

the  
Phoenix  
Generation  
Henry  
Williamson



## THE PHOENIX GENERATION

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(Macdonald & Co.)

# THE PHOENIX GENERATION

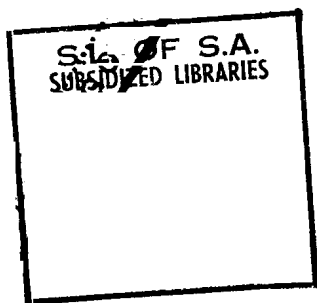
HENRY WILLIAMSON

~~'Thou knowst not, till a Glass be~~  
~~That 'tis in vain to dew or burne~~  
~~It with thy tears, or sweat, or blood~~

*John Donne*

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Part One  
**FELICITY**



## Chapter 1

### 'FARM BOY'

The guests were still arriving, to judge by the crowd waiting on the pavement outside the Oxford Street shop. The two young men, sitting in a black sport's car with fabric body, drawn up by the kerb across the street, watched for a while. The upper part of the building was illuminated. "Bogus," said Piers. "Look at that 'ornate Ionic' pillar. I wonder they didn't put Mickey Mouse on them as well."

But Phillip was thinking of the safety of his new possession, his Silver Eagle, a six-cylinder, three-carburettor sports car. "Perhaps it would be safer to park down a side-street, in case someone pinches it."

Piers thought that his friend had paid far too much for that second-hand car. It was less than a year old, but the exhaust smoked blue, the engine used a gallon of oil every hundred miles. Obviously the previous owner had caned it. Phillip had employed the Motor Association to vet it before buying. The engineer's report had been equivocal: *Provided the excessive smoking can be abated it is in good order.*

"Have you insured it against theft?"

"Oh yes!"

Piers thought that the sooner it was stolen the better. He said, "It should be fairly safe here, don't you think?"

Having removed black-leather flying coats and helmets, the two friends walked bare-headed towards the American-style department store, said to be the only one of its kind in London. Not quite the place, Phillip had understood from Piers, where one would buy one's shirts, ties, and socks. Piers had taken him to his shirtmaker in Burlington Arcade.

It was a fine night in May, 1929. Stars shone above the roofs of London. The sky had a tawny glow. As they re-entered Oxford Street a large yellow limousine drew up outside the flood-lit

building. The commissioner, a tall ex-Guardsman wearing the Victoria Cross on his uniform greatcoat, walked down to the kerb to open the door. The principal guest was to be the Earl of Lonsdale. The yellow Rolls-Royce of the famous sporting peer was known everywhere. But instead of the expected figure with large red side-whiskered face from which jutted what gossip-columnists called the inevitable cigar, a small dark man wearing opera hat and cloak alighted and, after giving the commissioner a tip, walked alone to the entrance. Some laughter greeted this odd figure.

"Dikran Michaelis, Piers. He bought one of Lord Lonsdale's old buses. I had a lift in it once. I rather like his books."

Piers thought it strange that one who could write so well himself should be taken in by such bogus stuff. Phillip was very nearly two distinct people in one body: a strange mixture. In his talk he was penetrating and amusing about some of his past encounters with women; but when Piers read what he had written about essentially the same episodes, the wit and penetration was absent. The trouble with Phillip was that he still idealised girls, who were either sexual bitches or sentimental leeches. That girl Felicity was no good for Phillip. She made him irritable and moody, but he would stick to her. It was the same with the Silver Eagle: it gave continuous trouble, but he wouldn't get rid of it.

They were taken up in the lift, shown the way to a large room leading through to an entire floor, and announced.

"Sir Piers Tofield! Captain Phillip Maddison!" as they went forward to Mr. Gordon Selfridge and their hostess.

Stringed music from one of five bands present was audible through the massed chatter. It was nearing midnight. "Let's find the champagne bucket," said Piers. "Ah, that's better. Prosit!" Glass in hand, Phillip looked around. Many of the younger men wore red carnations in button-holes. He recognised Sylvester Card, once an almost unknown member of the Parnassus Club of young writers who had met, just after the war, once a week in a small room in Long Acre to discuss Literature and Life. Card was now famous as a writer of witty comedies and revues. Phillip felt they had nothing in common. Sylvester Card collected all the urban moods of the moment.

He saw, with a mild shock, the bearded face of Tenby Jones, 'the lion of Chelsea', who had been painting in the ruins of Albert when he had been wheeled past on a stretcher on July the First. That moment belonged to the past which must not be

thought of until the time came when it could be written. He glowed within; then suffered with the thought that time was passing; and nothing done.

A woman with a smooth face recognised Piers. She wore a pink frock frothy with chiffon. Her neck lanced sapphire and richer-than-rose-red rays.

"Julia, may I present Phillip Maddison. Lady Abeline."

Another mild shock. Would Lady Abeline recognise him as the patient in the Royal Tennis ward at Husborne Abbey whom she had taken for walks in the park in May 1918, when he had been temporarily blinded by mustard gas? . . . he lived again in scenes of the Western Front, stricken, accompanied by that sudden piercing awareness of mortality whence come images of paradise clearness, realm of all beauty, poetry, art.

"Lady Abeline, w-we met at Husborne——"

She smiled with total confidence, showing splendid teeth. "Yes, you discovered a hawk-cuckoo, didn't you? Uncle Bohun has never let me forget it," she said gaily. Then to Piers, "How is Virginia? You must bring her to the Yacht Club. Of *course* it doesn't matter about the divorce. My dear, one *never* heeds the old women, who have nothing better to do than talk. 'Yes, my dear, have you heard, my dear?' Of *course* you must bring Virginia to see us."

They made their way to the buffet. "Champagne, no thank you. Never touch it." She lit a cigarette. Then winsomely, "A pink gin, thank you so much," throwing a swift smile with Sirius flashings below the tall neck. Phillip, swallowing more champagne, began to feel that the whole scene was one of grace and light.

The string orchestra sank to silence. People were turning to a screen being crossed by letters and figures. From loudspeakers came the voice of the Controller of the B.B.C.

"Labour gain."

"Oh lor'," said Lady Abeline. "I did the horoscope of Ramsay Mac. and knew this would happen. And *what* a doleful voice."

"The wreathing voice," said Piers. "Why doesn't he leave it to John Snagge."

A tall man with a grey moustache and an assumed easy manner sauntered up. Standing upright, he bobbed his head before Lady Abeline. After greetings Piers said, "May I introduce Phillip Maddison. He's a neighbour of mine and has just given up farming."

"Ah," said the elderly man. "Never forget what O. Henry said, 'Once a farmer, always a sucker'."

The affable and bewhiskered figure of Lord Lonsdale approached with a debonair, lightly-stepping man whose nose was slightly flattened. The four standing there appeared not to notice these celebrities, but all had observed them with the slightest of eye-movements. Phillip felt elation. He was among the great ones. Georges Carpentier, boxing champion of Europe . . . 1914, friends on the Hillies, warblings in the summer twilight, such happiness of life going on for ever and ever . . . until that strange and exciting suspension of life at the beginning of August.

The night glass-bubbled away and became early morning with a slight air of dishevelment. The screen continued to throw on election results. The monotonous voice of Sir John Reith—*Labour gain*. There was gentle booing in the vast crowded space: counter-cheers of the intelligentsia led by Sylvester Card, the actor-playwright with a red carnation in his button-hole. Phillip felt like cheering too: everywhere the Tory landslide. Thank God. No more hard-faced war-profiters becoming knights, baronets, and peers giving millions of pounds for Lloyd George's 'honours fund', while denying the workless ex-soldiers who had broken the Hindenburg Line and now were breaking their hearts on the dole.

He moved about in the crowd, happy with thoughts of one day writing this very scene. There was a kangaroo in a boxing ring with a young man. Most amusing. The animal gave a sudden kick at the bottom of the young man in boxing gloves as he tried to get away over the ropes. He fell. The kangaroo hopped over him, and stopped, appearing to stare at Dikran Michaelis standing alone with his back against a pillar: dark wavy hair, sharp Armenian-Jewish face cast in reflective melancholy. He said to Phillip, "It must be a French kangaroo, ignorant of the Marquess of Queensberry rules."

Phillip laughed. "My name is Maddison."

"I remember your face of Christ crucified. You are now famous, God help you."

"Not so famous as you are."

"A brief candle which guttered. From gutter to gutter, one might say."

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Michaelis."

The Armenian novelist looked even more depressed after a man

and a woman had come up to say, "Dikky darling, how *wonderful* to see you again", and passed on.

"They don't really mean it."

More people came up. Obviously Michaelis was popular. Why could he not believe it? Every affectionate greeting appeared to leave him more melancholy.

"These English ladies and gentlemen carry good manners beyond the point of insincerity, Maddison."

Phillip thought Michaelis must be unhappy because he, too, was cursed by a misplaced sense of time: occluded by shadow from childhood. He remembered that Armenians had been massacred by Turks. Dikran was rootless. A blank feeling overcame him. What if his own work ceased to be the mainspring of living? The work that he was not doing; feeling the presence of Lucy too much to struggle against in the dull valley life, the daily walk beside the brook to the Longpond. He must start his book on the trout.

A string band was playing *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. The music sank to a murmur as of leaves.

"Here is another result that has just come in——" the slow deep voice growled once more. "Labour gain——"

Phillip saw Piers beside a tall girl watching the screen. He went to them. Piers said, "You remember Gillian?"

"Yes indeed. We met at Colham market just about three years ago, when I bought my first cow."

"Rosebud"! And those too, too sweet calves you bought because they were starving, poor mites, and Rosebud had so much milk. Have you still got them?"

"I had to give up farming." The tone of his voice, with its hint of resignation, prevented her asking further questions as he sat beside her, to receive the full look of her big brown eyes. She was drinking brandy and soda.

"How is Felicity? I haven't seen her for ages. Didn't she become your secretary?"

"Yes. Do you ever go to the 'Game Pie' now?"

"Not since it was taken over by 'Ma' Merrill. It's become too, too bogus."

"Ugh!" said Piers. "Sweet champagne at three guineas a bottle. Well, I'm going to take Gillian home. If I don't see you here, I'll see you at the flat. Here's a latch-key."

About two o'clock there was a movement towards the screen about to relay further election results. Applause announced another

Labour ~~man~~? Lady Georgiana Birkin had won a Staffordshire constituency from a Conservative candidate, with a majority of nearly 8,000. This was followed by a second announcement that Mr. Hereward Birkin, her husband, had not only held the seat in Birmingham he had taken from the Conservatives during the previous election, but had increased his majority by over 3,000 votes. A roar went up from the crowd in the street outside to add to the cheering within. Phillip was standing beside Lady Abeline and heard her say to the grey moustached man beside her, "Pouff! Birkin goes round in an old motor, 'Boy', pretending to be the friend of the working man."

"A damned buffoon," replied the other as though genially. "I know his father. The young pup was born with a golden spoon in his mouth, but if he had his way there would not be one country house remaining in England. What?"

"It's quite a problem, sir," replied Phillip, thinking that he had been addressed.

"You're the friend of Piers Tofield, aren't you? You're the farmer——"

Lady Abeline took this chance to get away. Left with the grey-haired man, Phillip said, "Well, I *was* a sort of farmer, sir."

"Won't you join me at the bar, and drink to the damnation of all politics? Allow me to introduce myself. Owing to the general decay of manners among the so-called post-war generation, you were not permitted to hear my name, which is Runnymede."

"I remember Piers speaking of you, sir. He's putting me up for the Yacht Club."

"You must get 'im to bring you over to my place. The racin' starts this month, so we shall meet again soon. And don't call me 'sir'."

There was an euphoric glitter in the unfocus'd grey eyes that warned Phillip to keep his distance: was it pederasty? To his alarm he heard Captain Runnymede asking for two large whiskies and soda. Whisky on top of champagne—fatal. But he finished the drink out of an uneasy politeness, and was wondering how he could get away when a woman's screams followed by laughter amidst a scattering of figures revealed that the kangaroo had again hopped over the ropes of the boxing ring, and was loose among the gold lamé'd, chiffon'd, tulle'd, and boiled-shirted crowd. It stopped against no resistance as men and women stood still. Its keeper arrived with a small bunch of carrots and dangled them against its nose. The kangaroo held the

carrots between paws clobbered by boxing gloves and munched away as the room began to swirl around Phillip, who made for the door and hurried away down some stairs. He must get to the darkness of the side-street where his sports-car was parked. He was going to shoot his bundle.

After an hour he recovered sufficiently to open the top of the tonneau cover and drive slowly west until he found the Uxbridge road to Acton Vale and so to Ealing Common. Felicity was spending the night alone in the house during her mother's absence. She helped him into the bedroom and took off his shoes, while he sat shuddering on a chair.

"You're icy cold. Oh, Phillip, I should have been with you, to look after you. Come into bed, darling, and I'll warm you."

She moulded herself against his body. Gradually he ceased to tremble, and turned to enter her. She lay still, suffering because he did not make love to her first; he never wanted to kiss her, or do more than fondle her breasts. She understood this from what he had told her about his childhood: a mother forbidden to 'make him a namby-pamby' by comforting him when he cried: a father who had insisted that he sleep in a cot, and at one year old had taken away the part of an old silk petticoat his mother had given him as a comforter. Had this warped him, driven him into himself? Had he made love, ever, to his dead wife, Barley, whom she pictured in her mind as perfection? Oh, would Phillip never be entirely hers? He had turned away, he lay still. She remained quiescent beside him. After awhile he rolled over and, putting an arm around his own neck, settled to sleep.

For some time she lay without movement, hardly breathing. The muscles of her stomach became hard with frustration. When he was asleep she got out of bed and swallowed four aspirins.

Phillip arrived home by train the next day with Felicity, after sending a telegram to announce their arrival. Both had made new resolutions to make a success of this second attempt to work together: not to see one another before noon, when he would have finished the morning's writing: not to ask nervous-foolish questions about office details while he was by the river, observing and taking notes. He must be clear to write at regular hours every day, and finish at certain times. The afternoon was free. After tea, until supper, he would write his war novel. Every morning he would write his book on the life of a trout. That was the programme.

On arrival at Skirr Farm, Lucy told him that Piers had telephoned and left a message.

"He asked if we'd care to go with him to the Yacht Club on Saturday, and dine afterwards with Captain Runnymede."

"Well, Saturday is to be a whole holiday—relaxation—no writing. Can you leave the children with Felicity?"

"I didn't know you were coming, so I told Piers that I'd have to look after them, as Mrs. Rigg has Saturday at home." She hesitated. "Yes, I suppose I could leave them with Felicity."

"No," he said. "Not after last Christmas."

Felicity had been left alone with the children on Christmas night, when he and Lucy had gone to a party. She had only recently arrived to work for him, and had told them she would be quite happy alone; but overcome by melancholy and finally despair, she had written a letter to her mother describing her loneliness, and in an unhappy attempt to prove her feelings for Phillip, had brought her mother's reply to his writing room. He had glanced at it, but read no further after *My Darling Girlie, How dreadful for you to be left all alone on Christmas night of all nights! I was most distressed to read your letter—*

"But she was new then, wasn't she? Anyway, I'll be quite happy to remain here. Why not take Felicity? Piers said he wanted two more to crew him."

"She's never sailed, and I don't know much about that sort of racing yacht. I'll go alone."

"I wrote down the telephone number. Piers is not staying at his home, apparently, but at an hotel in the New Forest."

"I'll telephone now."

He thought that Piers was with Virginia, his wife, and he kept back his surprise when another voice, which he recognized as Gillian's, cut in and said, "Do bring Felicity. She's such a pet. I haven't seen her for simply ages."

He imagined Gillian with an arm over Piers' shoulder until his friend's voice said, "Get off the line, you bitch. Are you there, Phillip? That girl's listening from the bedroom."

"How's that adorable Rosebud?" the voice continued. "And those too, too sweet calves?"

"Oh, they're quite happy together."

"Do come," continued the voice, liquid-sloppy with drink. "I do so want to see Felicity. She's a pet."

"Yes, come," Piers cut in.

"I haven't got a car, I'm afraid."