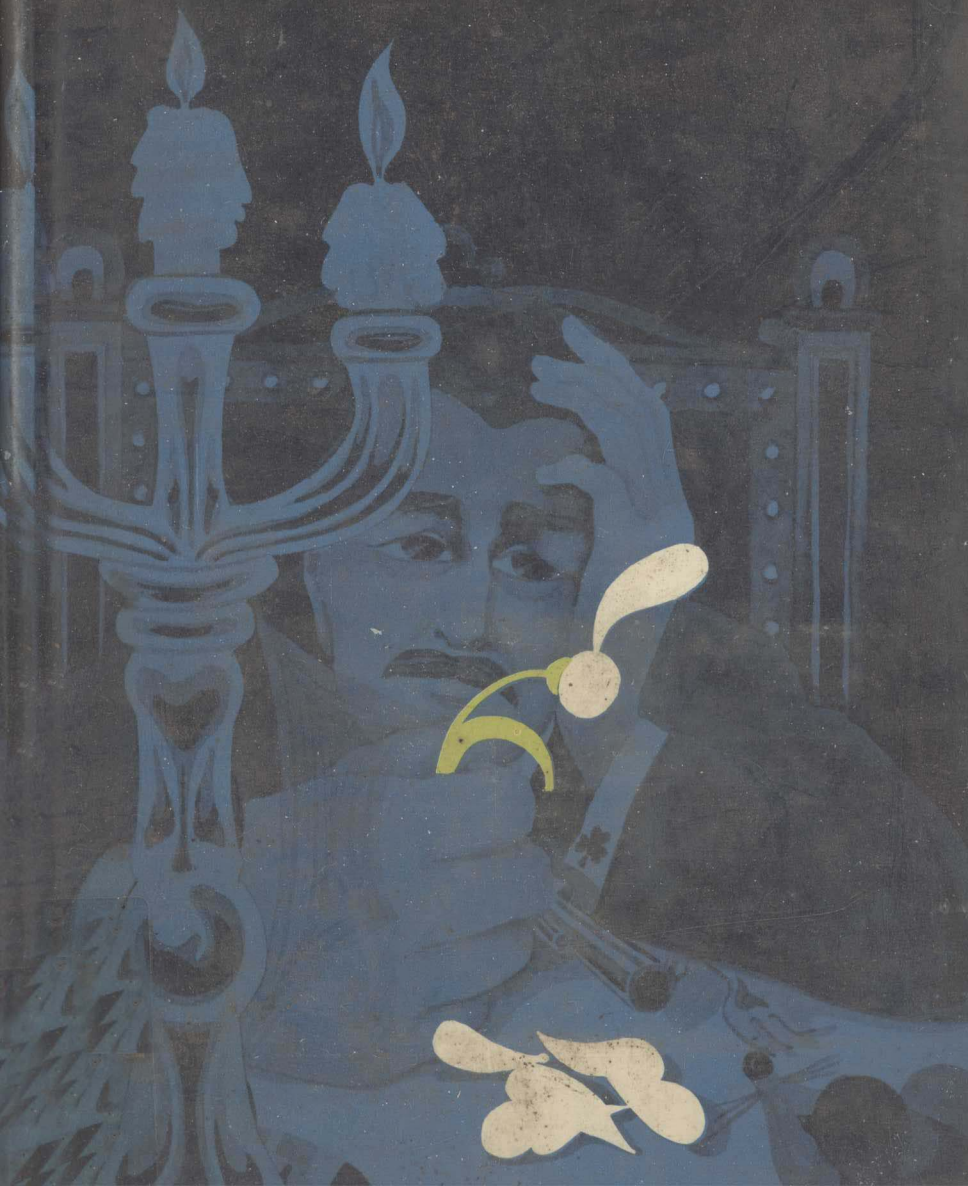
TROUBLES

J.G.FARRELL



TROUBLES

J. G. FARRELL

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1970

JONATHAN CAPE LTD
30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, WC1

ISBN 0 224 61900 4

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
EBENEZER BAYLIS & SON LTD
THE TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON
BOUND BY G. & J. KITCAT LTD, LONDON

TROUBLES

by the same author

A MAN FROM ELSEWHERE
THE LUNG
A GIRL IN THE HEAD

TROUBLES

Part I

A MEMBER OF THE QUALITY

In those days the Majestic was still standing in Kilnalough at the very end of a slim peninsula covered with dead pines leaning here and there at odd angles. At that time there were probably yachts there too during the summer since the hotel held a regatta every July. These yachts would have been beached on one or other of the sandy crescents that curved out towards the hotel on each side of the peninsula. But now both pines and yachts have floated away and one day the high tide may very well meet over the narrowest part of the peninsula, made narrower by erosion. As for the regatta, for some reason it was discontinued years ago, before the Spencers took over the management of the place. And a few years later still the Majestic itself followed the boats and preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground—but by that time, of

course, the place was in such a state of disrepair that it hardly mattered.

Curiously, in spite of the corrosive effect of the sea air the charred remains of the enormous main building are still to be seen; for some reason—the poor quality of the soil or the proximity of the sea—vegetation has only made a token attempt to possess them. Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour: the great number of cast-iron bathtubs, for instance, which had tumbled from one blazing floor to another until they hit the earth; twisted bed-frames also, some of them not yet altogether rusted away; and a simply prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls. At intervals along the outer walls there is testimony to the stupendous heat of the fire: one can disinter small pools of crystal formed in layers like the drips of wax from a candle, which gathered there, of course, from the melting of the windows. Pick them up and they separate in your hand into the cloudy drops that formed them.

Another curious thing: one comes across a large number of tiny white skeletons scattered round about. The bones are very delicate and must have belonged, one would have thought, to small quadrupeds ... ('But no, not rabbits,' says my grandfather with a smile.)

It had once been a fashionable place. It had once even been considered an honour to be granted accommodation there during the summer season. By the time Edward Spencer bought it on his return from India, however, it retained little or nothing of its former glory, even if it did retain some of its faithful guests of the year-by-year variety, maiden ladies for the most part. The only explanation for their continued patronage (since under Edward's management the hotel went swiftly and decisively to the dogs) is that as the hotel declined in splendour the maiden ladies became steadily more impoverished. In any event they could keep on saying: 'Oh, the Majestic in Kilnalough? I've been going there every year since 1880 ... ' and the man who sold the place to Edward

could claim that he had, at least, his few faithful customers who kept coming every year without fail. In the end these faithful customers became something of a millstone for Edward (and later for the Major)—worse than no customers at all, since they had their habits of twenty years or more; the rooms they had been staying in for twenty years were dotted here and there over that immense building and, though whole wings and corners of it might be dead and decaying, there would still be a throbbing cell of life on this floor or that which had to be maintained. Slowly, though, as the years went by and the blood-pressure dropped, one by one they died away.

From the *London Gazette*, General List:

The undermentioned relinquishes his commission on completion of service, Temporary Major B. de S. Archer, and retains the rank of Major.

In the summer of 1919, not long before the great Victory Parade marched up Whitehall, the Major left hospital and went to Ireland to claim his bride, Angela Spencer. At least he fancied that the claiming of her as a bride might come into it. But nothing definite had been settled.

Home on leave in 1916 the Major had met Angela in Brighton where she had been staying with relations. He now only retained a dim recollection of that time, dazed as he was by the incessant, titanic thunder of artillery that cushioned it thickly, before and after. They had been somewhat hysterical—Angela perhaps feeling amid all the patriotism that she too should have something personal to lose, the Major that he should have at least one reason for surviving. He remembered declaring that he would come back to her, but not very much else. Indeed, the only other thing he recalled quite distinctly was saying goodbye to her at an afternoon *thé dansant* in a Brighton hotel. They had kissed behind a screen of leaves and, reaching out to steady himself, he had put his hand down firmly on a cactus, which had rendered many of his parting

words insincere. The strain had been so great that he had been glad to get away from her. Perhaps, however, this suppressed agony had given the wrong impression of his feelings.

Although he was sure that he had never actually proposed to Angela during the few days of their acquaintance, it was beyond doubt that they were engaged: a certainty fostered by the fact that from the very beginning she had signed her letters 'Your loving fiancée, Angela'. This had surprised him at first. But, with the odour of death drifting into the dug-out in which he scratched out his replies by the light of a candle, it would have been trivial and discourteous beyond words to split hairs about such purely social distinctions.

Angela was no good at writing letters. In them it would have been impossible to find any trace of the feeling there had been between them during his home leave of 1916. She had certain ritual expressions such as 'Every day I miss you more and more—' and 'I am praying for your safe return, Brendan' which she used in every letter, combined with entirely factual descriptions of domestic matters: the buying of skirts for the twins in Switzers of Dublin, for example, or the installation of a 'Do More' generator for electric light, the first of its kind in Ireland and destined (they were sure) to restore the Majestic's reputation for luxury. Any personal comment, any emotion was efficiently masked out by this method. The Major did not particularly mind. He was wary of sentiment and had always had a relish for facts—of which, these days, his badly rattled memory was in short supply (in hospital he had been recovering from shell-shock). So on the whole he was glad to learn the size and colour of the twins' new skirts or the name, breed, age and condition of health of Edward Spencer's many dogs. He also learned a great deal about Angela's friends and acquaintances in Kilnalough, though sometimes, of course, his defective memory would cause whole blocks of facts to submerge for a while, only to reappear somewhere else later on, rather like certain volcanic islands are reputed to do in the South Seas.

After he had been receiving a letter a week for a number of months he acquired a remarkable skill for reading these letters and totting up the new facts, even sometimes peering past them into the lower depths where the shadow of an emotion occasionally stirred like a pike. There would be a list of Edward's dogs again, for example: Rover, Toby, Fritz, Haig, Woof, Puppy, Bran, Flash, Laddie, Foch and Collie. But where, he would wonder, is Spot? Where are you, Spot? Why have you failed to answer the roll-call? And then he would remember, half amused and half concerned, that in an earlier letter the vet had been called because Spot had had 'a touch of distemper' but had pronounced it 'nothing serious'. In this way, thread by thread, he embroidered for himself a colourful tapestry of Angela's life at the Majestic. Soon he knew the place so well that when he went there at the beginning of July he almost felt as if he were going home. And this was fortunate because by this time, except for an elderly aunt in Bayswater, he had no family of his own to go to.

On leaving hospital he had paid a visit to this aunt. She was a meek and kindly old lady and he was fond of her, having grown up in her house. She hugged him tightly with tears in her eyes, dismayed at how much he had changed, how thin and pale he had become, but afraid to say anything for fear of annoying him. She had invited some of her friends to tea to welcome him home, feeling no doubt that a young man returning from the war deserved more of a welcome than a solitary old lady was able to provide. At first the Major appeared put out to discover her house full of guests holding teacups, but then, to the old lady's relief, he became very cheerful and talkative, talked gaily with everyone, leaped around with plates of cakes and sandwiches and laughed a great deal. Her guests, alarmed at first by this gaiety, soon became enchanted with him and for a while everything went splendidly. Presently, however, she missed him and after looking for him everywhere finally came upon him sitting by himself in a deserted drawing-room. There was a bitter,

weary expression in his eyes that she had never seen before. But what else could one expect? she wondered. He must have been through horrors that peaceful old ladies (such as herself) might not even begin to comprehend. But he was alive, thank heaven, and he would get better. Tactfully she withdrew and left him to his thoughts. And in a little while he returned to the tea-party once more and seemed perfectly cheerful, his moment of bitterness amid the silent, hooded furniture forgotten.

The Major, of course, was aware that he was distressing his aunt by his odd behaviour. He was annoyed with himself, but for a while found improvement difficult. When on another occasion, hoping to divert him, she invited some young ladies to tea he dismayed everyone by the hungry attention with which he stared at their heads, their legs, their arms. He was thinking: 'How firm and solid they look, but how easily they come away from the body!' And the tea in his cup tasted like bile.

And there was yet another thing that disturbed his aunt: he declined to visit any of his former friends. The company of people he knew had become abhorrent to him. These days he was only at ease in the company of strangers—which made the thought of a visit to his 'fiancée' doubly welcome. It was true, of course, that he was slightly uneasy as he set off for Ireland. He was about to be plunged into a circle of complete strangers. What if Angela turned out to be insufferable but insisted on marrying him? Moreover, his nerves were in a poor state. What if the family turned out to be objectionable? However, it's hard to be intimidated by people when one knows, for instance, the nature and amount of the dental work in their upper and lower jaws, where they buy their outer clothes (Angela had delicately omitted to mention underwear) and many more things besides.

TROTSKY'S THREAT TO KRONSTADT

The situation in Petrograd is desperate. According to a manifesto issued by the Soviet, the evacuation of the city is going on with nervous eagerness. Trotsky has ordered that Kronstadt shall be blown up before it is surrendered.

It was the early afternoon of July 1st, 1919, and the Major was comfortably seated in a train travelling south from Kingstown along the coast of Wicklow. He had folded his newspaper in such a way as to reveal that in Boston Mr De Valera, speaking about the peace treaty signed the day before yesterday, had said that it made twenty new wars in the place of one nominally ended. The Major, however, merely yawned at this dire prediction and looked at his watch. They would shortly be arriving in Kilnalough. In Kingstown Theda Bara was appearing as Cleopatra, he noted, Tom Mix was at the Grafton Picture House, while at the Tivoli there was a juggler 'of almost unique legerdemain'. Another headline caught his eye: SATURDAY NIGHT'S SCENES IN DUBLIN. IRISH GIRLS SPAT UPON AND BEATEN. A party of twenty or thirty Irish girls, assistants of the Women's Royal Air Force at Gormanstown, had been attacked by a hostile crowd ... jostled, maltreated, slapped all along the street. Whatever for? wondered the Major. But he had dozed off before finding the answer.

'As a matter of fact, it is,' the Major was now saying to his fellow-passengers, 'though I'm sure it won't be my last. To tell the truth, I'm going to be married to a ... an Irish girl.' He wondered whether Angela would be pleased to be described as 'an Irish girl'.

Ah, sure, they smiled back at him. So that was it. Indeed now one might have known, they beamed, there was more to it than a holiday, sure there was. And God bless now and a long life and a happy one ...

The Major stood up, delighted with their friendliness, and the gentlemen stood up too to help him wrestle his heavy pigskin suitcase out of the luggage net, patting him on the back and repeating their good wishes while the ladies grinned shyly at the thought of a wedding.

The train rattled over a bridge. Below the Major glimpsed smoothly running water, the amber tea colour of so many streams in Ireland. On each side mounted banks of wild flowers woven into the long gleaming grass. They slowed to a crawl and jolted over some points. The banks dived steeply and they were running along beside a platform. The Major looked round expectantly, but there was nobody there to meet him. Angela's letter had said without fuss, factual as ever, that he would be met. And the train (he looked at his watch again) was even a few minutes late. There was something about Angela's neat, regular handwriting that made what she wrote impossible to disbelieve.

A few minutes passed and he had almost given up hope of anyone coming when a young man appeared diffidently on the platform. He had a plump, round face and the way he carried his head on one side gave him a sly air. After some hesitation he approached, holding out his hand to the Major.

'You must be Angela's chap? I'm dreadfully sorry I'm late. I was supposed to meet you and so on.' Having shaken the Major's hand, he retrieved his own and scratched his head with it. 'By the way, I'm Ripon. I expect you've heard about me.'

'As a matter of fact I haven't.'

'Oh? Well, I'm Angela's brother.'

Angela, who recorded her life in detail, had never mentioned having a brother. Disconcerted, the Major followed Ripon out of the station and threw his suitcase, which Ripon had not offered to carry, on to the back of the waiting trap before climbing up after it. Ripon took the reins, shook them, and they lurched off down a winding unpaved street. He was wearing, the Major noted, a well-cut tweed suit that needed pressing; he could also have done with a clean collar.