

# ALAN SILLITOE

## THE FLAME OF LIFE



## *The Flame of Life*

*By the same author*

**FICTION**

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning  
Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner  
The General  
Key to the Door  
The Ragman's Daughter  
The Death of William Posters  
A Tree on Fire  
Guzman, Go Home  
A Start in Life  
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Raw Material  
Men, Women and Children

**POETRY**

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Love in the Environs of Vorenezh  
Storm and other Poems

**TRAVEL**

Road to Volgograd

**PLAY**

All Citizens are Soldiers  
(with Ruth Fainlight)

# *The Flame of Life*

ALAN SILLITOE

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## *Author's Note*

The present novel was begun in August 1967, and finished in January 1974. This is a long time for one book, though during that period other items were written that were more urgently pressing. They elbowed the present work aside, which may have been compliant in this because the plot and form of the book weren't so absolutely clear in my mind as they subsequently became over the years.

During its progress three other novels were written, as well as two books of short stories, two filmscripts, and a volume of poems.

Earlier versions of chapters three and four were printed as part of a novel in progress entitled CUTHBERT in *The Southern Review* (Louisiana State University) in the summer of 1969.



## Chapter One

Albert Handley left his car in a meter-bay behind Oxford Street, and went into a shop to buy a transistor radio.

'How much is that?' he asked.

'Costs twenty-seven guineas,' said the young salesman.

Ash dropped from his thin cigar. He'd smoked all the way down that morning. His daughter Mandy had asked him not to, otherwise he might die of cancer. 'Who'll make the money to keep us in the sort of idleness we've got used to if *you* get carried off? The trouble is, you think of nobody but yourself.'

'Looks good.'

He twiddled a knob though it was not switched on. There were no batteries in any, and they were chained by their handles to the wall. He was eating himself so hard that cancer wouldn't get a look in.

'It's very fine,' the salesman told him, as if he weren't a serious customer, but was passing the time before going to a pornographic picturedrome down the street.

Handley unbuttoned his short fawn overcoat. He was tall and spruce-looking, with brown eyes, and a face more reddish than the ruddy glow it had when he'd been poor and walked everywhere. Yet he was still thin. No matter what food he shovelled down, and in truth it was never much, he did not put on weight. There was something intelligent and ruthless about his face, until he smiled and spoke, when whoever



he was addressing might make the mistake of thinking him an easy person to get on with.

'I want something powerful,' he said. 'A good radio with lots of short-wave. I live in the country, and like to feel cut off from the one I'm in!'

His brother John had been a wireless enthusiast, and so Handley wasn't as unfamiliar with radios as the salesman thought. But John's dead, you fool, he snapped at himself in his momentary abstraction. What do you mean dead? Of course he's not. Why do you say that? He never was dead nor will be dead. He can't be. If he died I wouldn't paint another picture. I'd die myself, in fact. But he *was* dead, all the same. Killed his bloody self.

He saw a black, complex, heavy model with a multiplicity of wavebands, switches and aerials. 'What do you rush for that one?'

'A hundred and ten guineas. It's a Philips, from Holland.'

'You look as if you could really communicate with it. Turn it on, will you?'

He unlocked the chain, and fixed in batteries.

'It's a good smart model.'

'Can you get police bands?'

'Everything. Fire-brigade, aircraft, radio-taxis, ship-to-shore in morse and telephone. Anywhere in the world, providing you adjust the aerials.'

The tone was good, trilled with spikey clearness when he spun the wheel over short-wave. 'Pack it up, then. I'll take it with me.'

He got back to his car and found a ticket fixed on the windscreen. He supposed it must be a two-pound fine because—as he now realised, looking at the meter—he'd forgotten to put money in. He drove off without touching it and, going smoothly along Oxford Street, flicked on the wipers till the little cellophane envelope flew out of his sight forever.

He cursed his carelessness—as well as the vindictive warden so assiduous in his packdrill duty—and picked his way through the traffic. His sleek black Rambler Estate made easy progress, but it still took some time getting to the Arlington Gallery after finding a vacant bay in Hanover Square.

String-wire-and-tinfoil sculpture that formed the basis of the current exhibition looked flimsy but interesting, something between Futurist

muck, Surrealist crap, and a heap of socialist-realist junk thrown out of a builder's yard. In other words, it didn't lack imagination but had no talent whatsoever, only a demonic persistence on the part of the artist to create something or die. The man's name was famous in the art world, and though Handley couldn't begrudge him that, he was annoyed at the fact that he didn't know what it was about, feeling insulted because the sculptor hadn't done something that his by no means simple intelligence could understand.

Still, maybe it was only a bit of obstinacy on Handley's part, because many people were paying high prices for it, and countless critics were vomiting words in order to explain it to each other. It kept them out of mischief, though he felt that the more words a picture needed the worse it was.

Sir Edward Greensleaves, large and affable, stood up from his desk. Handley was a few minutes early and this disturbed him but, due to reasonably good breeding, it got no further than his own thoughts. Known as Teddy to Handley and his friends, he was at the pinnacle of several hundred years of family history—a genealogical cutting tool. The Greensleaves had one of the oldest pedigrees in England, which meant they came over as vicious narrow-eyed plunderers with Norman from France. Handley could have reminded him, however, that his clan were in England even before the Norman Conquest and even, maybe, prior to the Roman Invasion, but such length of service can be a positive disadvantage especially if, instead of mixing and breeding only with the best names as Teddy's lot had done, you mucked in with all the jailbirds and riff-raff feeding on fur, feather and fin that happened to come your way. Teddy was the last of the Greensleaves, and being of a certain nature, was not likely to extend the name for another generation. Handley, with a family of seven kids, seemed set for a few more centuries at least, unless the world blew itself up in the meantime.

Greensleaves often boasted how he had pulled Handley from the gutter of direst hardship and turned him into a man of the world. He had given him his first show two years ago, and made him rich and famous. Handley didn't see it like that. He had always been a man of the world, and was no different now in either talent or spirit to when he was without money or recognition. His wife and seven kids had got along on national assistance, poaching, begging-letters, and raffling paintings now and again in the Lincolnshire village they'd lived in. He

shook Teddy's warm, pudgy hand. 'I need money, that's why I've come to see you.'

'You had a thousand last month. Are you sure?'

'There are a score of us living in our self-styled community, and that means twenty idle mouths to feed. I'm *not* idle, because I happen to be the breadwinner, but I don't mind that because it stimulates me for my work.'

'I wonder if you're making a mistake, living in a community?' Greensleaves ventured.

'Of course I am,' Handley said. 'I'm just one big twenty-two carat mistake like any other human being. It's not many months since my brother John died, and it seems like we buried him only yesterday. Living in a big group helps me to get over it a little bit.'

Edward didn't like Handley to be so much at the mercy of ordinary emotions. If the artist's brother died he should swiftly absorb the fact, however tragic it might be, into the mainstream of his creative powers—he suggested.

'We'll never see eye to eye,' Handley said. 'I enjoy coming to see you because it makes me feel so civilised. I mean, it amazes me how cultured people like you can live so far down in the mud.'

Teddy laughed. 'Let's not go into that.'

'Or we'll never get off it,' Handley said, pushing his face close, 'will we?'

'I mean,' Teddy said, 'wouldn't it be better for you to live in Majorca, or some place where the sun is warm, and living cheap?'

He grinned. 'You want to get rid of me?'

'I want you to be happy.'

'I thought so. You want me to stop painting.'

Greensleaves flushed, as if caught in a secret criminal thought, which deepened when he realised there was no basis for it.

'Don't take me seriously,' Handley said, 'or I'll cry. I'm the only one who knows how I can live.'

'You're painting well?' Teddy said, pouring two brandies. He had the look of a man who had his vices under control, but who also knew exactly what they were—which was something.

Handley sat in a leather chair, his feet on the long mahogany desk. 'Never better, in my humble opinion. You can put another show on as soon as you like.'

'It's only three months since the last. We don't want them to think you're too prolific.'

'Afraid they'll stop buying?' Handley jibed.

'They may want them cheaper. We can't afford that.'

'Why not? It'll hurt you but it won't hurt me. I'm working as if I'm on piece work. Bull week, every week. Grab, grab, grab. Call it inspiration if you like.'

Teddy pushed the brandy over. 'Leave the tactics to me.'

'Cheers! I suppose you might get thin if you didn't make so much money.'

He sipped and laughed. 'I don't think you realise it, Albert, but I like being fat.'

'There'd be nothing left of you if you weren't.'

'It's good to be fat in this business. A thin art dealer isn't trusted. A thin painter, yes, but not someone like me.'

He's trying to reassure me, Handley thought, that he'll never run away with my money. He's devious and corpulent. His eyes are shifty and incompetent. I'm sure he's robbing me. But he's good-natured, and I like him. 'Have you always been fat?'

'Generally, yes. People make way for a fat man. They respect him.'

Handley lit a cigar. 'Unless there's a war on.'

'No danger of that.'

'Civil war, I mean.'

Teddy laughed. 'When I go into a restaurant the waiters smile. I'm always served first, whether they know me or not. I get bigger helpings, what's more.'

Greensleaves' office made him uneasy because three of his paintings hung on the well-lit walls. They seemed out of place, set there for dealers and customers who saw them only as so many square yards of investment. Handley knew, however, that his attitude was a bad one, indicating a lack of detachment and even backbone. He was, after all, happy enough when Teddy took out his cheque book and passed a chit for three thousand pounds.

He put it in his wallet. 'That'll get me through the weekend! I don't need the other for the moment.'

They were disturbed by the buzzer, and when the door opened Handley recognised Lady Daphne Maria Fitzgerald Ritmeester (names he'd seen in an up-to-date *Who's Who* which he'd bought to get basic

facts on people he bumped into now that his paintings sold at the proper prices).

'You've already met, I believe,' Greensleaves said.

'Twice,' Handley stood up, 'and both times I asked her to kiss me, but she didn't.'

'On the first occasion you were drunk,' she said, with half a smile. Her charming and grating voice was the sort that would make you feel unsure of yourself if you thought there was a chance of going to bed with her. She was a thin middle-aged woman with dark hair piled over a splendidly intelligent face. Her grey eyes seemed over-exposed due to skilful make-up and care, and her faintly spread nostrils created a subtlety for her lips that they might not otherwise have had. Handley sensed that men would have to be a hundred times more gentle before such women would come to like them.

She turned to Greensleaves. 'I just popped in to give you this,' taking an envelope from her Florentine leather bag.

Teddy blushed at money instead of sex. There has to be something that embarrasses him to the marrow, Handley thought. Lady Ritmeester had bought some of his work, including the Lincolnshire Poacher, that star piece of his one-man show at which they'd first met.

'How long are you in town?'

'Depends,' he said. 'Till tomorrow, perhaps.'

She lit a cigarette and sat down. 'How's the country?'

'Restful, as long as I can get away.'

'I hear you run some sort of community?'

'An extended family, really. A five-star doss-house.'

'I thought the revolutionary thing nowadays was to eliminate the family.'

He laughed. 'That sort of theory's for young people who haven't got families. I have seven kids, so who could get rid of that lot? There would have been another but my wife lost it after our house caught fire in Lincolnshire. I'm afraid to make up a manifesto against the family in case she gets pregnant again. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The only thing is to make it bigger. It drives me up the zigzags.'

'You could simply walk away,' she teased, much to Teddy's enjoyment as he opened her envelope, and put the cheque in his drawer.

'If a man's up to his neck in a bog how can he get up and crawl off? He needs a tractor to pull him free, and then it might yank both his

arms out and he'd bleed to death. Still, there is some good in the family. The State's helpless against it—or one like mine. Any system that screams against the family only wants to abolish it for its own ends—good or bad. It wants such power for itself. Who wouldn't? Will you have lunch with me?

Launched in the same tone as his speculations on the family, the request took her by surprise: 'What a strange idea!'

'It would be if we went to a fish 'n' chip shop for a piece of grotty cod washed down with a bottle of high-powered sauce,' he said. 'But I mean real lunch at the Royal Bean up the street.'

She was an expensive production with the palest of porcelain skin as if, should you start to take her clothes off, she'd come to pieces in your hands. 'You fascinate me.'

'You're like a woman,' she answered. 'Full of tease. A real man, I believe it's called.'

No response was good enough, at least not while he expected it. 'I'd be delighted if you'd have lunch with me.'

If he thought about it he couldn't imagine anything more grisly, but it was too late to back out now. 'As an experiment, then,' she said, still with that damaged but maddening smile.

Teddy wondered if they'd need to use his desk to make love on—they were getting along so well—and had an impulse to begin clearing it, so as to inch himself back into their talk. They had forgotten him, and only such rude and crude behaviour could make them pay for it.

## *Chapter Two*

Handley suggested a taxi, but she preferred to walk the two hundred yards. They had the luck of a table near the curtained window. He offered a cigarette from his packet. 'Do you eat out much?'

'Reasonably often.'

'I usually get stomach poisoning, though this place looks all right.' He snapped his finger, but no one heard it.

'That's the disadvantage of a restaurant,' she said. 'Not good for one's self-confidence.'

She was enjoying herself, and what man could want more than that? He knew he was not very strong on courtship, and Daphne Ritmeester sensed it, too, and was trying to make him pay for it. But time was on his side, and they were no longer close to the prying ears of Teddy Greensleaves, which made them somewhat easier on each other.

'If a man is eating alone,' he said, 'and he complains about something or other he gets good treatment. But if he dines with a woman he doesn't because the waiter's back goes up, since he thinks he's only trying to impress the woman. Even if the man is justified in his complaints the waiter thinks he should show solidarity with the male sex and not mention them, especially in front of a woman. You can't win. They've got the class war in one eye and the sex war in the other. If I had

my way there'd be nothing but counters where you had to go up and get your own.'

'How perfectly horrible,' she said. 'I'd never eat out.'

'You could bring a maid,' he suggested, 'and she'd queue for you.'

Had he really done the paintings she so much admired? It was like having lunch with your chauffeur simply because he was a good driver. And yet, not quite. This might turn out more interesting. 'Tell me about your life,' she said when half a melon, big enough to float away on across the blue lagoon, had been set before them. 'How did you become a painter?'

'My life's simple,' he replied. 'Always will be, I hope. After prep school, Eton and Oxford, I got a commission in the Brigade of Guards. Fought in France, back through Dunkirk, went to Egypt and got wounded—though not in the groin. I rejoined my battalion and went to Italy, wounded again, invalided out, nothing to do except draw my pension and paint pictures.'

She laughed. 'That's not what you told the newspapers.'

'You've got to make up a good story,' he said, pushing his melon aside because it tasted like marrow. 'Uncle Toby would disown me if I didn't. I love you. But you must forgive me—not for saying that, because I can't imagine anyone not coming out with it—but for being so blunt and common. I can't make pretty speeches. I paint, not talk. I've never been good at weaving snares of words around women. If I'm so tongue-tied that I can only say "I love you", you'll have to forgive me.'

It seemed impossible to get through to him. There must be a gap in his armour somewhere. He knew she was thinking this, and saw that if he kept up his rigmarole long enough she might come to bed with him. 'Do you paint all the time?'

'Every minute God sends.'

'Don't you get bored?'

'I love you, Daphne.'

'Don't you get bored with that?' He was too impertinent to be her chauffeur.

'Let's go to Paris for a couple of days.'

'Certainly not.'

'Venice, then.'



It was ludicrous. She laughed. He rubbed his hands under the table. Wiping them on the cloth, she thought, pointing to the napkin. He drew it across his moustache.

‘You haven’t got your passport,’ she said.

He took it out of his pocket. ‘I never leave the house unless it’s on me—even if only to the pub for a packet of fags—in case I decide not to go back. I always do, though. You only vanish when all the ends will be left hanging.’

‘You’re a very destructive person.’

‘Not really. To myself maybe.’

‘You make my blood run cold,’ she mocked.

‘Here’s the horsemeat,’ he said, glad to end such a note.

For a thin woman she showed great appetite, and if he kept up with her it was only to get his money’s worth, and because he’d left home with no more than half a grapefruit and a thimble of black coffee under his belt.

He filled her empty glass close to the brim, hoping she’d bend her lips to the table to sip it, so that he could look down her dress. But he’d underestimated her dexterity, for she lifted it easily without spilling a drop.

He apologised: ‘I’m no good at serving people.’

‘You’d never make a waiter,’ she smiled. ‘When did you last go to the mainland?’

‘Fortnight ago. Got so bored with my community I lit off in the car. Drove five hundred kilometres to this posh hotel south of Paris. Cost fifty francs for a room and bath. Same again for something to eat. I got sloshed over dinner, so daren’t use the bath I’d paid for in case I drowned. I climbed into bed with my boots on to make up for it. After all, fifty francs is four quid. I really do love you.’

She jumped, though not, he noted, with annoyance. He imagined it might be due to his quick change of voice and because he touched her warm, silken kneecap under the table. ‘Why do you keep on?’

He sensed she’d be disappointed if he suddenly lost heart. She hadn’t been entertained at lunch for a long time, and so unexpected.

‘Listen,’ he said confidentially, eyes lit as he leaned closer, ‘I can get all the women I want, just by telling them I love them. If I say it earnestly enough—but not like a beaten dog—no woman can resist it. It always works, even if you do it only ten minutes after meeting them.