KINGSLEY AMIS

The Folks That Live on the Hill

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Chapter One

Bunty Streatfield poured boiling water from the electric kettle on to the bowl of dried apricots destined for tomorrow's breakfast. The water left unpoured made a fierce whooshing noise on the element when she set the kettle down. Overhead the strip lighting went on with its giant-mosquito whine, and just then the dishwasher entered the throbbing, growling part of its cycle. Even tiny kitchens in quite small flats were no longer the quiet places they must once have been.

Shutting the door on this one with the necessary bang, Bunty came out into the eating part where Piers Caldecote sat at the scrubbed pine table, at least it looked like pine. He was smoking a cigarette and reading the evening paper in a tolerant, uncommitted sort of way. At Bunty's approach he plopped his half-finished cigarette into the mug of tea he had taken half a dozen sips from.

'Ah, you're off then, are you?' For reasons best known to yourself, he seemed to imply, as often when others' activities were in question, but still tolerantly.

'You'll be going out yourself, will you?'

Piers inclined his head inch by inch towards the telephone. 'I may. I may. Then again I may not.' Suddenly he beamed at her.

Bunty hesitated. 'If you don't, there's some of those soused herrings and some tongue and stuff in the fridge. And . . .' She hesitated again.

'And, put them back when I've taken what I want and jolly well clear up after me a bit. But of course. Say no more. Stand on me. Now you run along, little thing. Have a good time.'

'I don't suppose we'll be late.'

'*And* . . .' He extended his neck and cocked a half-shut eye at her

in a way she had once thought must mean he was drunk, but which she now knew meant he was pretending to be caring. '. . . you're not to let that silly girl walk all over you. It's not good for her character for one thing. Nor for you my dear. The more you let her have her head, the more trouble you're laying up for yourself. You mark my words now.'

'I'll rule her with a rod of iron.'

'She might quite like that.'

'Sorry, how do you mean?'

'Forget it. Failed joke.' Then, 'You look very nice,' he called after her.

The flat had a reinforced hardboard front door which Bunty shut behind her with no bang at all. It opened directly on to a staircase with donkey-coloured carpeting, so directly that she had to hang on to the flimsy knob while she peered down into the hall and listened, not liking herself much for doing so. For the moment there was no sign of Mrs Brookes, the little old lady, in fact the not so very old but still stooped-over and awful old lady who lived on the ground floor and who was liable to start talking to Bunty on sight and at extreme range. A no-sign situation at this stage could not allow for Mrs Brookes's speed off the mark from the middle room where she mostly lurked, and a frightening number of times, like three in the year, she had been discovered crouching on the front step just as Bunty opened the house door. But this evening the way was clear, and the *Psycho*-type creaking of the middle-room door resounded too late.

The bright May sunshine in the street suffered from what Bunty had half-supposed to be a rock concert in the nearer middle distance but now turned out to be merely the output of some sort of radio playing to no visible audience from the scaffolding on the house opposite. Further along, a burglar alarm pealed steadily and somewhere else what was perhaps another form of alarm sounded a continuous fluctuating whistle like an automaton pronouncing sorry-sorry-sorry-sorry without end. Somewhere else again a loud male voice blurted unformed syllables. And this was supposed to be

a quiet suburb, handy for the centre, but still quiet. It had only recently begun to dawn on Bunty how she longed to spend even an hour or two a day somewhere that really was quiet: how older people coped with it all she could not imagine. But she knew there were other things besides, harder to define than noise, that she wanted to get away from.

She hurried down to the corner with Shepherd's Hill itself on her left, the half-dozen sloping acres of parkland that gave the district its name. Children and dogs ran to and fro on it, in and out of the lengthening shadows, and couples strolled or sat on benches. Bunty turned her eyes away and her thoughts to what sort of state the flat would be in when she saw it again. Although Piers must be getting on for forty he was no nearer being housetrained than ever, what with taps, lights, even gas, cigarette-ends, scattered newspapers, used crocks, unsoaked pans, nothing very much really but bothersome for finicky people coming in to find. He was not too bad, would often tidy away after a fashion unless something came up, as he put it, and something was always coming up in Piers's life, though he kept very quiet about what. Her guess was that it was a succession of little things, no great mystery there, just this and that, probably near the edge of the law. There seemed to be no women in his life but, in that sense, no men either. And how long did he propose to stay, or go on lodging with them, or sharing, or whatever he called it?

Actually if it had been left to her he could have stayed as long as he liked within reason. After all he was one of her only bits of family, not very close, true, being no more than Harry Caldecote's son by his first marriage, and Harry being what to this day it took her a couple of seconds to work out in her head, her stepmother's divorced husband, but still. And she had been known to be glad of Piers's company, and she would have had to admit she liked having a man round the house, even a man of a questionable sort. And there was no getting away from it, he could be very charming, for instance always ready to tell her she looked nice, and usually with better timing than just now.

She thought anyway she probably looked about as nice this evening as she ever would, going to be thirty-two in the autumn, a little tall for her own liking, a little ruddy-cheeked, but with abundant browny-red hair a few people seemed to think was quite attractive, trimmed rather short as it was nowadays and scraped back behind not-too-bad ears. The navy corduroy suit had mostly gone down all right in the past and nobody could have quarrelled with the new plain cellular shirt. Obviously a nice type of young woman, in the words of a testimonial she had once sneaked a look at.

Too much so? Not in a good way? She was turning right into Shepherd's Hill Road when a man of her own age began to cross towards the King's public house, a personable enough young man in collar and tie, even perhaps a nice type himself, and he eyed Bunty pretty thoroughly until they were about five yards apart, when he suddenly seemed to get very interested in the stained glass in the pub windows and doors and faded away. She was used to just that sort of double take, she ought to have been by now, but had not altogether stopped wondering about it, wondering if it could have anything to do with the look she had once or twice surprised in photographs of herself, coming upon them unexpectedly, but had never managed to catch in the mirror: a kind of joyless look, a worried and worrying look, the look of someone who without being in any way aggressive was always going to need a bit of handling, a bit of careful watching. At such times she came near guessing that her school nickname had been attached to her by way of irony, to point up her lack of easy dependable warmth and whatever other attractions might once have been expected in a girl called Bunty.

Now she was among the shops, including the bistro where the man shouted at the customers and the art place where the pictures on display really made you wonder why the artist had bothered until you noticed the price-tags on them, and reached the post office, or rather the post-office-cum-stationer's-cum-newsagent's-cum-tobacconist's-confectioner's-delicatessen-cum-video-library-cum(from next week)-dry-cleaning-establishment it had pro-

gressively but swiftly turned into. The two Asian (Indian or Pakistani) brothers who were the proprietors greeted her in their impressively informal English. 'Nice to see a bit of sun for a change, eh?' said the elder, and the younger said, 'You wait, we'll be paying for it later on.' Bunty nodded and smiled but could not think of the required next conversational move, try as she might.

Each of the brothers had a full moustache shaped like a square bracket and wore a thick dark pullover and expensive shoes; the younger's came into view when he darted round the front of the counter to put his hand on a special anniversary card called for by a fuchsia-faced old girl who carried a stick and got a 'How are you keeping?' and a 'Mind how you go now' thrown in. Bunty picked up her *Standard* and the new *Private Eye* and had her change in her hand in about four seconds. With a pleasant but slightly bland smile the older said, 'Have a nice weekend.' His brother said, 'Be seeing you soon.' She knew or hoped she knew that it was not being a misery or defeatist of her to imagine the 'What that one needs is a good screw' and the 'Sooner you than me, chum' that could follow her exit – but, she guessed, not if it could be overheard.

Off she went again, past Beautiful Dreamers now that sold nothing but beds, not even quilts, etc., past Potandum that sold wine but only a case at a time, past the house on the other side of the road where Harry Caldecote lived with his widowed sister, a rather pretty house, or rather half of a substantial Early Victorian house in white-painted stone on four floors, a lot of space for two even with a mostly-absent lodger on the top floor and a room or so in the basement that in some sense belonged to Piers. Well, Harry had done for her more than many stepfathers would have done and had gone on trying to help her after she had become no more than his ex-stepdaughter. He had been on her side when she took up with what the rest of the family had considered a thoroughly unsuitable boy-friend, and had still not stopped trying to repair what had turned out to be her less and less workable marriage to him. Anyway, they had stayed in touch one way and another until a year ago Harry had marvellously, providentially, got her into the flat she now occupied,

and so they had become neighbours. It was all a little odd, though no odder, probably, than her relations with any man would have had to be. Harry had remained somehow a distant figure, book on lap in his first-floor study, seeming to hold back as instinctively as she did from the affectionate embrace that might have seemed natural to two people in their position and with their history. He was a shy man anyway, she guessed, and after all what of it? It had its good side, too; she had never managed to feel it quite natural to be close to a man in any sense, and this one had a trick of hesitating sometimes before he spoke to her, as if wondering whether she was quite up to what he contemplated saying, that helped to keep them at a distance. But from across that distance she was full of gratitude, respect, esteem, loyalty.

Anyway, it was thanks to Harry that she was here on Shepherd's Hill, and it was a nice part, a comparatively clean part, even – workmen's radios and burglar alarms excepted – a quiet part, having its streets so choked with parked cars and vans that nothing on four wheels could hurry and heavier vehicles tried to by-pass it. But across the garishly painted railway bridge, where all traffic was now prohibited, the tube station promised infallible noise, noise enough and to spare. Although Bunty more or less had to use the Underground for work, she never went into its booming, battering depths without a moment or two of acute dislike. Years ago she had once seen that fear as the fear of a greater fear, but had gone no further with her analysis after that; in her experience it was very far from true that a fear was lessened by being better understood. Tonight as it happened was easier than many, with plenty of people about, no wait on the platform and something to look forward to at the far end.

That something was to be found in Chelsea, in an older and prettier house than Harry's, in Stokes Row. A blue plaque by the open front door said that Johann Christian Bach had lived there for a short time in the 1760s, and many of the paintings and drawings on view inside referred to that period. They thoroughly covered the walls of the passage that ran through the house to the garden

doorway, which showed like a bright yellow-green oblong at the end of a gloomy tunnel. The sound of voices from the open air had a flat, insubstantial quality. Bunty squared her shoulders, then rounded them again to appear less tall and stepped out into the late sunshine. She hoped she had not come too soon.

There were not really so many people as all that standing and sitting about drinking out there, perhaps fewer than twenty. When they realized she had turned up, which took a few seconds, some of them stared at her briefly while others welcomed her at top speed, delighted at her arrival, not far from astounded she had been able to make it. '*Bunty* how are you?' they said. '*Bunty* you're looking well! Here's *Bunty*! *Bunty* it's good to see you!'

Of course good old Bunty was not in the least put out by any of that. It was standard, what she had heard a man call par for the course. Alternatively it was how people behaved when they were embarrassed by her and trying to be nice, which was much better than unembarrassed people not trying to be nice, but unfortunately not as good as any sort of people not trying to be anything. That had sometimes happened in the King's on a Saturday morning. All her life she seemed to have been longing to be taken no notice of. Now she exchanged a fast hug with the hostess, who was American and the most delighted and the nearest to being astounded of all, as well as having the deepest voice and the heaviest bags under her eyes. Bunty wondered if they had met before. She looked away, noticed at the end of the small garden a sculptured and much-eroded head and half-torso almost smothered in garden ivy, concentrated on it rather than look round for anybody. 'You'll have a *drink* won't you? You must have a *drink*. Have a *drink* for goodness' sake,' they said, and generally did their utmost to talk her out of dashing off again.

Bunty soon got her drink, a moderately full glass of some fruit mixture topped with thawing fragments of ice. After another pause she started answering insistent questions about what was happening on the legal front while some of those near by told others that she was a solicitor, pretty high-powered one gathered. She had just

started to feel hollow inside in a kind of provisional way when suddenly it was all right.

Much better, in fact. What happened was that Popsy simply came up and kissed her without the slightest hesitation and with exactly the right emphasis, as if she had been reading her mind. Then she said in the slightly hoarse voice and the slightly bothered or complaining tone that Bunty could never get enough of, 'Right on time as usual, darling, I don't know how you do it. And now I'm going to get you to take me away from all these lovely chaps and chapesses.'

'Oh, you can't do that,' some of them said. 'Come on, have another *drink*. Bunty's only just got here. Have another *drink*, Popsy. Oh and *Bunty*, you have another drink.'

But Popsy was quite firm. She kept smiling and pushing at the air like somebody trying to shush applause and saying it had been a marvellous party but she absolutely had to go. Not once did she give the slightest hint that she in any sense had to, or that she might have preferred to stay even a couple of minutes longer or that going was anybody's idea but hers. That kind of thing was kept for when there was trouble or competition in the offing. None of that now. Bunty felt a glow.

Not that the struggle was quite over yet. 'What about eating? Yes, what arrangements have you made about eating?'

'Oh, Bunty's seen to all that, haven't you, darling?'

'If you let us know where you're going we'll join you.'

'Oh, sweet of you but honestly we just want to sneak away somewhere quiet, don't we, Bunty?'

'Oh I see, there we are. Bit mean, breaking up the party. Well, that's it, then.'

Not long after the hostess was finally convinced that Bunty and Popsy were sure they wanted to leave, she moved attentively off with them. The three were about halfway to the garden door when a considerable silence fell over the scene they had just left, followed after a couple of seconds by an excited gabbling as though everybody had started to speak at once. Popsy squeezed Bunty's hand for a moment.

'Good-bye, darlings,' called the hostess from her time-eroded doorstep, where someone else had polished the brass boot-scrapers to great effect. 'Talk to me soon.' From the way she waved alone it was easy to see how perfectly normal she thought it was that two women should go off like that so very much on their own. But then she looked as if she thought that most things that were conceivable were also perfectly normal.

'I've booked at a new Italian place just round the corner supposed to be quite good and reasonably quiet,' said Bunty to Popsy in one breath. 'Unless of course you'd sooner –' She would not have dared to sound so concerned in front of another.

'No. That sounds perfect.'

They turned along the river where, on the sunlit further bank, a huge building out of a 1930s science-fiction film promulgated on its tower an extinct brand-name. A few battered gulls, too stupid to have taken off downstream in the good weather, sailed peevishly about. Popsy said, 'Actually that was a pretty ghastly party. You'd have hated it, darling.'

'I'm sure I should. Was it as bad as the last one?'

'The last what?'

'The last party I picked you up at the end of.'

Bunty was very sure she would have hated the party they had just left, and the one before that too, but yet she was rather thinking to herself she would not much have minded the chance of being allowed in for an hour or so instead of five minutes to make up her own mind. She would have sworn she had done no more than think that, not let it show, but Popsy at once stopped blinking.

'Are you complaining about something?'

'No, honestly, I was only –'

'Because if it's a big drag for you to come from like Shepherd's Hill to Chelsea then don't bother and next time I'll go out to dinner with the others, okay?'

'I didn't mean anything like that.'

'Because everything's been so nice up to now, don't let's spoil it, eh? I had to go to that do to meet some ghastly Canadian who might

be interested in the gallery, then I wanted dinner alone with you. Selfish of me, but what would you? Satisfied, baby?'

Bunty nodded vigorously. She was afraid her voice might tremble if she spoke.

Popsy looked round the restaurant, which was full of little flights of stairs and entirely made of identical white-painted strips of perforated cast iron. By her expression it seemed to please her and so did the people sitting about, though Bunty had no idea of even the sort of people they were. Ten seconds with the ornate menu were enough for Popsy. She liked eating out but ate hardly anything, got through a lot of chocolate between times without it showing. 'It's nice here,' she said. 'Did you check it out yourself?'

'No, I just asked jolly carefully around.'

'Well I think it's jolly clever of you to have found it. Full marks, darling. And, by the way, it was mean of me to have dragged you across town, I realize that now. I just hope I can get you to think it was worth it.'

It went on in the same blissful style till Popsy's attention was caught by two well-dressed but berkish young men at the next table nudging each other and saying things about them to each other. She noticed at once and leaned over and said not very loudly, and in just an interested tone, 'What line of work are you in, Sammy? Sewage disposal, would it be?'

The two sat for the barest instant taking in what had been said.

'I get it, right, well if you ever feel you need a really good punch up the bracket you come right over and see me and I'll fix you up with a couple right away. Super. Sorry, my love,' she apologized to Bunty, 'but you have to make your point fast if you're going to make it at all. Now where exactly had we got to?'

The young men had not yet ordered, or at least had had no food set in front of them. With a speed of thought and reaction that augured well for their careers in most lines of work they sprang to their feet as one and were clear away before Popsy was well into her next sentence, which went on from about where they had got to.

It was a good job she did not ask Bunty for help in remembering

where wildly approximately, let alone exactly, they had got to, because she would have received none. She, Popsy, had started earlier by talking about something to do with the gallery, the Alder Street gallery where she supposedly worked, though Bunty had perforce a very poor idea of that gallery except that it was of some size and a going concern trafficking in contemporary works, never having had more to do with it than walk past it a couple of times. Popsy had forbidden her to visit her there in any capacity and though a colleague did appear from time to time it always seemed a matter of inadvertence. It was the same with other connections of hers – the occasional old schoolmate, a colleague from a former job, what might have been an ex-neighbour, once an undoubtedly genuine dull married cousin with husband and children in the background, but no part of any circle Bunty might have been invited to join. She sometimes wondered what she was to Popsy and decided she offered a handy pad and no questions asked and unlimited devotion. She hoped it would go on being enough.

What made it all much better than enough to Bunty was times like now, with Popsy on about the gallery and who knew what else and her halfway into a trance, bowled over by her continuing presence, by having her so long and so closely on view as she talked. She looked like an ethereal soccer hooligan, with a thin mouth habitually open and square separated teeth, arched eyebrows, bright wide-open brown eyes surrounded by skin of a delicate fawn, a pallid complexion, unluxuriant hair, a small frame, and was to Bunty altogether irresistible as she stood. Her accent, fitfully moderated, came from Birmingham or possibly Leicester and Bunty guessed she was about forty.

They had been sort of together for nearly two years, ever since their first meeting at a house in Hampstead after the Saturday lunchtime session at the Flask. It transpired that Popsy had been invited along only because of somebody's mistaken impression that she had been drinking with Bunty in the pub, and she had so to speak gone on from there, never saying anything much about her previous life.

But Bunty was content, in a contentment flecked with tiny moments of shame and fear. But there was no call for any of either at the moment. When they got home they found that some miracle of forbearance or industry on Piers's part had put everything in order, everything bar the extinct butt of a filter cigarette left standing upright, a great hate of Popsy's snatched out of sight just in time. The two women smiled at each other lingeringly. All was well, everything.

Later Bunty said in the dark, 'I wish we could just go away somewhere lovely and peaceful where no one would bother us.'

'But you must realize that's out of the question, darling. I've got the gallery and all my friends here in London. And you've got your being a solicitor.'

Popsy had spoken with affectionate exasperation, thought Bunty, and that was pretty restrained after having such an awful gooey remark made to her, a nine-year-old's remark. 'Oh, I didn't mean it wasn't out of the question,' she said hurriedly. 'It was just a thought like everyone gets. You know.' Not exasperation – impatience. Impatient tenderness.

Chapter Two

'I feel responsible for him,' said Harry Caldecote rather peevishly. 'I don't like feeling it, because it means among other things I have to keep seeing him, but I do. I don't know, I keep feeling responsible for people and there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it, I'm sorry to say. It must be the hand of Dad at work. Through early training or through the genes.'

'The way he carried on, it's certainly not through example. But which bit of Freddie's life do you feel responsible for?'

'Well, there he is married to Désirée. Isn't that enough?'

'It would be enough to drive most men mad, even men who had started off perfectly sane, but it's hardly your responsibility, I should have thought. You didn't put any pressure on him as I remember.'

'I brought them together. That's to say she was a pal of Gillian's.'

'And of yours,' said Clare Morrison, Harry's and Freddie's sister.

'We won't go into that just now if you don't mind. And then there's the poet thing.'

'Harry, I've heard you say something like this before but I've never taken it in. Are you telling me you encouraged Désirée to pursue Freddie by telling her he was a great or something poet?'

'No, what happened was I didn't do my utmost to put her off him by telling her what a lousy poet he was and how certain to be an abject failure as the writer he seemed set on being just then. A man can't just shrug off a thing like that.'

'I'd have a good try with this one if I were you. All you can sensibly say is that you may have helped to draw Désirée into Gillian's arty set that included Freddie whom she then proceeded to mark down. That was her business, and the fact that Freddie hadn't the sense or the backbone to get away from her, that was his business. Not yours. Oh, before you go off, why do you keep bringing up those poems? Just how bad were they really? And remember poetry's not my strong point.'

'Well now, put it this way, if they were ballet dancers you'd have to cover up your eyes until you were quite sure they'd all finished and gone off.'

'But is there – this is just idle curiosity – could you see anything of Freddie in them? Do they sort of remind you of him at all?'

'Well, you couldn't make head or tail of large bits of them, of course, and they didn't seem to get anywhere much, you thought, and by the end he seemed to be on about something quite different from what he'd started on. And you couldn't imagine why he'd bothered to write it in the first place. But here and there there were just a few interesting little oddities. There wouldn't have been more than two or three dozen of them all told.'

'Very like Freddie, in fact. But if they were as terrible as you say –'

'Yes. Well, plenty of stuff that was just as terrible was being published then, or come to that at any other time since about 1620,

but Freddie's was just right for the late Fifties. The worrying thing is that it's coming up again.'

'What? How can it?'

'Well, he was yammering something about taking up the struggle again or renewing his attempt to forge a personal diction or . . . Very worrying.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand the point about forging a personal diction.'

'No, well, it was rather the sort of thing that poets said they were going to do in those days to show what sound chaps they were. Like . . . like giving the Hun a taste of his own medicine.'

'Oh. But I still don't see what you're worried about. If there's as much lousy poetry about as you say, a bit more can't do any harm.'

'Don't you believe it. I don't like the sound of it.'

'Well, perhaps you'll find out a bit more about it today.'

'What? How?'

'I take it you haven't forgotten they're coming to lunch.'

'Oh Christ Almighty.'

'Harry, I do wish you wouldn't blaspheme like that. For one thing, it makes you sound so old.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'The young don't go in for it any more, or have you stopped noticing? It's not considered cool.'

'Fuck the young, and I mean that very seriously. All right, all right. And stop sounding like a . . .'

'Like a wife. Thank your lucky stars I'm not. Not your wife.'

'Oh, I do. Frequently. And fervently.'

After two divorces (one from Gillian in the long-ago, a second from Daisy finally made absolute as recently as 1988) Harry considered he had had enough of the married state to last him indefinitely. At the same time he would have had to admit that that state had certain positive advantages for a fellow if properly handled. Many or even most of them, he would inform his circle at the Irving, seemed to be at least adequately supplied by having one's widowed sister housekeep for one. He would tell a rather smaller