

# THE WATCH TOWER

ELIZABETH HARROWER



"SUBTLE BUT STINGING"

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD



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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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# Part One

‘Now that your father’s gone — ’

Stella Vaizey saw the two faces jerk to an even sharper alertness, and hesitated. What a pair of pedants they were! What sticklers, George Washingtons, optimists!

‘Dead,’ she corrected herself firmly, with a trace of malice. ‘Now that your father’s dead, the three of us are going to live together in Sydney.’

The blank receptive faces, the wide-open eyes, turned now to their headmistress, Miss Lambert, who nodded regretful confirmation.

‘When I’ve sold the house and found a flat in the city,’ the girls’ mother continued, taking in the exchange of looks dryly, ‘I’ll let Miss Lambert know.’

A magpie or a currawong, or some other bush bird she hoped never to hear in town, gave its careless, beautifully deliberate call from a giant blue gum in the distance outside the school grounds. (Someone sighed.) Closer at hand there were energetic sounds from the tennis courts, and laughter.

‘I can’t persuade you to reconsider this, Mrs. Vaizey? If we had Laura for her last years — She’s one of our best students, you know.’ The girl had thought that she might study medicine as her father had done, though Laura had now and then expressed her willingness, in addition, to sing in opera, if pressed to do so. And laughable and unlikely though such ideas often seemed, it was a fact, Miss Lambert had to admit, that human beings did perform in operas the world over, and that Laura had a charming mezzo-soprano voice, was musical, and had an aptitude for languages. However, her poor young father — at forty-five five years younger than Miss Lambert — had had a heart attack at the wheel of his car setting out one evening to visit a patient; and now, in a sense — from a headmistress’s point of view — his daughter’s life was in danger. (Clare’s too, of course, but she was only nine, not at such a crucial stage; was apt to say, anyway, to benevolent



enquiries about her future plans, 'I don't know' — unlike some others of her age, who could already answer, with an aplomb Miss Lambert liked to flatter herself the school had fostered, 'A physiotherapist, Miss Lambert', or 'A debutante, Miss Lambert'. Nice decisive little lasses!)

'Laura's career — It would make so much difference. There are scholarships —' Miss Lambert murmured, rising even as she spoke, for Stella Vaizey was murmuring back with a soothing insulting confidence, 'The girls understand. Their father was not very practical.'

Called on for understanding, her daughters looked at Mrs. Vaizey with a probing uncertainty. She cared for them so little they were awed. Their father had translated her to them from time to time; now Laura was obliged to attempt this for herself and Clare. Recently, she had explained: 'She's wonderful, really, it's only that she's unpredictable. But she's unusual because she's not an Australian, I think. You'd be bound to be different, being born in India.'

Clare left her attention and a finger on the blue-ruled page of her homework book, and raised bright-grey eyes to her sister's face. After an empty perusal of this face, which was intently thinking at a pastel portrait of Princess Elizabeth, Clare's eyes dropped deep into the inky problems of trains travelling at sixty, eighty and ninety-five miles an hour between three distant cities.

'Yes,' Laura repeated, frowning at the princess.

'Mmm.' Clare's agreement had the moody, putting-off note of one resisting an alarm-clock, but a part of her mind was grateful to hear: *wonderful, unpredictable, born India*.

But now, just ten days ago, their father, whom they had assumed to be as enduring as the sun, had turned out to be more unreliable than anyone they had ever known. Mrs. Vaizey had come with the news and gone. Their friends had crept off looking sly and sympathetic by turns, whispering at the end of the corridor, acting as if the Vaizey girls had violated the rules of some secret society. Miss Lambert and the other teachers were kind, but their helplessness in the face of events, and the chasm between the sisters and these officially affectionate, familiar people, became more and more



apparent to them as their mother shook hands with Miss Lambert now and kissed them and left the school. At a distance and slowly the idea rose on the horizon: it had only been a transaction all the time. They were only money and words and figures on an invoice.

During the remaining days there, the girls often stared into each other, profoundly surprised at the shape their world was taking. There was no precedent for death, and the snapping-off of what they had taken to be eternal friendships with Sheila and Rose, and being left (it felt) at the mercy of their mother with whom they were not very well acquainted. Monuments like Miss Lambert and the school were evidently insubstantial as the vacant creatures moulded in sand to resemble people by the sculptor on the Sydney beach they went to once.

Laura's father — her *father* — was as easily disposed of as the scraps of paper on which she had printed: *Dr. Laura Vaizey*. The taken-for-granted evolution of school life — entering as a 'little one' and leaving as a very senior person who had worked desperately hard and passed a most difficult examination — was apparently *not* inevitable.

Laura had read books. In all except a few dramatic stories set in other centuries, involving characters and circumstances ridiculously far removed from hers, everything ended happily for young heroines. Though their plans were shattered and there was no hope at all, it always worked out that there had been a fantastic misunderstanding. The girls and their loved ones then sped, laughing, to their rainbow-coloured future. Was she not a young heroine? Those other tragedies (Miss Lambert's classics) were beautiful, of course, and very sad, but not like anything real. So what had happened to the Vaizeys couldn't be tragic; it was only stupefying, left the future mysterious and unimaginable. It felt odd to plan only from morning till afternoon till night, with the next day, the next week, a featureless vacuum: and next year, or five years' time, like the space off the edge of the world. She had a sensation of having mislaid a vital pleasure that she could not quite remember, or a piece of herself. There was nothing to dream!



Clare bore her departure from school rather better, since she had always been under the impression that she had been sent there originally as a punishment, or to be got rid of. One night long ago her parents had quarrelled. They had said words she had forgotten that nevertheless had meant what she had understood and remembered them to mean. She and Laura were not wanted. School was a place they could disappear to for ever.

Nor had anyone, since she had arrived there years before, ever explained from the beginning the purpose they were all allegedly pursuing. In another place purposes might be clearer, the beginnings of stories be told — among them, even the reason for being here at all.



'I want you and Clare to take over from tomorrow morning, Miss Muffet.' Stella Vaizey lay back in bed and extended one small, beringed and manicured hand in a final relinquishing gesture. Propped against two pillows, smoking an Abdulla cigarette, she looked tolerantly at Clare, who sat on the dressing-table stool, leaning on her knees, plaits hanging, one navy-blue ribbon untied; and at Laura, who stood, back to the windows, assessing the strange bedroom and its furnishings with quick little glances. Laura hated that 'Miss Muffet'. It wasn't well intended.

'You're fixed up at your business college; Clare's enrolled at her school, and they're both within walking distance. You know where the shops are, and the beach is at the bottom of the hill, so you've got nothing to complain about, have you?'

She was crossing them off her list!

'And now that everything's settled, I'm going to expect you both to take some responsibility. I'm very tired. I've had a busy, upsetting time with that oaf of a solicitor bungling everything and selling the house. It's been a great —' her eyes filled with tears. She sneezed, and sneezed again, and groaned luxuriously as if to say, 'There! You can see for yourselves how ill-treated I've been.'

She was a very attractive woman. Her thick creamy skin



tanned easily; her face was short and wide; her eyebrows were dark and shaped with a beautiful, appeasing regularity; her mouth was pretty and her eyes were soft-looking and changed from violet-grey to amber in a way that had been considered fascinating. An Indian languor and grace of movement not always found in the offspring of British army majors had surprised and lured a number of young men none of whom was ever to be famed for his percipience: one was David Vaizey. It was clear even now, even to the girls, that she had been wrought for more congenial circumstances than these.

'Poor Mum!' Out in the kitchen, her tone perfunctory rather than sincere, Clare disposed of her mother and balanced on the white-painted spar of a chair, tipping it up and rocking.

'We'll work out a timetable and make lists. You'll have to help!' Laura was impressed by her own authority. Yet it was a joke in a way. Even her strict claim on Clare was made with conspiratorial laughing eyes. Yet she felt like someone else.

'I *will*. I *will* help,' Clare protested, her lively speculative look fastened on the game of houses they were about to play. Giving the chair an incautious jerk, she landed horizontal on the floor, the breath knocked out of her and a bump rising rapidly on the back of her skull.

'Oh, look out!' Laura whispered, giggling, as their mother called out from the bedroom, 'What on *earth* — ?'

They giggled silently as Clare picked herself up, and their mother's voice continued to rebuke their thoughtless noise. And they went on giggling — now that they had started — because of something embarrassing to do with their father, whom they had not known very well either; because this was the first day in their new home, a furnished flat, in an unknown suburb — Manly, in a huge city, Sydney — and they had to walk alone into strange institutions tomorrow.

They laughed, and they had to sit down; and they laughed, and bit their hands, and wrapped their arms round their middles, and started each other off again when the riot seemed to be waning. They laughed till all their laughter emptied out, then almost instantly they felt very tired. They smelt the



clean and unfamiliar odours of the flat — new paint, empty cupboards — and draughts of the salty wind that rattled the loose windows.

'She'll get up tomorrow or the next day.' Clare shivered and yawned; and, standing up to go to bed, staggered for no reason and started to laugh again. And even as she laughed a strange silent panic rose up in her and she thought, with a sort of bright rigidity: *I want to go home*. She was trapped here. She wanted to go home. Laura was locking the back door, and her arms looked white and weak. Laura knew no more than she did.

The school, teachers, friends, had cast them off. Their father was nowhere. *I want to go home*, Clare thought again stubbornly, pushing with her mind against the knowledge that she had really nowhere to want to go. Caught, not safe, cold — There were no reliable people. It was all wrong! She kicked the chair that had made her fall over.



'What were they like at school?' Laura carefully washed the chops that had slid with gentle wilfulness from griller to linoleum.

'All right. One girl said I put on jam. I *don't* talk funny. I *told* her it was only Miss Carroll's speech class. What were they like at your place?' She set out the cutlery on her mother's tray.

'All right.' Laura had learned a number of illuminating facts not connected with shorthand and typewriting: for instance, it was pitiable, awful, not to have a boyfriend; it was repellent to have your hair in plaits and not to wear make-up; it was peculiar to be without a father, yet to have a mother who need not work; it was the very nadir of dullness in a female of her age not to be able to discuss film and recording stars. 'I hope I'll like it. When I get to know them better.'



On one side of the dining-room table Laura was practising shorthand outlines, on the other Clare was brooding over an atlas.



'How long,' she asked, her eyes roaming the coloured world, 'how long do you think Mum's going to stay in bed? Because it's weeks and weeks. *I* don't think she's very sick.' Clare looked through to the kitchen where dirty dishes stood in dismal mounds on the sink; she pushed her face out of shape with her fists and crossed her eyes.

Laura stopped work to sharpen her pencil with a razor blade. 'It's her nerves,' she said loyally, looking into her young sister's eyes, then dropping her own. But it was important to believe that your mother, at least, was truthful, at least. She, Laura, was seven years older than Clare so it was up to her —

'Well, why,' asked Clare darkly, having considered the proposition of her mother's nerves for some seconds, 'won't she let us go out or anything?'

'We went swimming on Sunday and we're allowed to go to the pictures next Saturday afternoon.' Laura pressed the sharp point of her pencil on the page and broke it.

'Yes, but you know what I mean. That's just us. Why can't we go to see any of the girls ever?'

'Because she likes to know where we are and who we're with, *and*' — Laura looked up again from grinding away at the lead pencil — 'they can't come here because Mr. and Mrs. Kirby downstairs own the place and they'd ask us to go if you brought fifty noisy little friends home.'

Clare wriggled her shoulders and grimaced at the map of the world. 'Old India!'

'Anyway, when would there be time?' Laura asked, unanswerably.

They were rarely unoccupied. Afternoons ticked into evenings while tomatoes and apples were bought, potatoes peeled, bathroom and kitchen floors washed, dinner cooked, homework prepared; and on Saturday there were groceries to buy, carpets to Hoover, washing to be sloshed all over the laundry and hung out; then on Sunday there was ironing, more cooking and homework. Though there was swimming, too, now that it was hot again.

She asked the question and Clare accepted its statement with no trace of grievance. Their rackety housekeeping took



time but was a novelty. They were not supervised. Laura aired her pleasant voice daily and liked to stare out of the bedroom window at three huge triumphant flame trees on the slope above the cricket ground, their tangled branches. Clare liked to slide down the banisters to the ground floor. She liked to run, read, swim and sing.

They ran down the steep hill past two- and three-storeyed blocks of flats like their own, and the grey stone church balanced on the incline. Stopping for breath and running again, stopping for traffic and running, their long plaits of hair smacking their backs then curving out ahead, they at last reached the esplanade, the semicircle of pines and fine yellow sand beyond which there was only the Pacific. If they were uncertain of everything else, they knew this was a boundary. It took them aback. Jolted to a stop, they stared and stared before, in a sense, giving up, looking away, and dropping, stiff-kneed, down the steps to the beach.



'Did you remember to change the books, Laura?'

Stella Vaizey was lying on her dark-blue velveteen sofa under the windows, smoothing her eyebrows with a tiny brush, examining the effect in the oblong mirror from her handbag.

'Yes, I got two of each. Don't know what they're like.'

At her mother's behest she had joined the threepenny lending library and was working systematically along the shelves. Mrs. Vaizey flipped and dipped through the novels and tepid tales of travel Laura produced, but the flat was silent for hours on end while, in private lairs behind cushions and the high backs of chairs, or round in the passage between the brick laundry and the paling fence, the printed pages were taken in by her daughters with such fervour that objects any less wondrous than words would have been permanently enfeebled by it.

'I went to town this afternoon. Some of Daddy's friends from home rang up.'

Laura sat down on the stool, leaning forward, to listen eagerly. 'Who? What did they say? Did they remember us?'



It did not surprise her, as it had the first time, to hear that her mother had gone out. Frequently now when early summer produced mornings of unparalleled transparency, of a significant and singing radiance, she sauntered into them. She window-shopped and pottered and drank coffee. She had her hair set and met country visitors. She sat in the faded canvas deck-chairs facing the ocean and read what the astrologers foretold for the following week, and wrote to her brother Edward in India, and other distant relations in Somerset. More important still, she had begun to play bridge three or four times a week with a group of women who gathered in Mrs. Casson's flat downstairs.

Stella Vaizey was convalescing. She resided rather than lived with her daughters. Languid, detached, she allowed herself to be looked after. She could venture out safely now, because it had become obvious to the girls, without a word having been uttered, that someone so small should not have to labour. *They* were Australian, medium-sized mortals, quite lacking in their mother's fragility and exotic heritage. It was entirely natural that they should leap about, bruising their shins and hip-bones, cutting their fingers, acquiring circles under their eyes, in the process of fending for her and themselves.

In town, apart from her card-playing acquaintances, Mrs. Vaizey knew no one. The uncle whose presence in Australia had been the pretext for her visit to the country, and in whose house she met David Vaizey, had died. David's sister was married and living in Canada. His father, an old man now, whom she had never met, lived somewhere in the north of Queensland with his second wife. No solutions to her future were likely to be forthcoming from any of these directions, yet —

'Something very, very nice is going to turn up one of these days,' she promised herself, speaking aloud to Clare.

Was it? Clare watched her mother rasp a match on the box and light her cigarette. Fascinated, with an almost loving intensity, Clare watched the cigarette smoke writhe. She *knew* her mother, but still, something wonderful was going to happen. Her mother said so.



'Who knows? I might open a gift shop down on the Esplanade or the Corso with that little bit of money Daddy left. Or I wonder if flowers — ?'

She raised her face to the looking-glass never far from her hand, and inspected her smooth creamy image. Surely it had a meaning? So accurately designed. Even her hair, which was heavy and smooth, arranged in what Miss Lowe down the street called 'a sculptured Egyptian style', looked somehow intended. A wealthy husband, of course, was the obvious answer.

'Yes, a gift shop!' Laura supported her seriously. 'Or flowers.'

She and Clare had risen up with genuine praise and encouragement for dozens of tentative musings of this nature on their mother's part. Unfortunately, though, her mentioning and their support always had the effect of turning an idea for action into buried experience. However —



Laura passed what passed for examinations at the business college and was commended by Mr. Sparks who owned it and had a black moustache.

'As our top student, Laura, you could have the pick of the jobs on the register, but your mother wants you to find something locally, does she? You'd get more money in town.' Jim Sparks, thirty-five, destined to spend his days nursing his own invalid mother, raised his moustache enquiringly.

'It's the travelling time. I help at home.'

'Oh, well. That doesn't leave us too much choice, you know.' His pale fingers went over the card-index with a cycling motion. 'Shaw's Box Factory. Only a fair wage to start. No Saturdays.'

Laura had her light-brown sun-streaked plaits cut the same afternoon, and her hair hung in loose natural waves to her shoulders. Out of startled blue eyes she looked at her new face. She felt a sensation that was hard to identify. She half-thought to put it down to the loss of her hair, which had never been cut before. But it was only that reality, in the sound of a few words, had twisted her heart.



Shaw's Box Factory. Doctor Laura Vaizey — Laura Vaizey at Covent Garden —

She was like someone who, having gone bravely through preparations for an operation that would almost certainly truncate her life, realized with a terrible twisting of her heart just as the anaesthetist's mask descended, that this shocking thing was truly happening, inevitable: shrieking resistance was of no avail.

'Well, if that's the job Mr. Sparks has suggested —' Her mother gently acquiesced in his decision and continued her letter to Edward. Instead of evaporating as expected, Laura remained. Her silent presence made Mrs. Vaizey look up, mildly irritated but constrained to add, 'Something very nice will turn up soon, you'll see!'

She was rubbing her jaw-line delicately with her left hand. 'Don't tell me I've been bitten by a mosquito! — No, if your father had only thought — But, anyway, you're a born homemaker, a born housewife. And you've got an unusual little face, pretty eyes and teeth and a small waist. You'll —' she stroked her jaw worriedly '— meet some —' she paused again. Laura wandered off.

Mr. Shaw of Shaw's Box Factory was a swarthy nuggety man of forty-four who looked closer to fifty. He was hardly taller than Laura in her two-inch heels. He usually wore a brown suit with the coat unbuttoned and flapping open, and had a dark-brown hat at a dashing angle on his thick black hair. Heavy untidy eyebrows overhung eyes of an extreme darkness with large irises and almost no whites. In the afternoons, by four o'clock, his beard was beginning to sprout. He looked like a pirate, and people who had never seen a Turk or a Persian thought that he looked like these foreign men, too.

Most of the time he was absent collecting materials and delivering orders. When he came to the factory his attention went with the inflexible fixity of a primitive machine from one object to another — one ledger, one journal, one carton filled with little boxes. He rarely spoke and when he did it was only ever about the particular task that had his attention. His voice grated and rasped as if his throat was perpetually



rough from shouting. Since he was apt to speak without indicating which member of his staff he was addressing (by, for instance, looking someone in the face) and since he was inclined to enunciate in the manner of one talking to himself, he was very often asked to repeat his instructions. Occasionally this seemed to anger him, but in general he appeared not to notice the presence of company.

In the one-roomed factory five girls sat at a long bench opposite a row of windows; on the brick wall blearily visible through the glass they read, day in day out, in green letters on a yellow ground: TRY TRIxie TEA—IT'S TASTY, TEMPTING AND TANTALIZING!

Layers of cellophane material pressed into folds and cut into solid crosses by a guillotine were stacked at each girl's right hand. Four strokes of liquid cement and a moment's pressure completed a box. Towers of these colourless cubes were constructed daily, the girls competing against each other for the highest wage.

Florists were Shaw's chief customers, but jewellers and department stores were beginning to place big orders, too. The wireless played all day. The girls worked fast and sang huskily.

After a few hours' inspection they were casually friendly to the new office girl who sat typing at her desk further along the same grimy wall. They genuinely pitied anyone who had to write shorthand and add figures. Especially since they made more money than she did, and worked the same hours. Yes, they felt quite friendly towards her.

'How're ya goin', Laurie? Watcha up to this arvo, love?' They peered over at her typewritten page, at her notebook, laying warm hands on her shoulders. Idle for a moment, kindly patronizing, smelling of face powder and pickled onions and liquid cement, they paused to joke with her and tease her.

On Laura's fourth day at the factory, she yelped at the sight of two large rats running not very quickly in her direction along the ledge behind the girls' feet.

Aileen and Greta, the senior girls, choked over their boxes,



laughing. 'They're our pets! Doncha like 'em? Feed 'em our crusts! *They* won't hurt you! More afraid of you.'

The young ones, Shirley, Diane and Bernadette, cried inextricably, 'They don't like 'em eether, Laurie. They're havin' you on. Dirty big things! — The rats, the rats, we meant!' they shrieked, voices and faces cracking with giggles as their elders threatened to crown them.

Returning to the factory at three that afternoon, Mr. Shaw found a tin of poison on his desk. He read the label, ponderously turned the tin upside-down, then raised his eyes to look at Laura for what appeared to her to be the very first time.

'What's all this? Where did this come from?' His voice was thick and slow.

Laura told him she had bought it, and why.

Mr. Shaw began to laugh in rather a startling way. He looked — jocular, Laura thought, but he laughed the way people did in pantomimes, the way the Dame did, as if he was listening to himself.

Feeling herself blanch, Laura returned his smile conventionally and asked, cringing from the thought, if she could put the poison down.

'Well, now! Well, now!' With a stunning abruptness Mr. Shaw *stopped* laughing, and looked at Laura with a very serious frown, as if she had brought up some entirely different subject, and was asking him to throw away half his assets. She felt, and was abashed to feel, that she had begged a colossal favour. After all, in a way, he did own the rats.

Her nerve fluctuated; she could understand nothing. Seeing her waver, Mr. Shaw started to laugh again in a way that was meant to be, but was not entirely, reassuring.

'Okay!' he declared largely, tossing all sensible deliberation aside. 'Out they go! And I'll put it down myself.' This girl had actually spent *her* money to get rid of *his* rats. This fact continued to strike him. No, he was not indifferent to it. 'Save you the trouble,' he added.

After this, Laura felt a vague sort of loyalty to the man. Somehow he had put her under an obligation.

