipped his drink and looked out over the still lake in its deep crater and the thick wildwood of Nemi's fertile soil. 'Terrific ecology!' he said.

'You mean the view?' Pauline said.

Hubert sat in a chair with his back to the grand panorama and he sighed. 'I have to give it up,' he said. 'There's nothing for it. The house isn't mine and Maggie's changed so much since her new marriage. They're insisting on charging me rent. A high rent. I have to go.'

'Remember your dinner date,' Pauline said, 'and Hubert, would you sign some letters, please?'

'Dinner date . . . ?' said Hubert. Since Maggie's marriage following on her son Michael's marriage, and since the trouble with his money in Switzerland, he had been asked out less and less. He looked into his little drop of gin, while Father Cuthbert seized on the doubt about dinner. 'You're going to go out for dinner?'

'We've already told you so,' said Pauline.

'Oh, I didn't know if you meant it,' said the priest.

Hubert, remembering, said, 'Oh, yes, I am. I have to go and change very soon, I'm afraid. They eat early, these people.'

'What people?' said Father Cuthbert. 'Do I know them? Could we come along?'

His companion the ecologist began to show embarrassment. He said, 'No, no, Cuthbert. We can go back to Rome. Really, we mustn't intrude like this. Unexpectedly. We have to . . . ' He rose and looked nervously towards the car where it was parked half-way down the drive.

'Why don't you go and see Michael?' Hubert said, meaning Maggie's son, whose house was near by.

Father Cuthbert looked eager. 'Do you know if he's home?'

'I'm sure he is,' said Hubert. 'They're both in Nemi just now. He got married himself recently. Marriage does seem to be a luxury set apart for the rich. I'm sure they'll be delighted to see you.'

While Hubert explained to the excited priest how to get there by car, his friend, Father Gerard, looked around him and across the lake. 'The environment,' he said. 'This is a wonderful environmental location.'

'It's your duty to visit Michael and Mary, really,' Pauline egged them on. 'They have sumptuous dinners. They had a shock when Maggie got divorced and married again, you know. It's been an upset for the Radcliffes. Her new husband's a pig.'

'Don't they see his father?'

'Oh, I dare say,' Hubert said. 'Radcliffe was Maggie's second husband, of course. The new one's the third. But it was so sudden. The family's all right financially of course. But I must say it's left me in a mess, personally speaking.'

When the priests had left, Hubert went with Pauline into the kitchen. He opened a tin of tuna fish while she made a potato salad. They then sat down to eat at the kitchen table, silently, reflectively.

It seemed as if Hubert had forgotten the priests. Pauline, as if anxious that he should not forget a subject that had served to bring them closer, assiduously said, 'Those priests . . .'

At first he didn't respond to the tiny needle. He merely said dreamily, 'It's not too much to wonder if they're not a bit too much,' and took in a mouthful of food.

'But so pressing, so insufferably pushy,' Pauline said, at which Hubert was roused into agreement, chummily communicating it: 'It's an extraordinary fact,' he said, 'that just at the precise moment when you're at your wits' end it's always the last people in the world you want to see who turn up, full of themselves, demanding total attention. It's always the exceptionally tiresome who barge in at the exceptionally difficult moment. Would you believe there was a time when a Jesuit was a gentleman, if you'll forgive the old-fashioned expression?'

Pauline passed him the potato salad. It had ~~onion~~, too, in it, and mayonnaise. 'Forget them, Hubert,' she said, plainly intending him not to do so.

But Hubert smiled. 'Miss Thin,' he said as he took the salad bowl from her hand, 'I have inside me a laughter demon without which I would die.'

Chapter Three

'Demons frequented these woods, protectors of the gods. Nymphs and dryads inhabited the place. Have you seen the remains of Diana's temple down there? It's terribly overgrown and the excavations are all filled in, but there's a great deal more to see than you might think.'

'No, I haven't seen it,' said Mary, curling her long legs as she sat, yoga-style, on a cushion on the pavement of the terrace. She was a young long-haired blonde girl from California, newly married to Michael Radcliffe. The priests were entertaining her enormously. She didn't want them to leave and pressed them to stay on for a late dinner. Michael had gone to Rome and wouldn't be back till nine. 'He said nine, which most probably will be ten,' she said.

'Pius the Second,' said Father Gerard, 'said that Nemi was the home of nymphs and dryads, when he passed through this area.'

'Really?'

An Italian manservant, young and dark-skinned in a white coat with shining buttons and elaborate epaulettes, brought in a tray of canapés and nuts which he placed on the terrace table beside the bottles. He looked with recognition at Father Cuthbert who, without looking at the manservant, took a handful of nuts, as also did Father Gerard. The ice clinked in the glasses, and they helped themselves to the drinks when their glasses were empty, refilling Mary's glass too. They were Americans together, abroad, with the unwatchful attitude of co-nationals who share some common experiences, however few.

'I majored in social science,' said Mary who had been to college in California.

'Did you come to Italy before?' said Father Gerard.

'No, never. I met Michael in Paris. Then we settled here. I love it.'

'How's your Italian?' said the other priest, beaming with idle pleasure – as who would not after two months' continuous residence in the priests' bleak house in Rome, anonymous and detached in its laws of life?

'Oh, my Italian's coming along. I took a crash course. I guess I'll get more fluent. How about yours?'

'Gerard's is pretty good,' said Father Cuthbert. 'He doesn't get enough practice. There are Italians at the Residence of course, but we only talk to the Americans. You know the way it gets. Or maybe the French –'

'Cuthbert speaks almost perfect Italian,' said Father Gerard. 'He's a great help when I'm talking to the locals around the country about their legends and beliefs.'

'Gerard,' said Father Cuthbert, 'is doing a study on pagan ecology.'

'Really? I thought the Italians were mostly all Catholics.'

'On the surface, yes, but underneath there's a large area of pagan remainder to be explored. And absorbed into Christianity. A very rich seam.'

'Well,' said the girl, 'I don't know if you've talked to Hubert Mallindaine about that ...'

Hubert was a whole new subject, vibrating to be discussed. The priests began to speak in unison, questions and answers, then the girl broke in with laughing phrases and exclamation marks, until Father Cuthbert's voice, being the highest and most excitable, attained the first hearing. The manservant hovered at the terrace door, his eyes upon them, waiting to serve. Mary stretched her fine long suntanned legs and listened. 'We arrived this evening,' said Cuthbert, 'without letting him know in advance. Well, that's nothing new. As a matter of fact the last time I saw him, about six weeks ago, in Rome, he said, "Come to dinner any time. Sure, bring a friend, you're always welcome. There's no need to call me. I never go out. Just get into that car and come." That's what he said. Well. We arrived this evening – didn't we, Gerard?'

'We did,' said Gerard.

A person with a good ear might have questioned the accuracy of Cuthbert's report on the grounds that Hubert, not being American, was not likely to have used a phrase like, 'Sure, bring