

EVELYN WAUGH



PUT OUT MORE FLAGS

E V E L Y N W A U G H

PUT
OUT
MORE
FLAGS

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BY EVELYN WAUGH

Novels

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VILE BODIES
BLACK MISCHIEF
A HANDFUL OF DUST
SCOOP
PUT OUT MORE FLAGS
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BRIDESHEAD REVISITED
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HELENA
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Short Stories

MR. LOVEDAY'S LITTLE OUTING, AND OTHER SAD STORIES
BASIL SEAL RIDES AGAIN

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TO
RANDOLPH CHURCHILL

Dedicatory Letter

to

MAJOR RANDOLPH CHURCHILL,
4th Hussars, Member of Parliament

Dear Randolph,

I am afraid that these pages may not be altogether acceptable to your ardent and sanguine nature. They deal, mostly, with a race of ghosts, the survivors of the world we both knew ten years ago, which you have outflown in the empyrean of strenuous politics, but where my imagination still fondly lingers. I find more food for thought in the follies of Basil Seal and Ambrose Silk than in the sagacity of the Higher Command. These characters are no longer contemporary in sympathy; they were forgotten even before the war; but they lived on delightfully in holes and corners and, like everyone else, they have been disturbed in their habits by the rough intrusion of current history. Here they are in that odd, dead period before the Churchillian renaissance which people called at the time "the Great Bore War."

So please accept them with the sincere regards of

Your affectionate friend,

THE AUTHOR

"A man getting drunk at a farewell party should strike a musical tone, in order to strengthen his spirit . . . and a drunk military man should order gallons and put out more flags in order to increase his military splendour.

CHINESE SAGE, *quoted and translated*
by Lin Yutang in THE IMPORTANCE
OF LIVING.

"A little injustice in the heart can be drowned by wine; but a great injustice in the world can be drowned only by the sword."

EPIGRAMS OF CHANG CH'AO; *quoted*
and translated by Lin Yutang in
THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING.

The military operation described in Chapter III is wholly imaginary. No existing unit of His Majesty's Forces is represented there, or anywhere, directly or indirectly. No character is derived from any living man or woman.

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Put Out More Flags

CHAPTER I

Autumn

1. IN THE WEEK which preceded the outbreak of the Second World War — days of surmise and apprehension which cannot, without irony, be called the last days of “peace” — and on the Sunday morning when all doubts were finally resolved and misconceptions corrected, three rich women thought first and mainly of Basil Seal. They were his sister, his mother and his mistress.

Barbara Sothill was at Malfrey; in recent years she had thought of her brother as seldom as circumstances allowed her, but on that historic September morning, as she walked to the village, he predominated over a multitude of worries.

She and Freddy had just heard the Prime Minister’s speech, broadcast by wireless. “It is an evil thing we are fighting,” he had said and as Barbara turned her back on the house where, for the most part, the eight years of her marriage had been spent, she felt personally challenged and threatened, as though, already, the mild, autumnal sky were dark with circling enemies and their shadows were trespassing on the sunlit lawns.

There was something female and voluptuous in the

beauty of Malfrey; other lovely houses maintained a virginal modesty or a manly defiance, but Malfrey had no secret from the heavens; it had been built more than two hundred years ago in days of victory and ostentation and lay, spread out, sumptuously at ease, splendid, defenceless and provocative — a Cleopatra among houses; across the sea, Barbara felt, a small and envious mind, a meanly ascetic mind, a creature of the conifers, was plotting the destruction of her home. It was for Malfrey that she loved her prosaic and slightly absurd husband; for Malfrey, too, that she had abandoned Basil and with him the part of herself which, in the atrophy endemic to all fruitful marriages, she had let waste and die.

It was half a mile to the village down the lime avenue. Barbara walked because, just as she was getting into the car, Freddy had stopped her saying, "No petrol now for gadding about."

Freddy was in uniform, acutely uncomfortable in ten-year-old trousers. He had been to report at the yeomanry headquarters the day before, and was home for two nights collecting his kit, which, in the two years since he was last at camp, had been misused in charades and picnics and dispersed about the house in a dozen improbable places. His pistol, in particular, had been a trouble. He had had the whole household hunting it, saying fretfully, "It's all very well but I can get court-martialled for this," until, at length, the nursery-maid found it at the back of the toy cupboard. Barbara was

now on her way to look for his binoculars which she remembered vaguely having lent to the scoutmaster.

The road under the limes led straight to the village; the park gates of elaborately wrought iron swung on rusticated stone piers, and the two lodges, formed one side of the village green; opposite them stood the church; on the other sides, two inns, the vicarage, the shop and a row of grey cottages; three massive chestnuts grew from the roughly rectangular grass plot in the centre. It was a "beauty spot," justly but reluctantly famous, too much frequented of late by walkers but still, through Freddy's local influence, free of charabancs; a bus stopped three times a day on weekdays, four times on Tuesdays when the market was held in the neighbouring town, and to accommodate passengers Freddy had that year placed an oak seat under the chestnuts.

It was here that Barbara's thoughts were brought up sharply by an unfamiliar spectacle: six dejected women sat in a row staring fixedly at the closed doors of the Sothill Arms. For a moment Barbara was puzzled; then she remembered. These were Birmingham women. Fifty families had arrived at Malfrey late on Friday evening, thirsty, hot, bewildered and resentful after a day in train and bus. Barbara had chosen the five saddest families for herself and dispersed the rest in the village and farms.

Punctually next day the head housemaid, a veteran of old Mrs. Sothill's regime, had given notice of leav-

ing. "I don't know how we shall do without you," said Barbara.

"It's my legs, madam. I'm not strong enough for the work. I could just manage as things were, but now with children all over the place . . ."

"You know we can't expect things to be easy in war-time. We must expect to make sacrifices. This is our war work."

But the woman was obdurate. "There's my married sister at Bristol," she said. "Her husband was on the Reserve. I ought to go and help her now he's called up."

An hour later the remaining three housemaids had appeared with prim expressions of face.

"Edith and Olive and me have talked it over and we want to go and make aeroplanes. They say they are taking on girls at Brakemore's."

"You'll find it terribly hard work, you know."

"Oh, it's not the work, madam. It's the Birmingham women. The way they leave their rooms."

"It's all very strange for them at first. We must do all we can to help. As soon as they settle down and get used to our ways . . ." But she saw it was hopeless while she spoke.

"They say they want girls at Brakemore's," said the maids.

In the kitchen Mrs. Elphinstone was loyal. "But I can't answer for the girls," she said. "They seem to think war is an excuse for a lark."

It was the kitchen-maids, anyway, and not Mrs. El-

phinstone, thought Barbara, who had to cope with the extra meals . . .

Benson was sound. The Birmingham women caused *him* no trouble. But James would be leaving for the Army within a few weeks. It's going to be a difficult winter, thought Barbara.

These women, huddled on the green, were not Barbara's guests, but she saw on their faces the same look of frustration and defiance. Dutifully, rather than prudently, she approached the group and asked if they were comfortable. She spoke to them in general and each felt shy of answering; they looked away from her sullenly towards a locked inn. Oh dear, thought Barbara, I suppose they wonder what business it is of mine.

"I live up there," she said, indicating the gates. "I've been arranging your billets."

"Oh have you?" said one of the mothers. "Then perhaps you can tell us how long we've got to stop."

"That's right," said another.

"D'you know," said Barbara, "I don't believe anyone has troubled to think about that. They've all been too busy getting you away."

"They got no right to do it," said the first mother. "You can't keep us here compulsory."

"But surely you don't *want* to have your children bombed, do you?"

"We won't stay where we're not wanted."

"That's right," said the yes-woman.

"But of *course* you're wanted."

"Yes, like the stomach-ache."

"That's right."

For some minutes Barbara reasoned with the fugitives until she felt that her only achievement had been to transfer to herself all the odium which more properly belonged to Hitler. Then she went on her way to the scoutmaster's, where, before she could retrieve the binoculars, she had to listen to the story of the Birmingham schoolmistress, billeted on him, who refused to help wash up.

As she crossed the green on her homeward journey, the mothers looked away from her.

"I hope the children are enjoying themselves a little," she said, determined not to be cut in her own village.

"They're down at the school. Teacher's making them play games."

"The park's always open you know, if any of you care to go inside."

"We had a park where we came from. With a band Sundays."

"Well I'm afraid I can't offer a band. But it's thought rather pretty, particularly down by the lake. Do take the children in if you feel like it."

When she had left the chief mother said: "What's she? Some kind of inspector, I suppose, with her airs and graces. The idea of inviting us into the park. You'd think the place belonged to her the way she goes on."

Presently the two inns opened their doors and the scandalized village watched a procession of mothers