

DIRK BOGARDE



A Short Walk from Harrods

His sixth volume of autobiography

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A SHORT WALK FROM
HARRODS



PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS

A SHORT WALK FROM HARRODS

From his first major screen appearance in 1947, Dirk Bogarde starred in more than sixty films. His popularity as a teenage idol brought him vast amounts of fan mail and enormous box-office success, which was to continue through the fifties and sixties. Later he achieved a different kind of success with such films as *The Servant*, *King and Country*, *Accident*, *Death in Venice*, *The Night Porter*, *Providence*, *Despair* and *These Foolish Things* (*Daddy Nostalgie*).

In later life he became well known as a writer. He published seven volumes of autobiography, *A Postillion Struck by Lightning*, *Snakes and Ladders*, *An Orderly Man*, *Backcloth*, *Great Meadow*, *A Short Walk from Harrods* and *Cleared for Take-Off*; and six novels, *A Gentle Occupation*, *Voices in the Garden*, *West of Sunset*, *Jericho*, *A Period of Adjustment* (the sequel to *Jericho*) and *Closing Ranks*. Penguin publish all of these titles, as well as *A Particular Friendship*, a collection of letters written between 1967 and 1970 to an unknown American woman, and *For the Time Being*, a collection of his journalism.

Though he spent his latter years in London, Dirk Bogarde lived for many years in France and was made a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 1990. He was also made an Honorary Doctor of Letters at the University of St Andrews and at the University of Sussex. He received a knighthood in 1992.

On his death in May 1999, *The Times* wrote of him 'Handling words came easily to Bogarde ... He wrote gracefully, as he had moved gracefully across the screen'.

BY DIRK BOGARDE IN PENGUIN

Autobiography

A Postillion Struck by Lightning

Snakes and Ladders

An Orderly Man

Backcloth

Great Meadow

A Short Walk from Harrods

Cleared for Take Off

Fiction

A Gentle Occupation

Voices in the Garden

West of Sunset

Jericho

A Period of Adjustment

Closing Ranks

Letters

A Particular Friendship

Journalism

For the Time Being

For
GARETH AND LUCILLA

With very much love



'... at sixteen the height of my ambition was to construct a cage ...
for a pet linnet.' Sussex, May 1937

Author's Note

When I finished writing *Backcloth* in 1985 I was absolutely sure that I would never write another book again, let alone another volume of autobiography. I had been overtaken by events far beyond my control. However, the only thing which is certain in life is that we can never be certain of anything. Here then is my eleventh book and sixth volume of autobiography.

For obvious reasons I have altered a number of proper names and some place names, but the events are as they were and as I recall them without the aid of diaries or journals. Alas, the area of France about which I write has now been drastically altered, almost beyond recognition. This, then, is a tribute to the patch of it which I was privileged to own and which I greatly loved.

It is also a tribute to the memory of a valiant and courageous man who loved it with an equal passion. My love and my thanks to my editor, Fanny Blake, who encouraged me and supported me whenever I foundered in the 'remembering', and, as always, to Sally Betts, who once more has had to cope with my 'inserts' and 'corrections' with patience and rapidity.

D. v. d. B.

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The chimneyplace, 1985

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The moon country

The first Christmas, 1969

The terrace, 1986

Last photo of the terrace, 1986

Chapter 1

Sitting here, as presently I am, the nicotiana is higher than my head. Well. As high as. The scent is overwhelming, drifting out into the still evening air. I suppose that I should try and find a word other than 'drifting'. But that is exactly what scents do on still summer evenings; it's what this scent is doing. So it remains. Drifting. It's all part of building up an illusion of peace and calm. I planted the things out in April, earlier than advised, but I did it anyway, and did it so that I should be able to sit one evening quite embowered by blossom and suffocated by heavy scent.

And so I am.

A sort of peace descends. It would appear, from all outward signs, that stress has faded.

Only 'appear'. I still jump like a loon if a book falls, a door bangs, the telephone rings. That's rare. Rarer than falling books or banging doors. The telephone hardly ever rings. And never between Friday afternoon and Monday afternoon.

People go away.

Sometimes, on Sundays, if it gets really grim, I walk to the station to buy a newspaper I don't need, or want, and talk to the very friendly chap who runs the paper stall. His mate runs the flower stall. We speak of the weather, local football (about which I know nothing, but I nod and listen), and it breaks the silence.

Heigh ho. A fat bee nudges rather hopelessly among the fluted white trumpets. If you could talk to a ruddy bee I'd tell it that it was out of luck. You won't get any pollen from that lot, the trumpet is far too narrow.

But it's not after pollen. Nectar. That's the word. And it won't get that either. A hopeless, fruitless search.

Talking aloud to oneself, or trying to engage a bee in conversation, or discuss the state of the day with a portrait, or the wallpaper, is an almost certain sign of incipient madness and, or, senility.

I don't honestly feel that I have reached either of those stations of the cross; but I have checked it out with others who live alone and living alone, they assure me, gets you chatting up a storm.

To no one.

Well, it fills in the silences. Sometimes they are good, the silences, but at times they do get a bit heavy. Music helps, of course. I listen to more music now than I ever did before.

The evening sun is warm on my face, the terrace tiles still hot under my bare feet, hot from the glory of the day. It really is a kind of contentment. The bee, the nicotianas, the stillness and, high in the tree beyond, the kestrel.

He arrived like a silent dart a few moments ago; sussed me out, snapped his head round, fixing me with huge golden eyes. Steady. Below, on the close-mown grass, two wood pigeons waddle about like a couple of blowsy bag-ladies. Aware, with the extraordinary vision which they possess, of the danger above but disinclined to fly until death swoops, they continue to waddle. Very British.

The tree frills in a slight breeze which arrives suddenly like a sigh. The kestrel sways gently, eyes still on me. The nicotiana, the white and yellow daisies, the magenta bells of the fuchsia rustle and swing and suddenly, as if the breeze had been a signal, the kestrel takes off in a long low swoop, glides across the lawns, flustering the bag-ladies, planes upwards over the trees on the boundary and is lost to sight.

All is still. The breeze has dropped as suddenly as it arrived. A crow across the garden cries out in raucous worry; its mate, squatting on a rickety platform of twigs, calls back two or three times; the bag-ladies shake ruffled feathers and nose and bob, cooing in relief.

Danger has passed.

The garden is still, fading gently into evening. The ice in my whisky chinks, almost convincing me with the serenity of its delicate sound that there is nothing for me to do, or nothing which has to *be* done. But I know very well that there is.

The nightly watering chore has to commence. I do find it exhausting, carting gallons of water about and trying not to bump into the furniture on the way. Dusk is falling slowly, my ice melting; through the fretwork of the tree the elegant shape of Peter Jones looms, flags limp now in the breezeless air, sleek, proud, clearly bent on a collision with the Royal Court Theatre across the square.

Lights spring up somewhere on the top floor, an ambulance siren wails, a window is slammed shut, traffic mumbles distantly, a voice calls out, a woman laughs and feet clack-clack-clack along the pavement.

I am back full circle. I'm where I started out on my journey at the meek and wondering age of seventeen.

Consider: at sixteen the height of my ambition was to construct a cage from garden-bamboo for a pet linnet. Which I did, only to find that I had misjudged the widths of the bars, through which the bloody bird sped. Story of my life you might say. But you'd be quite wrong.

At seventeen, refusing education of a higher kind, refusing university, refusing all chances of becoming an office boy, or

a runner, at *The Times*, Printing House Square, refusing, in fact, to follow my exceedingly clever father into his post as art editor, I agreed, fairly ungraciously I have been told, to a place at art school in Chelsea Polytechnic. At seventeen, just turned, I was a year too young but apparently showed 'interesting talent' so they took me on. Unaware of my lack of education and my cavalier method with measurements or anything requiring thought. (Check with bamboo bird cage above.)

However, there it was: I went. And sitting here I can almost see the spire of St Luke's church, which was not so far from the school. Which is why I can say that I am back full circle. For this was my area, my manor if you like. I knew it, and loved it, well.

So.

At seventeen an art student, at nineteen I was scrubbing out the pans and pots in the tin wash at Catterick Camp. At twenty-seven, after a good bit of voyaging, I was back again, became a 'film star', and at forty-eight, deciding to take stock and readjust the seasoning of life, I left England for Provence and sat up on a mountain among my olives and sheep very contentedly until I was sixty-seven. When the heavens all of a sudden fell.

So I came back here. To the area in which I had begun to grow up; or, if not that exactly, to set down tentative roots, and commence an adult life. It was familiar territory, I walked among ghosts, pleasant ones, and felt not so strange, and people were initially very kind, until I decided, quite by myself, that solitude was better by far than being 'in demand'. So I cut adrift and went on my way. A dinghy bobbing along happily in the fog of unfamiliarity.

Being 'in demand' simply meant that you were presentable enough, not an unspeakable bore, that you could talk left and right at a dinner or luncheon table, be agreeable, amusing (moderately), and, above all, that you were unattached. That was the most important thing of all: no wife or mistress to trail about, just you yourself. Free, *available*, the desperate hostess's dream. You had become a 'spare pair of trousers'. It is not as disagreeable as perhaps it sounds. You get your supper free – you just have to do a bit of singing for it. Not difficult. Merely tedious.

The deadliest thing of all was the agonizing sameness of it. After over two decades away I had grown far distant from the chatter and behaviour of the people with whom I now dined or lunched. I did my best to bone up, as it were, on London events by reading a great many daily newspapers. I could talk about, for example, plays and films and books which I had never seen or read simply because I had studied their critics. *All* of them, so that I could work out for myself how things were in that performance or production or book. I read about politics, something I had hardly ever bothered to do in France; even got into American politics through the pages of the glossy news magazines. Nervously I went to my dinners if not in a black tie, which I did not possess and refused to wear anyway, at least moderately well armed with general information. What bugged me most was that I was not at all *au fait* with the local politics of the neighbourhood. I had no idea who was sleeping with whom, who had gone off with a wife or husband, boyfriend or lover, and where they had all hidden. I didn't know who was 'in' or 'out', and was amazed, above all, to discover that the only thing which really had not changed over the years was the speech pattern

of the guests at these unquestionably perfect, elegant, beautifully presented and, ultimately, dull evenings.

Generally speaking my hosts, hostesses and their guests were all, to my silent consternation, merely marking time. A long-forgotten roar from my regimental sergeant-major at Aldershot drifted often into my mind while I toyed with a slim Baccarat wine glass: *'On your marks! Slow march!'* And this is exactly what they were doing, apparently quite unaware and uncaring. Perhaps it was all too late for them anyway? It seemed to me that they were digging themselves into a hole of their own making. Trapped hip deep in the past. Their scenario was sepia, thumbled and tattered.

I had, personally speaking, chucked my copy away years ago when I left the grey-white cliffs of Dover for a new life. But now on returning I discovered, to my dismay, I had to dig it out again, dusty and faded by the years, and play it over once more. Or, rather, replay it, without the confidence and knowledge that once I had possessed. It was very worrying really, but, I suppose, better than boiling up one of those deathly plastic bags, or crumbling Carr's water biscuits into a tin of heated-up soup over the sink. I couldn't do more, frankly. Boiling an egg had become either 'victory' or 'disaster'. Even with an egg-timer from the Reject Shop. It was extremely insular and (a name the papers decided to lumber me with) 'reclusive' to hang in just with myself. I really couldn't complain that the telephone never rang, because I was fast becoming a deadly, unsociable boor. My own fault. Therefore I decided to accept the invitations which did come my way from generous and affectionate friends from way-back-when. To go out and discover life among the living! Not to sit there alone in my room, to go where the music played . . .

Okay. But did it? Let me describe an average evening. You can make up your own mind. It was a far cry from my life before. I had known Victoria for years, since my earliest days in the post-war theatre. She had a very pretty house in Charles Street filled with minor treasures. Flowers, silks, good paintings, good furniture. It was not by any means an 'arrogance of good taste'; it was extremely comfortable, pleasing and very expensive. She had arrived from America years before with a glorious figure with which to carry her clothes and a glorious figure with which to purchase them from the great houses and to please her bankers and her future, pretty useless but titled, husband. In short, Victoria survived radiantly, and by the time I met her, after my first big West End success, she was intent on launching me into Society. I didn't desire that, and there really wasn't much 'Society' flying about by that time, 1947-50. What was left after cruel decimation in the war and vicious taxation didn't amount to very much. Victoria's world was crumbling like an Alka Seltzer. Only she, and her guests, didn't dare face the fact.

One happily peaceful evening she telephoned me. Her voice, light, warm, only very slightly inflected by distant Philadelphia, coaxed me. 'Now, sweetie, *don't* be tiresome. Put this down in your little book. The 17th. Supper here, eight-thirty, come about 7.45. There will be eight. So exciting that you are back *at last!* What an aberration that all was! A peasant farmer in the hills! *Madness*. Abroad is so "alien", don't you think? Not black tie. I have two Socialists coming. They write books but aren't at all vegetarian, which has pleased Mario enormously. Oh! It's exciting that you are back again! A delicious "spare pair of trousers". You'll be

swamped with offers. But I have got you first, haven't I? What huge fun it is to have you home!' I didn't in all truth feel elated.

Sheraton table gleaming, silver, crystal winking in soft light. An air of comfort and old-fashioned elegance and riches. Served superb food by three sullen Filipinos. It always was at Victoria's. Whatever else you might have to put up with, the food was glorious. Mario was the best private chef in London at the time. Eight of us at table, the silk-covered walls spread with Piranesi engravings, Colefax and Fowler swags at the windows, candles sparkling in Georgian silver. I sat between Phyllida and Margot. Margot had informed us in the drawing-room that she had called a taxi one evening to go to the Savoy and, in her anxiety not to be late for dinner, crashed straight into a lamp-post, smashing her nose. She now, in consequence, was forced to wear a black frilly lace mask. It was very becoming. I wish to differentiate here between Margot with a mask and without one. *With* was far more acceptable.

Across the table, separated tactfully, were the two book-writing Socialists. Perfectly acceptable as it would appear: she in sprigged voile with puffed sleeves, her hair braided across her head like a Viennese loaf, he in, predictably, a red tie worn with a white suit and a very high collar in the manner of Tom Wolfe. She was quiet, rather nice, asked if I missed France and did I ever make jam from my figs? I said no. He said that the theatre should be an 'event'. Last from nine a.m. until eleven p.m. Not just 'a pathetic two hours with arrogant, overpaid property developers and their women only longing for the interval and the bar'. It should be for the working man. Elevating, enriching, a form of subsidized 'feeding for