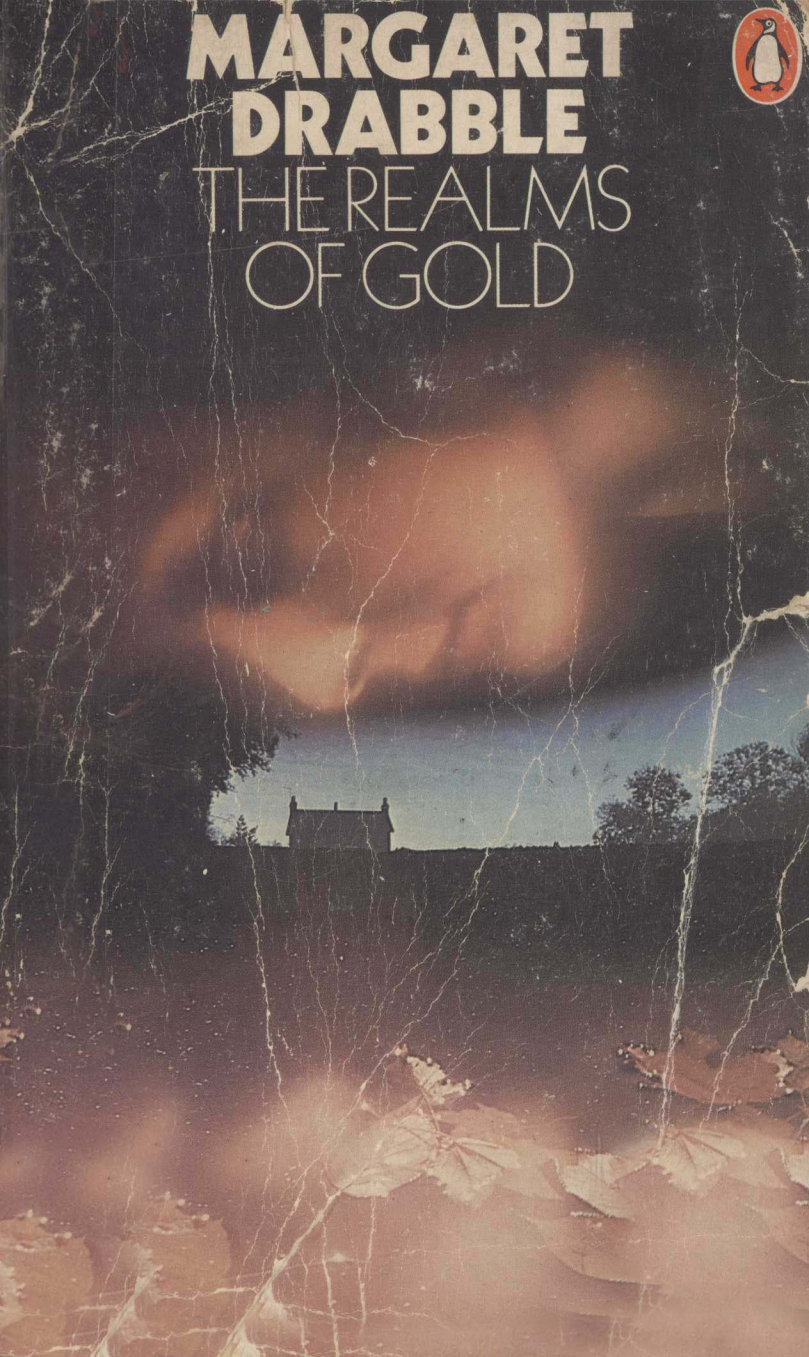
MARGARET DRABBLE

THE REALMS OF GOLD



Penguin Books
The Realms of Gold

Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939 and went to Mount School, York, a Quaker boarding-school. She won a Major Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English and received a double first. She won a travel award in 1966 from the Society of Authors and received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973. Margaret Drabble has three children.

She has written several novels: *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965, filmed as *A Touch of Love* in 1969), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969) and *The Needle's Eye* (1972), all of which have been published in Penguins. She has also published a short critical book on Wordsworth, a television play, and various articles, as well as *London Consequences* (1972, edited with B. S. Johnson) and *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974); and has edited *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976). Her latest novel, *The Ice Age*, was published in 1977.

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For Francis Hope

Part One

The octopus lived in a square perspex box with holes for his arms. He had touched her with his grey wet hand, and had shrunk quickly from the contact. Back into his box he went, as she into this rather nice hotel room.

He had suckers all the way along his arms. She thought of them with affection and amusement. He was the best thing she had seen for some time, better even than the view of the bay. He had seemed quite friendly, even though he hadn't wanted to touch her, even though she didn't quite like the smell of formaldehyde that filled the research laboratory. The most intelligent of the invertebrates. Perhaps the octopus had no sense of smell.

Idly, she reached for her perfume bottle and dabbed a little on her neck. Silly, really, to travel with such a big bottle. Her case was so heavy. But it gave one something to do, packing, unpacking. There stood a few of her things, though she was only here for a couple of nights – a bottle or two, a hair brush, a few books, photographs, talcum, a biro, lecture notes, her glasses. She had made her mark on the room. She never understood people who said they felt submerged by hotel rooms, that they felt extinguished, annihilated, depersonalized. She had occasionally felt the reverse – that her self, suddenly put down in transit, was so powerful that it might burst through the frail partition walls and send all the things swirling. Towels, fittings, coathangers, things like that. On the whole, she was happy to be in hotel rooms. A little rest, one got there, from the strain of adjusting oneself constantly, putting oneself as it were under a shade, muting oneself, lowering one's eyes. In a hotel room one could look oneself at least in the eyes, throw oneself upon the bed, take a bath naked, and no harm done to anyone. In this hotel room, one could even have a drink without any effort. She was delighted with the little humming refrigerator full of miniature bottles and fruit juices and

halves of champagne and chocolate cherries. It was a nice room. The bed was old and ornate, with an inlaid headboard, the curtains were heavy and shut out the light, the windows were double glazed and shut out the noise of the traffic, and there was a view of the bay. The fitments were modern. In the last hotel, the night before, everything had been a little old and dusty – they had apologized, and she had said she liked old hotels better, but really, she did like a nice modern bath and a little refrigerator humming away as well. This one was just about right. It was fine. She had a sip of the drink at her elbow, and then a larger gulp. It wasn't one of those miniature drinks, it was a good healthy tumbler full of duty free brandy with some water in it.

There was a very attractive gilt-edged mirror, on the wall just over the desk. Sitting down, she couldn't see herself in it, but didn't much want to. The desk had little pigeon holes and inlay. What period was it? She didn't know, she wasn't very good on furniture. It looked good, though. So did those carved black people supporting the door. There was a description of the building somewhere downstairs, she'd seen it at Reception, and it mentioned those black people. Blackamoors it called them, in its quaint English translation. Had there been slave trade here? It seemed likely. There were a lot of Arabs. It was a big port.

It was, in fact, indisputably, the best bedroom in the hotel. There was no doing anything about it. They had given the best room, in what seemed to be the best hotel.

Things were getting bad. No matter what she did about it, they were going from bad to worse. It wasn't as though she hadn't expected it, she told herself. She had, exactly, expected it. This was precisely the stage for it to happen. Eight days away from home, and it would happen, like clockwork.

However had she got herself here, into this good room? It was madness, really. Why hadn't Professor Andersson seen how mad it was, when he showed her up to the room? (A rather personal touch, that had been, but she was used to such personal touches, she even appreciated them, she liked his delicacy about it, he was a nice man, he had wanted to be sure that the hotel had done all it promised.) Professor Andersson had seemed to accept her – not quite to take her for granted because nobody took her for granted,

everyone was far too polite for that. Ah, what attentions she had purchased. But he hadn't said, 'There's your room, and it's too good for you.' At the thought of him saying that (which he might have said, instead of what he did say, which was, here's your room, I hope you find it comfortable, there will be a good view in the morning) she smiled to herself, but rather dourly, the kind of smile that old world heroes made on their way to the gallows. To the gallows I go, she said to herself, and had another large drink.

It was bound to be bad, this evening. Did that make it better or worse, as a prospect? That was something she could debate at leisure. There was something rather dreary about the inevitability of it all. Let us postpone it, she said brightly, aloud, to herself. She was an eccentric woman, and often talked to herself, aloud, in hotel rooms.

Perhaps it wouldn't be dreary. Perhaps it would be gripping. She walked over to the window and pulled back the thick curtain. There, below the double glazing, were the yachts, the bay, the port, the cars, the restaurants. All very lit up, though it was out of season. It was better than the last town she had been to. That had been really dusty. But then, it was further south. At this time of the year, very early spring, life lay in the north rather than in the south: the colder, the gayer. The south had been truly shabby, faded and desperate. The taps had been large and brass, the floor had been of spotted marble, the staircases had been wide, the porter had been thirteen years old, and the roof garden had been utterly empty, deserted like a closed building site. She had stumbled over spades and a heap of geranium roots. It was livelier, here. An all-the-year-round city. The octopus industry flourished, as did her own. Further south, she had felt like a prophet, a wanderer (which in a sense she was). Perhaps that had made it better. She had felt a purpose there. Here, she had none, she was one of many, there was no reason why she should not be down there in one of those flash cars, or dining in one of those illuminated restaurants, rather than sitting here alone, with an empty evening, an utterly empty evening ahead of her. (It was only six o'clock.) She could have accepted a dinner at one of those restaurants down there: the Professor and his wife would have been glad to take her out.

The octopus, intelligent creature that he was, could survive in a perspex box. Though why he bothered, who could say. And the female of the species died, invariably, after giving birth.

It's all a question of programming, she said to herself, as she began to walk up and down the room. It wasn't presumably possible that an individual mother octopus could refuse to die. They always made the same decision, even when tempted from their death beds by choice morsels. Their role accomplished, they preferred death. She often wondered what she herself was programmed for. This curious mood, into which she was now just about to fall, seemed to be part of her plan. And as it was part of her, so she had made plans for it. She was good at plans and programmes – she had a programme for her lecture tour, full of times, dates, names, addresses, hotels, she had left behind her a complicated programme for her children, with meals, Wednesday swimming day, Thursday window cleaner, and such things written upon it. And she had by now a well-established programme for the horrible thing that was about to get her. (Sometimes she dignified it with the name of Despair – had usually done so, in fact, as a child, but now she was less respectful to it, and saw it as some kind of illness. A family illness, but more of that later.) A tutor of hers (and indeed her first seducer) when she used to complain about Despair, had said that she must learn to familiarize herself with it, and treat it as a part of a pattern, part of a cycle. She had thought him a foolish and cynical old bore (he had been twenty-nine) but time had in fact proved him right. You must learn to see life as a cycle, not as a meaningless succession of mutually exclusive absolute states, he had said.

She had tried to learn to do just that, but wasn't too pleased with some of the results. She did indeed know now, of her states of mind, that they would arrive, and pass, and that each time they'd seem to be there forever. It was largely a question of sticking it out. She also knew, more sinister knowledge, that she tended deliberately to choose every now and then a situation in which nothing else could possibly happen. Solitude, enforced, as now. As though she wanted it? This was something she by no means understood.

Programming. She thought about that again, it was a pleasant

distraction, it occupied the brain, while whatever it was gathered behind her eyes, in her chest. It had been interesting, the experience of being programmed for maternity. She had been a fairly responsive case; yet not utterly responsive. Now her youngest child was seven, and some of her finer responses were no longer needed. She had felt, had noticed her heart hardening. She no longer softened at the sight of other people's babies: in fact she would avoid them and leave railway compartments when they entered. She no longer wept over newspaper stories about battered and abandoned infants. Advertisements for the NSPCC and the Salvation Army failed to draw automatic tears, as they had done. But she didn't seem to be developing other, compensatory areas of softness. Her heart didn't bleed for divorced wives or retired pensioners. She was just getting harder. These days, she blamed people for what happened to them, instead of excusing them. Perhaps, her children now so old, and no longer needing her care so much, there was nowhere else for her to go. What were women supposed to do, in their middle years, biologically speaking? Have more babies, she supposed. The idea appalled her. Unlike the octopus, she seemed resolved on a course of defying nature. Maybe that was why she felt so bad?

The male octopus hadn't known his limitations. He thought he could have a full, active healthy life in that box, or surely he would have sat down and died?

It wasn't much good, really; speculations about the octopus were interesting, but not interesting enough. She looked at her watch. (A bad sign.) Ten past six, said her watch. Only ten past six.

She walked up and down the room a few more times, and looked again. Still only ten past. And here it came, this indescribable event, which as soon as it had passed would be gone and forgotten, leaving nothing in its wake, though in other ways one could have compared it to a change in the weather, to a feared approaching squall or hurricane, and it was true that the air did grow very dark at that moment, but it would pass (she told herself), and leave nothing, it broke nothing, it hurt nothing, she would be all right soon, inevitably she would be all right. She repeated these words, a careful formula. It grew darker, a kind of

blue-grey watery darkness, and she began to moan (as she had always moaned as a child, tossing her head backwards and forwards on the pillow, finally beating her head against the wall or the rails of the bed.) Indescribable, how bad it was, when it came. And yet, she told herself (a little, safe, monotonous voice speaking) it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, it will pass, up and down, up and down, she walked and walked, and the tears rose, and she breathed with difficulty, and the hot tears spilled down her cheeks, and she thought that's better, it's nearly over, when the tears come, for though the tears had no healing power, they took off the edge of it, like cold water on a burn, which similarly has no healing power, and before she knew where she was she was weeping and gulping as she walked, and moaning at the same time, and for a moment it seemed to be happening, in time, and then whatever it was was over, and she was left feeling obscurely cheated, as though she had missed something of final importance by not concentrating hard enough. This was the worst thing of all, the sense of loss. As though one waited, constantly, for something that never happened, was never revealed. That, too, was familiar. And now it was all over, the tears that still fell were falling meaninglessly, unfelt; she pulled out her handkerchief and blew her nose. It wasn't so bad, really, after all. More of a nuisance, really.

She honestly couldn't tell whether it was the depth of her being that she fell towards, at such moments, or whether it was some squalid muddy intersecting gutter or canal, from which she would struggle wisely back to dry land. At times she would willingly have fallen further. But never achieved it. Always, the struggling back, the drying of eyes, the reassembling of parts.

She still didn't feel exactly cheerful, though the worst was over. She walked up and down for half an hour or more, muttering to herself, trying to divert the energy of the experience to some more useful end, but she was exhausted. It was, after all, as though some bad weather had passed over her, leaving her a little flattened, like a field after heavy rain. It would take her some time to shake it off and slowly uncrackle and unfurl herself again. Meanwhile, she walked up and down, and had another drink. She was a large woman and could drink more than was good for

her, and moreover had got into the habit of doing so. Sometimes she had thought she could drown her bad moments in drink, but had never managed to yet; they always lurked and waited for her, and got her later, when she had a hangover. (Her brother, of much the same temperament, had pursued drink more effectively, and seemed to have had good results, though accompanied by deplorable side effects.) At one patch in her life, the bad moments had been so frequent (this was just before she decided, finally, to leave her husband) that she had gone to her doctor like an adult woman and asked for tranquillizers, as all her friends did: she'd swallowed the things, mouthfuls of them, and waited for some Nirvana of happy irresponsibility to take over, but nothing at all had happened. Absolutely nothing. She'd been back to the doctor and complained, and he'd tried her with some others, and again, nothing at all had happened. (She'd found much the same resistance to purple hearts, at Oxford.) She still wept endlessly, and moaned and beat her head on the wall, in almost incessant stormy weather. After a while, she'd abandoned the whole idea of drugs, and had subsequently been relieved that they hadn't worked: it made her misery more, not less, respectable, she felt; she was glad it hadn't been so feeble as to respond to a few chemicals. As soon avert an avalanche with a wall, or quench a volcano with fire-hoses, as they had vainly and recently tried to do in Iceland.

(In fact, it was largely Frances Wingate's own fault that she did not respond to drugs: it is true that she had a happy constitution, a metabolism able to deal with large quantities of foreign substances, but it is also true that she never followed instructions on bottles, and failed to grasp the point that many pills are geared for cumulative or long-term effect, not for instant relief. Her doctor, unable to believe that Frances could be so stupid, never thought to question her more closely about her pill-taking habits, and remained puzzled by her resistance. But then, he had never been convinced that there was anything much wrong with her.)

When she left her husband, the thing stopped altogether, for a while. Aha, she had said to herself.

It started up again some time later, and had continued, though very intermittently, through the happiest years of her life. It was

back again now, but not surprisingly. She poured herself another drink, and wandered over to the gilt-edged mirror and looked at herself, while thinking of the happiest years of her life, and wondered if they could really be over, as it now seemed. She looked at herself, red and blotchy, her skin with broken veins (drink, of course, as much as age), and thought that she certainly didn't look as though she had much future. The notion amused her, because she was after all only in her mid-thirties, and doing very well for herself in other ways. She blew her nose, and decided to feel better, if she possibly could.

It was partly her own fault that she was feeling so bad. She must, in some way, have wanted it. Otherwise, she wouldn't have come back to this very town, where she had parted from the only man she had ever loved, the only man in Europe. (She liked that phrase and said it to herself from time to time, and in a sense it was appropriate as well as melodramatic, for the man in question had been a middle European, born in Pilsen though reared in Palmers Green.) She deserved to feel bad, after all. One had to relive one's own worst moments. (Part of her said, if one must be miserable, one might as well have something to be miserable *about*.)

Though she was feeling, distinctly, better. Blowing her nose, powdering her nose, wiping her eyes. It's all your own fault, she said to herself, you shouldn't spend so much time alone. You should have gone to dinner with Andersson, as you were supposed to.

But I didn't *want* to, she answered herself. I'd seen enough people, I'd met too many people.

Oh heavens, she said to herself, and looked at her watch. It was, amazingly, mercifully, ten to eight. One good thing about one's bad moments, they did speed up once they got going. It was only the approach that was so laboriously, so boringly, so painfully slow. It was rather like work. Settling down to work was agonizingly tedious, and yet once one got into it the time flew away. Ten to eight. If she went out now for dinner, and had a little walk on the way there, and a little walk on the way back, it would be time to go to bed when she got back to the hotel, and the whole evening would be over, polished off, finished forever. She looked at