



# THE LONG PROSPECT

ELIZABETH HARROWER



"COMPLETELY CONVINCING"

THE AUSTRALIAN

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*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
is intended to any living person.*

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THE  
LONG PROSPECT

*By the same author*

The Watch Tower

The Catherine Wheel

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE FRONT door of Thea's flat was ajar so Lilian gave it a push and went in, her eyes on swivels. This was the first time she had been here but Thea's name was printed on a card next to the bell so there could be no mistake about it, any more than about the building which, on its cliff-side road, was hardly more to be expected *there*, and hardly less conspicuous, than a transplanted Sphinx.

To Ballowra, for Ballowra, the building, and the choice of the building as a dwelling place, seemed pretentious. Since its birth Ballowra had been—you might say on principle—low-lying, single-storeyed: in everything, that is, but steel-works and factories.

Ignoring the lift, walking upstairs with one ironic eyebrow cocked ready to greet Thea, one drooping disdainfully, Lilian had reflected on the truth of her late husband's saying. The exact words of it were in the grave with him, but she remembered it as a complaint against the commercial types from Sydney who were even then coming up and building up and making money—spoiling the place, he had incredibly said (for what could spoil Ballowra?) with their great department stores and blocks of flats.

That someone *she* knew, that someone who had boarded in her house for years, should have aspired to and achieved the tenancy of one of these quaint apartments struck Lilian as more than comical—it was ludicrous. It was as if Thea had suddenly claimed for herself some marvellous talent.

'God in Heaven!' she softly exclaimed as she walked through the small passage into the sitting-room.

What she thought of the room was neither here nor there and had nothing to do with her cry. The thing was, she had registered her disapproval of Thea's unnatural act in coming here: that done, she more tolerantly looked around and crossed to the wide windows. There, below, and straight ahead, was



that much-praised view of the sea. A lot of water, yes, but nothing to make a fuss about. She had once said, 'For all I care the Pacific can jump in the lake.' It had been a success. On the strength of that success she now relaxed her mouth at the Pacific and admitted that it was blue.

Turning, her eye took in with less and less attention flowers, books, ceiling, floor. . . .

Now that her first curiosity was assuaged, she had begun to wonder at Thea's continued absence. There had been doors to the right and left, she remembered, as well as this central door she had chosen to enter.

She took herself again to the hall and listened, frowning. She meant to charge and reprimand Thea for her carelessness in leaving her flat unguarded, and in order that her reproof should have authority, she wanted to keep combined the full surprise of her physical and vocal presence. Therefore she was silent, but she thought, I might be Jack the Ripper for all she knows, and here I am, inside.

A few quick steps carried her heavy, erect figure to the kitchen—little more than a gleaming cupboard of white and dark blue—where the sight of dishes, two sets of dishes on a tray, in a moment overrode the more immediate effect made by the dazzle of fitments and paint.

Thea was solitary: *she* was unexpected. Affronted by the mystery of the dishes, Lilian went back across the hall towards the other door, almost shut, presumably the bedroom.

As she approached it a voice was raised and Lilian stopped dead. Then with a fall to something like disappointment, she realized that Thea was speaking on the telephone. She let out a breath. But then, again, at a note in the voice, at the tone, her face twisted incredulously. She had never heard anything like it. And that was Thea, whom she knew.

Tense, eyes fixed, Lilian listened, her mouth quivering with anger and excitement and a curious kind of pleasure. Absorbing it all, directing content, manner and implications to their appropriate ends, she decided that the really annoying thing about it was that but for this accident she might never have found out.

Another small, galling but unadmitted factor in her reaction



was jealousy, for at this time she had not met Rosen, and Olly had had his day.

Now Thea was speaking again, and there was her voice. . . .

When at last the receiver was replaced on the stand Lilian was unprepared for it. She gave a jump. She had banged the front door and turned with a smile to meet Thea before she knew what she was doing. Several long seconds passed in silence and astonished surmise strained the smile to a grimace.

‘Lilian!’

Defended by a poise that Lilian had never shaken, Thea stood in the doorway and was eyed by her uninvited guest with the usual mixture of awe and derision. A woman by temperament thoughtful, generous and feeling, Thea was accustomed to being suspect by the majority that was her opposite.

‘Did you expect someone else?’

‘No. Not even you. I heard a noise. Was that . . .? How are you?’

‘Anyone might have come in. Luckily it was only me.’

‘What do you mean? Sit down over here.’

‘The door. You should be more careful. I read last week—’

‘Why? It’s so hot,’ Thea excused herself, turning to light a cigarette. ‘There might have been a breeze.’

‘But there isn’t.’ Lilian protestingly flapped her gloves in front of her face. ‘Billie and Gladys and I and a few others were round at the Horizon this afternoon, so when we broke up, and I was practically next door—I knew you’d be home from work—I thought I’d come and have a look at your *flat*.’

‘And what do you think of it?’ said Thea, standing at the windows. When Lilian continued to watch her with cold, amused grey eyes she knocked some ash from her cigarette and said, ‘But you haven’t seen it yet, have you? I’ll show it to you.’ She added tonelessly, half lifting a hand, ‘This is almost all there is.’

Another silence came over them. At length Thea said, ‘And how is Emily?’

‘Wondering what’s hit her now that you’re not there to spoil her,’ said Lilian ironically of her granddaughter. She



said, more slowly, looking round the room, 'The house is empty now with only the two of us, but I see why you had to have your flat. I see *now*.'

Unable to relax so far as to sit down, Thea nevertheless seemed to grow easier, though there was about her still an unfamiliar, uncharacteristic distractedness. Behind Lilian she touched a cushion on an empty chair. 'I must see her soon. You do like it, then? A room of this size is rare in a new building.' Seeing by Lilian's smile that she had mistaken her meaning, she said, 'The position? The view?'

'Oh, the view!'

In Greenhills, the most western suburb of Ballowra, farthest from the coast, from her house on the side of a hill, Lilian could see three provision shops on the opposite corner, two roads at right angles, hundreds of corrugated iron rooftops, and smoke from acres of steelworks. Nevertheless she said of the cliffs, the long curved beach, and the Pacific, 'Oh, the view!'

'Then what? What do you mean?' Thea smiled, disarmed by her scorn, her attention finally canalized, concentrated on Lilian.

Lilian tilted her head. 'Who's Max?'

There was the slightest pause during which their eyes held together stilly.

'Why do you ask? Did you overhear our conversation?'

'I heard what *you* said,' Lilian declared. 'Luckily it was only me. You shouldn't leave your door open. Who is he, anyway?'

By Lilian only the broadest of gestures and words were comprehended; for that reason, very little that was natural to Thea ever came into play against her. That, in Lilian's company, passivity and non-retaliation were the sole defences of integrity she had long ago learned. She had agreed to pay the enervating toll exacted by the stopping-up of spontaneity.

She therefore stood, and holding at bay the idea of Lilian's witness, said indifferently, 'You must have heard me mention his name.'

'He's at the works with you? Is he a chemist, too?'

'You could call it that.'



‘Something atomic?’ Lilian hazarded, looking suspiciously up at her. ‘Trying to ruin our weather, is he?’

‘Happily, no,’ Thea said, with the ghost of a smile, and felt free to walk to the mantelpiece to discard her cigarette: having done that her position became devoid of purpose.

Outwardly controlled, she eyed a small vase of petunias with blank resistance, and waited for Lilian’s next remark which was, ‘Of course, he’s married. I made out that much. Will he get a divorce?’

‘There’s no question of it.’

‘Ah!’ Lilian dug her heels into the carpet and bounced farther back on the sofa. She said shrewdly, after thoroughly studying Thea’s figure and pose, ‘What’s the trouble, is he a Catholic or something?’

Seeing in Lilian’s unsuccessful speculation a means of halting the catechism Thea almost warmed to her. ‘Yes.’ She sat down in an armchair and added, forestalling further questions, ‘To-night, as you probably heard, he’s flying to Melbourne.’ She said it with the air, casual yet candid, of one telling all.

Lilian was nonplussed. Her other questions, banished by the previous moment’s intense receptivity, could not be recalled. She cleared her throat. ‘It’s a good night for a plane,’ she remarked.

‘The forecast says fair weather.’

They did not speak again of Max.

When Lilian was leaving, Thea came after her to say, ‘Tell Emily—tell her I’ll come to see her soon.’

Thea had known Lilian Hulm and lived in her house for eleven years, ever since the year of her graduation when the opportunity offered by A.C.I.L. for research had brought her from Sydney. In those days there were no flats; a moat of steelworks and factories surrounded hills and plains of drab bungalows and shops. Cinemas, hotels, reared up from the encircled plain like small cathedrals. At night the sky glowed dusky red with industry.

For a newcomer, a single woman, accommodation meant a room in a stranger’s house in whichever suburb was nearest to her place of work. That Thea had at the beginning chosen



to stay with Lilian indicated no more than the convenience of the house, and the lack of an alternative; that she continued to stay was the measure of her detachment.

Lilian Hulm, handsome, twice-widowed, forty-seven, had had boarders in her house—sometimes one, once as many as three—ever since her first marriage at eighteen.

For two years before the death of her first husband, Paula's father, she had been the mistress and landlady of Jack Hulm—a personable man twenty years her senior. Now *his* widow, free of ties and financial worries—he had left her a row of houses and three taxis—she was searching in an intuitive but none the less methodical manner for his successor.

It was of bygone and potential candidates for this rôle that she talked to-night.

Thea had to hear again the old story of Olly's defection. She was told, incidentally, about the woman across the street who had bunions, and Jill having trouble now that she had reached that certain age. She was told that Billie Duncan no longer slept with her husband; that Moira Digby along the street owed ten pounds to the grocer, that at forty-two Janet Olafson expected her first baby and no one could guess who the father was. Olafson was at sea. Thea was taken, in detail, through Dotty's mother's operation for gall-stones. And an ancient interesting hæmorrhage of Lilian's own was recalled in passing.

In return, Thea did not mention Max. She did not give her opinion of the United Nations' resolution on the European crisis, or ask for Lilian's. She did not say that she had last night, with great pleasure, re-discovered Housman. Neither did she attempt to summarize what she knew of the work of Jung, nor try to convince Lilian of its great value. That she and Max had dragged themselves from bed at dawn to walk on the empty beach, and smiled now to remember their subsequent exhaustion, she did not say. And about Emily, whom she suspected of not being properly fed, she did not ask. The hostile irrelevance of Lilian's reaction was all too predictable.

It was several months since Thea had been to Greenhills. Her visits now were always arranged to coincide with Max's



periodic trips to Sydney or Melbourne for meetings. But to-night, in spite of his absence, she was depressed by the senselessness of time so spent. Inevitably, she and Lilian had shared a web of associations: they knew the names of each other's friends and relations, recognized each other's clothes, brands of toothpaste, soap, and cigarettes. Each knew what would not amuse the other. The routine of Lilian's daily life was as familiar to Thea as her own. And, too, it had not been possible to live in her house for years, through vicissitudes which had included two deaths, two weddings and the birth of her granddaughter, without having come to respect some part of her immense, uncompromising gusto, and the sheer size of her most wrong-headed qualities. Thea understood Lilian, but discerned the point beyond which her understanding did not go: Lilian, on the other hand, pronounced on *her* with the confidence that comes of ignorance and physical propinquity—but without intentional malice. This was the sum of their relationship. To-night, to Thea, it seemed insufficient reason for her presence.

In a small agony of restlessness Thea felt it insupportable that they should remain as much as acquaintances. Communication so arid should long have been abandoned. But in the past, living in the house, there had not been this necessity to sit face to face for the purpose of entertaining and being entertained, and if there had been, it was not impossible that she would then have responded without the sensation of disintegrating boredom and reluctance that now assailed her. Then, alone and disengaged, she had had endless tolerance and patience. Now, she could not bear for the length of an evening, the fall to tedium, flatness, and the exchange of personalities. And it was a delusion to think of her presence or absence, her interest or distaste, in terms of selfishness or generosity: anyone over the age of twenty-five with normal hearing would have served Lilian as well.

Her coming to-night was an act of hypocrisy—one that had not gone unpunished, she wryly thought. And she suppressed a sigh, for this brief return to the past made her long for the present, long for Max, long for their life together, as sharply as if all were unattainable.



Her eyes drifted abstracted over the room she had known to satiation—white walls, dark picture rail, plain beige velvet sofa and chairs, two round mirrors, the big chiming clock, ten o'clock. A pink racing guide poked out from under a cushion. Ten o'clock.

Lilian was saying, 'The thing about Olly is he's got a bit too big for his boots. They're all the same. Put a few pounds in their pockets and before you know it they're telling you what to do. He's threatening me—*me*, mind you—that he could get off with that Mrs. Rufus, you know, her with the mink coat, that he could get off with her any time he likes. Well, you can imagine——'

Standing behind a high black chair which was at an oblique angle to the wall, Emily slowly ran a small forefinger along, up, along and down the narrow aperture between the spars. Slowly, round and round, the finger went while she stood, eyelids drooping with sleep, staring at Thea. At the same time, mechanically, with tongue and teeth and breath she formed a soundless chain of words, worked a hundred soundless Theas into an incantatory chain to link her to the woman in the chair.

Since dinner she had been there. Three times she had resisted the appeal of Thea's outstretched hand lest her grandmother should be reminded of her existence and send her away. But still she was near, seeing, listening to Thea. . . .

Again Thea stretched out her hand and looked at her, and again the child glanced away.

'So I said to him, "Mr. Olly Porteous, I've put better men than you——" What are you doing standing there? How long have you been there?'

'A while,' Emily said, reluctantly.

'A while, indeed,' said Thea, smiling, recognizing in the child the reason for her continued association with Lilian. 'She's been very quiet. I don't wonder that you didn't notice her.'

Her grandmother said, not unprudently, 'Oh, she knows how to behave when there are grown-ups in the room. Don't you? Don't you, Emily?'

And Thea remembered that Lilian had been brought up to be



seen and not heard. The result *there* had been such that, looking at her, though she was dismayed to have the formula applied to Emily, Thea had to laugh.

'Oh, Lilian!' she protested. 'I thought I had convinced you long ago——'

She was disregarded.

'Well!' Lilian said irritably to the child. 'Can't you answer when I ask you a question? . . . Don't you think she's a great silly lump of a girl for nearly seven, Thea? What do you think of a girl as big as that who won't open her mouth when she's spoken to? Oh, she's as stupid as all the Lawrences!'

Salt waves of mortification washed over Emily. She met the scorn in her grandmother's eyes and then bent her head to look at the carpet. No one could like a great lump of a girl. No one could not agree with a voice so positive.

Yet, miraculously, the towering mountain that was Thea—suddenly beside her—could be heard to say, 'She's my most favourite girl of nearly seven. I love her.' Turning to Lilian she said, 'The most clever, too! Did you see her school books, to-night?' She leaned down. 'Sleepy? It's late for you to be up. . . . I know it really is too bad to have to go to bed when things are happening out here, *but*, Emmy . . . and I'm going very soon.'

Rising, Lilian pointed an imperious finger at the door. 'Take yourself off this minute! You should have gone hours ago without being told.' Scarcely giving herself time to draw breath she said, 'What do you say?'

'Yes, Grandma.' Emily clutched at another chair as if to anchor herself to the room. She could not bear to go. But slowly, as she watched the two women, her fingers uncurled.

'I'll help her,' Thea said, but Lilian cried, 'No, no, no, no! She can get herself off. We'll have a cup of tea. I'll put the kettle on. Now say good night to Thea or she'll think you've got no manners and she won't come to see you again.'

The confusion of having the slow, full stream of Thea's attention—all of Thea's concentration—on her was great. She



looked up and adored. When she said goodnight it would be over and Thea would go. Thea would go, and would she ever come back?

She was all at once enfolded, engulfed in warmth and softness: she could have died in the embrace—anything to stay with Thea. But a moment later, inadequate, wriggling away, she giggled shrilly, called good night in a high false voice and, arms outstretched, twirled in dizzy circles to the bedroom, laughing stupidly.

‘Well!’ said Lilian, not displeased. ‘After all you used to do for her. You used to be a great favourite. I noticed tonight she wouldn’t go near you.—Oh, the kettle!—Yes, you always spoilt her. But they forget. They change.’

Sitting back in her chair Thea gazed heavy-lidded at her hands without answering. When Lilian still hovered over her, shifting her weight from foot to foot, fiddling with a china ornament at one moment, putting it down the next to squint along the length of a table for smears or dust, Thea felt rather than saw the sharp glances that investigated her face. She said, ‘And how is her mother? How is Paula? Have she and Harry come to any decision?’

‘Oh, them!’ Lilian straightened up. ‘Paula’s all right. She still likes Sydney better than Ballowra and she sells a few hats now and then. She says she wouldn’t come back here for all the tea in China, but nothing would get her out to Harry in Coolong, either. The latest idea is that if and when he gets a transfer to Sydney, they might set up house again and take Emily, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they got a divorce before then.’

‘It’s come to that?’

‘Well, you know what they were like together.’

With a snort of laughter Lilian went out to the kitchen and Thea was left with the spectral figures she had defensively conjured up. She had known Emily’s parents well.

Paula, Lilian’s only child, a solemn girl held in thrall by her mother, had, in a moment of revulsion following the discovery of her mother’s relations with Jack Hulm, turned outwards to the importunities of Harry Lawrence, a local boy who worked in the local bank. He was attracted by her calm good looks,