

TER ANGUS WIL
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No Laughing Matter

Emile Zola: An Introductory
Study of His Novels
The Mulberry Bush: A Play
For Whom the Cloche Tolls
The Wild Garden: Speaking of Writing

ANGUS WILSON

No Laughing Matter

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FOR GLYN AND JANE

PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

Quentin Matthews
Gladys Matthews
Rupert Matthews
Margaret Matthews
Sukey Matthews
Marcus Matthews

SUPPORTING ROLES

William Matthews (Billy Pop), their Father
Clara Matthews (The Countess) their Mother
Granny Matthews
Miss Rickard (Mouse), their Great Aunt
Henrietta Stoker (Regan), the Cockney cook

ADDITIONAL CAST

Husbands, wives, lovers of various kinds, university teachers, and undergraduates, Russians, members of Society, politicians, journalists, members of Lloyd's and of the Bloomsbury Group, Cockneys, German refugees, staffs of preparatory schools, English residents abroad, Egyptians, actors and actresses, Moroccans, financiers, Scandinavians, and representatives of the Younger Generation.

Book One

‘Before the War’

All through that year the kinemas showed scenes from the Exhibition on Gaumont Graphic or Pathé Pictorial (for the cowboys much largo to express wide open spaces, but for the little geisha girls the piano sounded a touching staccato). Audiences caught quick jerky glimpses of huge cartwheel hats wreathed in ostrich feathers, of trains dragging in the dust, of bowlers and toppers and peaked cloth caps and little round caps set with their tassels upon the back of thickly brilliantined heads, of parasols and button boots, of sailor suits and knickerbockers, of pearly waistcoats and choker scarves, of bad teeth and no teeth, of princess petticoats, squirrel skin, sable and beaver, neapolitan ices (Oh, oh Antonio) and of hot potatoes for the muff, each in its season, of a sari or two, of the kaffir chief's headdress, of a guardsman's busby, and of a little toque of violets worn on a Great Personage's head (Viking's daughter from over the sea so splendidly null in half mourning), of the Big Wheel, the Water Shoot, the Balloon, the Haunted House, and of diabolos everywhere, of Kaiser Bill moustaches, and, above all, of even more imperial moustaches curled like a buffalo's horns, Buffalo Bill himself. Was it S. F. the showman and not the great Colonel at all? Who could tell? And true to say, who cared? It was ideal for the children. With their broad-brimmed hats, their fringed breeches, their lassoes and their whips. In the Wilds of West Kensington the West was now long established.

The Matthews family, as they came that hot July afternoon through the crowds, from the Stadium, might so easily have been frozen and stored away in the files of the National Film Institute. There Mrs Matthews' chic (Worth or Paquin, it might seem, but actually the little woman around the corner), or Marcus' pear-shaped, altar boy's head and great dark Greco eyes, or the future Regan's blowsy, randy, cowlike, cockney, Marie Lloyd features might have caught the attention of the costume designer, the lover of moments of good cinema, or the searcher for social types. But there was no such camera poised in waiting. And the loss in recall is probably not very great, since the

jerky Colonel-Bogey-accompanied life of an old film news strip would ill serve to dissolve the limbs into that delicious, sunbathed, pleasure-sated rhythm which alone could bring back the exact feel of that far-off afternoon. In any case, what no recording machine yet invented could have preserved was the pioneer happiness, the primitive dream that for some minutes gave to that volatile, edged and edgy family a union of happy carefree intimacy that it had scarcely known before and was never to know again. Whatever its origin (alas for the limits of our parapsychological knowledge) some features were common to all the day dreams in each of which one Matthews played the lead.

As a covered wagon, placidly swaying, lumbers, ambles, or generally browses across the vast plains (are they desert, are they prairie? Certainly a wind stirs, blowing dry reedy grass and sand) only Miss Rickard sees the grass clearly and supplies the balls of tumbleweed that rollstop, rollstop across the desert, but all see prairie and desert alike as yellowing through a buff to an almost primrose in the glowing sun. For most of them the prairie soil turns suddenly to sand (like the East Coast old Mrs Matthews (Granny M) sees it, where the spiky sea poppies and the coarse sea lavender so suddenly give way to wind rippled dunes), but Miss Rickard (Mouse), who once again *knows*, would (had she guessed at the old lady's English source of comparison) have bid her look up rather to Cromer's cliffs for her vision's furnishing—she has *seen* this desert and it is not sand but rock—flat rock, often, it is true, sand-covered rock, indeed always some sandy shade of yellow, but nevertheless rock.

For Will Matthews himself, bronzed and boyishly smiling for all his absurdly young patriarch's Noah's Ark responsibilities, the rocks have transformed themselves into the Rockies, for something lofty is always called forth by his muse (can it be Wordsworth's boyhood lakeside heights—his boyhood reading—that furnish his fancy?). He gazes up above the solemn peaks (surely there if anywhere the Sublime will give us the Ironic Answer) to where an eagle soars, and as he whittles away a stick of wood (for purposes obscure) he shouts out (one less subtly gentle would say 'to the very heavens') something of Bret Harte's? something of Whitman's? Bret Harte, no doubt, for Whitman, though more shoutable, seems somehow too fierce for the sunny, easy ambling roll of that day's wagon ride (English-wise the greatest affirmations are surely made in gently smiling earnest), Whitmanesque-acceptant though the day's mood must be. But,

however smiling, declaiming, whistling (perhaps a Winander owl's hoot) he is, beneath his lazy summer mood, attentive, vigilant, keen as the moose to scent approaching dangers that may threaten the God-given brood he is leading out of bondage into primeval lands (what bondage can it be? The rising income tax, a bank overdraft, or liability to jury service? Some measure of Lloyd Georgery no doubt. Most certainly no bondage of servitude, for all our party save Stoker the bondmaid herself, are of private means) and on to Eldorado.

As for the older ladies, each has her wisdoms and her skills—never such bread as old Mrs Matthews bakes, never such stews as she concocts in her billycans, never such improvised mending for her men folk as this gentle indomitable old lady, always one to remember, always one to have brought the thermometer, to have brought old Nanny Segram's handwritten book of recipes, to have brought sennapods. But Miss Rickard needs no book, she is herself their gazeteer and their medical dictionary rolled into one; the wayside waterfilled cactus root, the quamash growing by the sudden spring, the roasted porcupine—all these were her contributions. She it was who found the snakebane and the thorn with which to dig out ticks, and all these she offered with a nonchalant gracious bend of her ageing, thin, pemmican-dry pioneer's body that disclaimed all praise—as how could she accept it, for despite all her pioneering courage, she alone had the sure knowledge that when they arrived at Eldorado, it would prove to her, the much travelled woman, somewhere already familiar—after all she'd gone through Manitoba to Vancouver in 1898, to San Francisco in 1902, and in 1906 went over the Rockies to Seattle (how wisely not to San Francisco) and no doubt, at the last, Eldorado would prove to be one of these three tolerably civilised places of interest. So she smiles her old grim smile that acts like steel to stiffen the back of any waverer, and with her old grim (yet tender) wit tempers the wagon's happy family love with a needed austere irony.

Needed indeed now and again by Miss Stoker, who, a good-natured, true serving cockney, will do anything, does do anything, for her charges. Yet in Miss Stoker's mind is the clear realisation that faced by buffalo, grisly or Indians it is she, the 'down at the Old Bull and Bush I shall shortly own er, walks among the cabbages and leaks' Hetty Stoker who (in her masters' version), for all her gallery roaring, heart-as-big-as-the-Elephant-and-Castle loyalty, will panic, take fright, pee her knickers or otherwise betray her lowly origins instead, as the legend should be, of dying by sucking the poisoned wound of her youngest charge (Master Marcus) when the Indian arrows are flying fast and furious. Sensing their hidden view of herself indeed,

Miss Stoker needs all the force of Miss Rickard's (Sourpuss to her) communicated grim irony to restrain her wish to spit in their bloody faces. But as it is, and so fortified, her version takes in theirs and, Comic Western to the life, she falls over the prickly pear, mistakes the porcupine for a camp stool, and just gets back to the stockade as the growling mountain lion tears through her skirt to reveal the legs of her drawers (chase me Charlie, lend me one of yours) at once, dear, lovable comical kid to tread on the board that raises the bucket that flies through the air that empties the whitewash slap in her kisser—to the laughter and toffee-paper-rustling of all six of her loving, larking sticky-fingered charges. And even young Mrs Matthews, so beautiful and high and mighty, so very much milady, smiles as she sits at her embroidery. What would we do without our Stoker and her constant scrapes to keep us laughing, cries milady (but they'd have to in the end of course, for who but the hickseed cowboy with the freckles and the stutter would carry off Henrietta Stoker, a blushing bride, after a long comic courtship, and oblivious even at the end of the clanking old tin bucket tied to the rear of their wedding buggy? Ah well, if he was like any of the cowpunchers they'd just seen, he'd have a nice packet of meat to him).

And indeed milady, young Mrs Matthews does at that moment smile across at Stoker, the conspirator's smile of two young (younger?) women brought close in their pioneer proximity—eating all at one table, no doubt, the shared wash tub, the shared God knew what. But breeding takes such things in its stride (look at Mouse on her outlandish travels) so that some of the outer show of inner differences (maid and mistress right through to the bone) had fallen away like 'trunks not wanted on the voyage' when the old country's shores had faded out of sight. But the shared smile soon became more general as young Mrs Matthews, her great straw bonnet shading her from the prairie's ardent sun, stopped for a moment her plain sewing to day-dream, well set chin cupped in smooth white palm, large dark eyes gazing absently across the wide expanse, to ponder upon the ties that bound her so closely (her a woman whose febrile beauty, whose voracious love of life might so easily have broken her wings upon the wheel) to all those loved ones in that lumbering wagon, all those whose deep love for her was as warm yet not harsh as the prairie sun's rays. She stretched out one lovely arm to caress her Billy's curly head (improvident, carefree, hopeless, hush whisper it not, sometimes prosy, wonderful Billy, whose genius her warming love had still to ignite) and then with her other hand she brushed the crowns (flaxen, ash, russet, chestnut, coalblack) of all her children (Rupert, glorious

golden Rupert, a handsome mother's handsome favourite perhaps) but all, all (yes, even bitter, black little Marcus) the extraordinary, brilliant, healthy, handsome, utterly improbable offspring of her own deep hold on life, cherished by her, cherishing her. Jogtrot, jogtrot to the wagon's old everyday motion—she turned back to her plain sewing, wonderingly smiling at this extraordinary world which could cast someone so wild, someone so untameable as herself for the maternal role. But the casting had worked and that was all that mattered. Of course one day the journey would be done, the jogtrot in sunshine or rain be over, and Eldorado . . . suddenly she walked between the tables, cigarette in hand, hips swaying, skirts froufrouing, and the men, huge thighed, tight loined, wide shouldered, cheered as she threw down a bundle of notes on the green baize table, or more suitable to her long delicate hands, her arms gloved to the elbow, staked a pile of chips to the croupier's call . . . she adored the idea of Monte. But with that named paradise the vision blurred, toppled like the pile of chips on the edge of absurdity. Carefully she steadied herself, first one hand on the children's haloed crowns, then the other on Billy's curly mop and soon she was back contentedly with her plain sewing, swaying in the happy family wagon (of Mr Matthews, the magazine writer—two stories and an article in the Strand, three stories in the Windsor, and of Mrs Matthews, the magazine writer's wife, born hostess for a refinedly successful literary man). She began to hum beneath her breath a silly, jaunty tune, 'Oh, we'll chase the buffalo! . . .'

Quentin, at first, had thought only for the horse beneath him, as Reuben he rode, proud watchdog eldest son beside the wagon's precious load, letting the prairie winds blow around him. But another Quentin was alive within the guardian Reuben, a Quentin if not so alert, yet more deeply happy, unaccustomedly at ease, lulled into life perhaps by the unfamiliar rocking cradle of the great cowboy saddle beneath him. Unity was all to this Quentin—that at last they were all together, as they had not been since he (he the unwanted, he the recriminated fugitive to comfort) had left eight years before for Granny M. and Ladbrooke Grove. Now at last he could relax, forgiven for not sharing in shabbiness and sudden violences, could be caught up and float away in that muddied, strangely twisting, overgrown, smelly, once-so-familiar family stream that Granny M.'s portwine, best plumcake solid affluence kept out of her shiny clean, pattern-neat, timetable-exact, great empty Italianate station of a house. Keeping an old woman company, it isn't right, Quintus; but no need for gratitude's denial now, for in the adventures ahead, kind, good, dull

Granny M. (Oh! How the Sunday afternoons of stamp albums and stereoscope with pictures of the Russo Japanese war killed the hungry heart) was united with the mad, wonderful, frightening, undefendable parents and best of all with *us*. But now, behind the happy united Quentin that had grown within the guardian rider, another Quentin peered and quizzed—Quentin the looker on. “Good *and* dull,” he said, “wonderful *and* undependable,” he said, and he laughed to make the reunited Quentin shiver. Under his quizzing, unity fell away and even the prairie which had called it forth threatened to dissolve into void, but Quentin, the eldest son, lean, eager, simple and straight as a die, forced himself to feel only the horse beneath him and the wind blowing his hair. I’m only a schoolboy, he said, no time for looking on, time now only for tree felling, the lasso and the steers—too much to do to have time for comment. And if he thought he heard a mocking sound it was no doubt only the coyotes howling where the winds are free. Oh bury me deep in this family day.

Gladys, of course, was busy inside the wagon. All the stores had to be checked and double entered in the great ledger book. With a long quill pen by the light of a hurricane lamp she dipped into the silver inkpot (silver? more likely horn, moose horn perhaps), counted and wrote, counted and wrote—long bars of coarse yellow soap, packets of candles, loaves of sugar (pyramids, she saw them, in dark blue paper), red flannel petticoats (use obscure but an essential item) and beads (like the flannel, of course, for barter—or was that in the South Seas?), huge hams, vast sacks of lentils and chick peas (what could *they* look like?). And Father (how cunningly he held the reins, just feeling the horses’ mouths, no more) turned back and smiled. “Well, Podge. Our little manager. She’ll make a perfect wife for some lucky devil in Eldorado.” She ran up the length of the wagon and, throwing her arms around his shoulders, pressed her cheek against his, and they both looked up (boyishly twinkling blue eyes, solemn little dark ones) through the frosty air to where an all Halloween moon showed its pumpkin form in the great star vault above them. Then he tugged her pigtails lightly—“So that’s how it is. But you’ll have to leave your little wooden hut one of these days, you know. For some lucky fellah or other.” “Don’t tease the poor Podge. Time enough when she loses all that puppy fat. You’ll manage the general stores in Eldorado, won’t you, darling?” The back of her mother’s hand so cool, like blue veined marble, stroked against her other cheek, pressed against it. And instantly his lips were gently finding hers, then pressing hard against them so that she almost cried (it was painful the first time, Marian Sargeant said), pressing as hard as his hard thighs