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THE EBONY TOWER

JOHN FOWLES

AUTHOR OF
THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

"THE MOST
ENJOYABLE FICTION
OF THE SEASON!"

NEW YORK TIMES



The Ebony Tower

John Fowles



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The Ebony Tower



*... Et par forez longues et lees
Par leus estranges et sauvages
Et passa mainz felons passages
Et maint peril et maint destroit
Tant qu'il vint au santier tot droit...*

—CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, *Yvain*

DAVID arrived at Coëtminais the afternoon after the one he had landed at Cherbourg and driven down to Avranches, where he had spent the intervening Tuesday night. That had allowed an enjoyable meander over the remaining distance; a distant view of the spectacular spired dream of Mont-Saint-Michel, strolls around Saint-Malo and Dinan, then south in the splendid September weather and through the new countryside. He took at once to the quiet landscapes, orcharded and harvested, precise and pollarded, self-concentrated, exhaling a spent fertility. Twice he stopped and noted down particularly pleasing conjunctions of tone and depth—parallel stripes of watercolor with penciled notes of amplification in his neat hand. Though there was some indication of the formal origin in these verbal notes—that a stripe of color was associated with a field, a sunlit wall, a distant hill—he drew nothing. He also wrote down the date, the time of day and the weather, before he drove on.

He felt a little guilty to be enjoying himself so much, to be here so unexpectedly alone, without Beth, and after he had made such a fuss; but the day, the sense of discovery, and of course the object of the whole exercise looming formidably and yet agreeably just ahead, everything conspired to give a pleasant illusion of bachelor freedom. Then the final few miles through the forest of Paimpont, one of the last large remnants of the old wooded Brittany, were deliciously right: green and shaded minor roads, with occasional sunshot vistas down the narrow rides cut through the endless trees. Things

about the old man's most recent and celebrated period fell into place at once. No amount of reading and intelligent deduction could supplant the direct experience. Well before he arrived, David knew he had not wasted his journey.

He turned off down an even smaller forest road, a deserted *voie communale*; and a mile or so along that he came on the promised sign. *Manoir de Coëtminais. Chemin privé*. There was a white gate, which he had to open and shut. Half a mile on again through the forest he found his way barred, just before the trees gave way to sunlight and a grassy orchard, by yet another gate. There was a signboard nailed to the top bar. Its words made him smile inwardly, since beneath the heading *Chien méchant* they were in English: *Strictly no visitors except by prior arrangement*. But as if to confirm that the sign was not to be taken lightly, he found the gate padlocked on the inner side. It must have been forgotten that he was arriving that afternoon. He felt momentarily discomfited; as long as the old devil hadn't forgotten his coming completely. He stood in the deep shade, staring at the sunlight beyond. He couldn't have forgotten; David had sent a brief note of reminder and grateful anticipation only the previous week. Somewhere close in the trees behind him a bird gave a curious trisyllabic call, like a badly played tin flute. He glanced around, but could not see it. It wasn't English; and in some obscure way this reminded David that he was. Guard-dog or not, one couldn't . . . he went back to his car, switched off, locked the doors, then returned to the gate and climbed over.

He walked along the drive through the orchard, whose aged trees were clustered with codlings and red cider-apples. There was no sign of a dog, no barking. The *manoir*, islanded and sundrenched in its clearing among the sea of huge oaks and beeches, was not quite what he had expected, perhaps because he spoke very little French—hardly knew the country outside Paris—and had translated the word visually as well as verbally in terms of an English manor house. In fact it had more the appearance of a once substantial farm; nothing very aris-

ocratic about the façade of pale ochre plaster broadly latticed by reddish beams and counterpointed by dark brown shutters. To the east there was a little wing at right angles, apparently of more recent date. But the ensemble had charm; old and compact, a warm face of character, a good solid feel. He had simply anticipated something grander.

There was a graveled courtyard opposite the southward of the house. Geraniums by the foot of the wall, two old climbing roses, a scatter of white doves on the roof; all the shutters were in use, the place asleep. But the main door, with a heraldic stone shield above, its details effaced by time, and placed eccentrically toward the west end of the house, was lodged open. David walked cautiously across the gravel to it. There was no knocker, no sign of a bell; nor, mercifully, of the threatened dog. He saw a stone-flagged hall, an oak table beside an ancient wooden staircase with worn and warped medieval-looking banisters that led upward. Beyond, on the far side of the house, another open door framed a sunlit garden. He hesitated, aware that he had arrived sooner than suggested; then tapped on the massive main door with his knuckles. A few seconds later, realizing the futility of the weak sound, he stepped over the threshold. To his right stretched a long gallery-like living room. Ancient partitions must have been knocked down, but some of the major black uprights had been retained and stood out against the white walls with a skeletal bravura. The effect was faintly Tudor, much more English than the exterior. A very handsome piece of dense but airy space, antique carved-wood furniture, bowls of flowers, a group of armchairs and two sofas farther down; old pink and red carpets; and inevitably, the art . . . no surprise—except that one could walk in on it like this—since David knew there was a distinguished little collection besides the old man's own work. Famous names were already announced. Ensor, Marquet, that landscape at the end must be a "cool" Derain, and over the fireplace . . .

But he had to announce himself. He walked across the stone floor beside the staircase to the doorway on the far

side of the room. A wide lawn stretched away, flower beds, banks of shrubs, some ornamental trees. It was protected from the north by a high wall, and David saw another line back there of lower buildings, hidden from the front of the house; barns and byres when the place was a farm. In midlawn there was a catalpa pruned into a huge green mushroom; in its shade sat, as if posed, conversing, a garden table and three wicker chairs. Beyond, in a close pool of heat, two naked girls lay side by side on the grass. The further, half hidden, was on her back, as if asleep. The nearer was on her stomach, chin propped on her hands, reading a book. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, its crown loosely sashed with some deep red material. Both bodies were very brown, uniformly brown, and apparently oblivious of the stranger in the shadowed doorway thirty yards away. He could not understand that they had not heard his car in the forest silence. But he really was earlier than the "teatime" he had proposed in his letter; or perhaps there had after all been a bell at the door, a servant who should have heard. For a brief few seconds he registered the warm tones of the two indolent female figures, the catalpa-shade green and the grass green, the intense carmine of the hat-sash, the pink wall beyond with its ancient espalier fruit trees. Then he turned and went back to the main door, feeling more amused than embarrassed. He thought of Beth again: how she would have adored this being plunged straight into the legend ... the wicked old faun and his famous afternoons.

Where he had first intruded he saw at once what he had, in his curiosity, previously missed. A bronze handbell sat on the stone floor behind one of the doorjambs. He picked it up and rang—then wished he hadn't, the sharp schoolyard jangle assaulted the silent house, its sunlit peace. And nothing happened; no footsteps upstairs, no door opening at the far end of the long room he stood in. He waited on the threshold. Perhaps half a minute passed. Then one of the girls, he didn't know which, appeared in the garden door and came toward him. She now wore a plain white cotton *galabiya*; a slim girl of slightly less than medium height and in her early

twenties; brown and gold hair and regular features; level-eyed, rather wide eyes, and barefooted. She was unmistakably English. She stopped some twenty feet away, by the bottom of the stairs.

"David Williams?"

He made an apologetic gesture. "You were expecting me?"

"Yes."

She did not offer to shake hands.

"Sorry to steal in like this. Your gate out there's locked."

She shook her head. "Just pull on it. The padlock. I'm sorry." She did not seem it; and at a loss. She said, "Henry's asleep."

"Then don't wake him, for God's sake." He smiled. "I'm a bit early. I thought it would be harder to find."

She surveyed him a moment: his asking to be welcomed.

"He's such a bastard if he doesn't get his siesta."

He grinned. "Look, I took his letter at its word—about putting me up?—but if . . ."

She glanced beyond him, through the door; then back at his face, with an indifferent little tilt of query.

"Your wife?"

He explained about Sandy's chicken pox, the last-minute crisis. "She's flying to Paris on Friday. If my daughter's over the worst. I'll pick her up there."

The level eyes appraised him again.

"Then I'll show you where you are?"

"If you're sure . . ."

"No problems."

She made a vague gesture for him to follow her, and turned to the stairs; simple, white, bizarrely modest and handmaidenly after that first glimpse.

He said, "Marvelous room."

She touched the age-blackened handrail that mounted beside them. "This is fifteenth century. They say." But she looked neither at him nor the room; and asked nothing, as if he had driven a mere five miles to get there.

At the top of the stairs she turned to the right down a corridor. A long rush mat ran down the center of it. She

opened the second door they came to and went a step in, holding the handle, watching him, uncannily like the *patronne* at the hotel where he had stayed the previous night. He almost expected to hear a price.

"The bathroom's next door."

"Lovely. I'll just go and fetch my car."

"As you wish."

She closed the door. There was something preternaturally grave about her, almost Victorian, despite the *galabiya*. He smiled encouragingly as they went back down the corridor to the stairs.

"And you're . . . ?"

"Henry calls me the Mouse."

At last a tiny dryness in her face; or a challenge, he wasn't sure.

"You've known him long?"

"Since spring."

He tried to evoke some sympathy.

"I know he's not mad about this sort of thing."

She shrugged minutely.

"As long as you stand up to him. It's mostly bark."

She was trying to tell him something, very plainly; perhaps just that if he *had* seen her in the garden, this was the real distance she kept from visitors. She was apparently some kind of equivalent of his hostess; and yet she behaved as if the house had nothing very much to do with her. They came to the bottom of the stairs, and she turned toward the garden.

"Out here? Half an hour? I get him up at four."

He grinned again, that nurselike tone in her voice, so dismissive of all that the outside world might think of the man she called "Henry" and "him."

"Fine."

"Make *comme chez vous*. Right?"

She hesitated a moment, as if she knew she was being too cool and sibylline. There was even a faint hint of diffidence, a final poor shadow of a welcoming smile. Then she looked down and turned away and padded silently back toward the garden; as she went out through the door the *galabiya* momentarily lost its opacity against the sunlight beyond; a fleeting naked shadow.

He remembered he had forgotten to ask about the dog; but presumably she would have thought of it; and tried to recall when he had been less warmly received into a strange house . . . as if he had taken too much, when he had taken nothing, for granted—and certainly not her presence. He had understood the old man had put all that behind him.

He walked back through the orchard to the gate. At least she hadn't misled him there. The hasp came away from the body of the padlock as soon as he pulled. He drove back and parked in the shade of a chestnut opposite the front of the house, got out his overnight bag and briefcase, then an informal jeans suit on a hanger. He glanced through the doorway out into the garden at the back as he went upstairs; but the two girls seemed to have disappeared. In the corridor above he stopped to look at two paintings he had noticed when she first showed him up and failed to put a name to . . . but now, of course, Maximilien Luce. Lucky old man, to have bought before art became a branch of greed, of shrewd investment. David forgot his cold reception.

His room was simply furnished, a double bed in some rather clumsy rural attempt at an Empire style, a walnut wardrobe riddled with worm, a chair, an old chaise longue with tired green upholstery; a gilt mirror, stains on the mercury. The room smelled faintly musty, seldom used; furnished out of local auctions. The one incongruity was the signed Laurencin over the bed. David tried to lift it off its hook, to see the picture in a better light. But the frame was screwed to the wall. He smiled and shook his head; if only poor old Beth were there.

David had been warned by the London publishing house—by the senior member of it who had set the project up—of the reefs, far more formidable than locked gates, that surrounded any visit to Coëtminais. The touchiness, the names one must not mention, the coarse language, the baiting: no doubt had been left that this particular "great man" could also be the most frightful old bastard. He could also, it seemed, be quite charming—if he liked you. Naïve as a child in some ways, had

said the publisher. Then, Don't argue with him about England and the English, just accept he's a lifelong exile and can't bear to be reminded of what he might have missed. Finally: he desperately wants us to do the book. David was not to let himself be duped into thinking the subject of it didn't care a fig for home opinion.

In many ways his journey was not strictly necessary. He had already drafted the introduction, he knew pretty well what he was going to say; there were the major catalogue essays, especially that for the 1969 Tate Retrospective ... the British art establishment's belated olive branch; those for the two recent Paris shows, and the New York; Myra Levey's little monograph in the *Modern Masters* series, and the correspondence with Matthew Smith; a scatter of usable magazine interviews. A few biographical details remained to be cleared up, though even they could have been done by letter. There were of course any number of artistic queries one could have asked—or would have liked to; but the old man had never shown himself very helpful there, indeed rather more likely on past record to be hopelessly cryptic, maliciously misleading or just downright rude. So it was essentially the opportunity of meeting a man one had spent time on and whose work one did, with reservations, genuinely admire ... the fun of it, to say one had met him. And after all, he was now indisputably major, one had to put him with the Bacons and Sutherlands. It could even be argued that he was the most interesting of that select band, though he would probably himself say that he was simply the least bloody English.

Born in 1896, a student at the Slade in the great days of the Steers-Tonks regime, a characteristically militant pacifist when cards had to be declared in 1916, in Paris (and spiritually out of England for good) by 1920, then ten years and more in the queasy—Russia itself having turned to socialist realism—no-man's-land between surrealism and communism, Henry Breasley had still another decade to wait before any sort of serious recognition at home—the revelation, during his five years of “exile from exile” in Wales during the Second World War, of the Spanish Civil War drawings. Like most artists, Breasley

had been well ahead of the politicians. To the British the 1942 exhibition in London of his work from 1937–38 suddenly made sense; they too had learned what war was about, of the bitter folly of giving the benefit of the doubt to international fascism. The more intelligent knew that there was nothing very prescient about his record of the Spanish agony; indeed in spirit it went straight back to Goya. But its power and skill, the superbly incisive draftsmanship, were undeniable. The mark was made; so, if more in private, was the reputation of Breasley's "difficulty" as an individual. The legend of his black bile for everything English and conventionally middle-class—especially if it had anything to do with official views on art, or its public administration—was well established by the time he returned to Paris in 1946.

Then for another decade nothing very much happened to his name in popular terms. But he had become collectible, and there was a growing band of influential admirers in both Paris and London, though like every other European painter he suffered from the rocketing ascendancy of New York as world arbiter of painting values. In England he never quite capitalized on the savage impact, the famous "black sarcasm" of the Spanish drawings; yet he showed a growing authority, a maturity in his work. Most of great nudes and interiors came from this period; the long-buried humanist had begun to surface, though as always the public was more interested in the bohemian side of it—the stories of his drinking and his women, as transmitted in the spasmodic hounding he got from the yellower and more chauvinistic side of Fleet Street. But by the late 1950s this way of life had already become a quaintly historical thing. The rumors and realities of his unregenerate life-style, like his contempt for his homeland, became amusing . . . and even pleasingly authentic to the vulgar mind, with its propensity for confusing serious creation with colorful biography, for allowing van Gogh's ear to obscure any attempt to regard art as a supreme sanity instead of a chocolate-sucking melodrama. It must be confessed that Breasley himself did not noticeably refuse the role offered; if people wanted to be shocked, he generally obliged. But his

closer friends knew that beneath the continuing occasional bouts of exhibitionism he had changed considerably.

In 1963 he bought the old *manoir* at Coëtminais and forsook his beloved Paris. A year later appeared his illustrations to Rabelais, his last fling as a pure draftsman, in a limited edition that has already become one of the most valuable books of its kind in this century; and in the same year he painted the first of the pictures in the last-period series that was to establish his international reputation beyond any doubt. Though he had always rejected the notion of a mystical interpretation—and enough of the old left-winger remained for any religious intention to be dismissed out of court—the great, both literally and metaphorically, canvases with their dominant greens and blues that began to flow out of his new studio had roots in a Henry Breasley the outer world had not hitherto guessed at. In a sense it was as if he had discovered who he really was much later than most artists of his basic technical ability and experience. If he did not quite become a recluse, he ceased to be a professional *enfant terrible*. He himself had once termed the paintings “dreams”; there was certainly a surrealist component from his twenties past, a fondness for anachronistic juxtapositions. Another time he had called them tapestries, and indeed the Aubusson *atelier* had done related work to his designs. There was a feeling—“an improbable marriage of Samuel Palmer and Chagall,” as one critic had put it in reviewing the Tate Retrospective—of a fully absorbed eclecticism, something that had been evidenced all through his career, but not really come to terms with before Coëtminais; a hint of Nolan, though the subject matter was far less explicit, more mysterious and archetypal . . . “Celtic” had been a word frequently used, with the recurrence of the forest motif, the enigmatic figures and confrontations.

Breasley himself had partly confirmed this, when someone had had the successful temerity to ask him for a central source—and for once received a partly honest answer: Pisanello and Diaz de la Peña. The reference to Diaz and the Barbizon School was a self-sarcasm, need-

less to say. But pressed on Pisanello, Breasley had cited a painting in the National Gallery in London, *The Vision of St. Eustace*; and confessed it had haunted him all his life. If the reference at first sight seemed distinctly remote, it was soon pointed out that Pisanello and his early fifteenth-century patrons had been besotted by the Arthurian cycle.

What had brought young David Williams (born that same year of Breasley's first English success, 1942) to Coëtminais in the September of 1973 was precisely this last aspect of the old man's work. He had felt no special interest in Breasley before the Tate Retrospective, but he was forcibly struck then by certain correspondences with an art, or rather a style, the International Gothic, that had always interested the scholarly side of him. Two years later he had formulated the parallels he saw in an article. A complimentary copy had been sent to Breasley, but it was not acknowledged. A year passed, David had almost forgotten the whole thing, and certainly had not pursued any particular interest in the old man's work. The invitation from the publishers to write the biographical and critical introduction to *The Art of Henry Breasley* (with the added information that the offer was made with the painter's approval) had come very much out of the blue.

It was not quite a case of a young unknown visiting an old master. David Williams's parents were both architects, a still practicing husband-and-wife team of some renown. Their son had shown natural aptitude very young, an acute color sense, and he was born into the kind of environment where he received nothing but encouragement. In the course of time he went to art college, and settled finally for painting. He was a star student in his third year, already producing salable work. He was not only *rara avis* in that; unlike the majority of his fellow students, he was highly articulate as well. Brought up in a household where contemporary art and all its questions were followed and discussed constantly and coherently, he could both talk and write well. He had some real knowledge of art history, helped by many stays in his parents' converted farmhouse in Tuscany, as