

# Iris Murdoch

the message to the planet

'Her vision of the world is heart-rending,  
but ultimately celebratory'

*Guardian*

VINTAGE CLASSICS



Iris Murdoch

THE MESSAGE TO  
THE PLANET



V I N T A G E

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## THE MESSAGE TO THE PLANET

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Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. She went to Badminton School, Bristol, and read classics at Somerville College, Oxford. During the war she was an Assistant Principal at the Treasury, and then worked with UNRRA in London, Belgium and Austria. She held a studentship in Philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, and then in 1948 she returned to Oxford where she became a Fellow of St Anne's College. Until her death in February 1999, she lived with her husband, the teacher and critic John Bayley, in Oxford. Awarded the CBE in 1976, Iris Murdoch was made a DBE in the 1987 New Year's Honours List. In the 1997 PEN Awards she received the Gold Pen for Distinguished Service to Literature.

Since her writing debut in 1954 with *Under the Net*, Iris Murdoch has written twenty-six novels, including the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978) and most recently *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995). Other literary awards include the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whitbread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997). She has written several plays including *The Italian Girl* (with James Saunders) and *The Black Prince*, adapted from her novel of the same name. Her volume of poetry, *A Year of Birds*, which appeared in 1978, has been set to music by Malcolm Williamson.

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## PART ONE

'Of course we have to do with two madmen now, not with one.'

'You mean Marcus is mad too?'

'No, he means Patrick is mad too.'

'What do you mean?'

The first speaker was Gildas Herne, the second was Alfred Ludens, the third Jack Sheerwater.

'I mean,' said Gildas, 'that by now Patrick is mad. That Marcus is mad goes without saying.'

'Marcus is not mad,' said Ludens, 'and Pat is very ill, not out of his mind.'

'Gildas is just expressing his frustration,' said Jack.

'We are certainly frustrated.'

Gildas who was sitting at the piano, played some melancholy chords. The open window of his flat admitted smells of springtime from not too distant Regent's Park. There was to have been, as usual, singing; but tonight, although it was late, the other two were still sitting at the supper table with the whisky bottle. Of course they should have kept off the subject of Marcus Vallar, but as Patrick Fenman failed to recover, indeed was visibly sinking, the question of Vallar became increasingly inevitable.

'As we don't know where he is,' said Ludens, 'and my God we've tried hard enough —'

His friends usually used his surname, except sometimes when expostulating or for rhetorical effect.

'It's ridiculous,' said Jack, 'how can someone vanish, how can someone famous like him vanish?'

'He vanished before,' said Ludens.

'Anyway, he's not famous now,' said Gildas. 'There's no reason why he should be, he hasn't done anything notable for years. Anyone who's heard of him probably thinks he's dead.'

'Perhaps he is dead,' said Ludens.

'What happened to the little girl?' said Jack.

'His daughter?' said Gildas. 'No idea. Didn't she run off to Paris or somewhere, I wouldn't blame her for clearing off, Marcus was *intolerable, insupportable*.'

'No, no!' said Ludens.

'You're sentimental about him,' said Gildas. 'You're too anxious to please people and be pleased by them. He was a destroyer.'

'He damaged you,' said Jack. 'He was a bit of a cold fish. But he didn't harm Ludens, and he positively helped me, he set me up!'

'Oh, *you*, you'd survive anything!'

'I don't think he really damaged you, Gildas,' said Ludens. 'You'd have lost your faith, or whatever it was that happened, in any case.'

'For Christ's sake, let's sing,' said Gildas. They often sang together, fancying themselves and recalling the Finches of the Grove. Gildas was the musical man, a talented pianist who had been a choirmaster and had even imagined himself to be a composer. He had a fine high tenor voice. Ludens was a creditable baritone and Jack an impressive bass. Patrick, now absent from them, was what Gildas called, not always warmly, 'an Irish tenor', meaning by this something more than that he was (which he was) both Irish and a tenor. Of course they never let the women sing.

Jack and Ludens ignored the suggestion.

'We could advertise,' said Jack.

'He'd be furious, he'd make a point of not answering.'

'Yes, but someone else might.'

'The trouble is, if he's to be any use we mustn't offend him. We must arrive on bended knee. All right, Gildas, you hate him, but we don't.'

'You evidently revere him,' said Gildas.

'Yes,' said Jack, 'I revere him. I'd give a good deal to see him again, even apart from Patrick.'

'It's better you don't,' said Gildas, 'you might be embarrassed to find yourself feeling sorry for him. He could be pathetic. He's fallen out of sight because there's nothing more he can do. He may be fading away in some mental home.'

'Thinking he's Superman? Well, perhaps he is.'

'How is Patrick?' said Ludens to Jack.

Patrick Fenman was extremely ill, now said by some to be dying of a mysterious disease. Earlier on, when Patrick emerged from a first visit to hospital, Jack Sheerwater had removed his friend from his shabby digs into his own house. After further visits, further tests, Patrick was back again in Jack's house.

'He's thin and white and transparent.'

'Does he still talk to Franca?'

'He utters a lot of rhyming doggerel like nursery rhymes —'

'And "speaks with tongues"? That would interest Marcus!'

'He babbles in some unidentifiable language.'

'It's Irish,' said Gildas, 'nothing more mysterious than that.'

'You don't know Irish, Gildas,' said Jack, 'you just thought it sounded like a Celtic language. You don't even know Welsh. Why don't you come and see him, or are you afraid? Franca is marvellous with him, and Alison's pretty good considering how she hates anything to do with illness.'

'Alison is certainly the goddess of good health,' said Gildas, playing a few more irritable chords, 'and Franca is famous for being an angel.'

Franca was Jack's wife, Alison his mistress.

'Women are so brave,' said Ludens.

'I suppose it *can't* be Aids,' said Gildas.

'Of course not!' said Jack. 'That was settled ages ago. The doctors are still talking about an obscure African virus.'

'And the psychiatrists are saying it's psychosomatic.'

'One doesn't die of something psychosomatic,' said Ludens.

'Doesn't one? What about Aborigines who die because someone has pointed a bone at them.'

'They're primitive savages, Pat is a civilised European.'

'No, he isn't,' said Gildas. 'He's a wild man from the west of Ireland, his ancestors were seals.' Patrick had explained to his friends that, where he came from, the local girls had used to mate with seals.

'Well, we must hope it *is* psychosomatic,' said Jack, 'provided we can find Marcus.'

In the earlier and more lucid part of his illness Patrick had several times said that he had been cursed by Marcus Vallar and was dying of the curse.

'Oh, what's the use,' said Gildas. 'Let poor Pat die in peace. Why should he be tormented at his last moments by that nightmare figure? Why do you imagine Vallar would want to help him, remove the curse and make him better? He might curse him all over again, and us as well!'

'That Catholic priest came, didn't he? That did no good.'

'Marcus was dangerous,' said Jack, 'he could throw poisoned darts. We all parted on bad terms with him. He told Gildas he was telling lies about God, he told me I was a filthy lecher *and* a rotten painter! Actually he never quarrelled with you, Alfred, you were the lucky one.'

'We just drifted apart,' said Ludens. 'I began to find his company *extremely tiring*.'

'It was extremely tiring, but we were all addicted to it.'

'Actually,' said Ludens, 'although I agree that Marcus was dangerous there was also something naive and childish about him, as if he meant no harm.'

'Didn't he just!' said Gildas.

'You have to admit,' said Jack, 'that he was the most remarkable person we ever met.'

'We admit it,' said Gildas. 'Now do stop drinking whisky. You won't be able to sing properly.'

'We shall sing better. But perhaps not that Tallis motet.'

Supper had consisted of fishcakes and boiled potatoes followed by bread and cheese, followed by chocolate biscuits. This feast was by now so far in the past that Jack and Ludens were hungry again and were tearing up the brown loaf and hacking off chunks of cheddar cheese. Red wine, brought by Jack, had preceded the whisky. Gildas and his piano occupied a flat at the top of an office building off the Marylebone Road. The building was empty after six in the evening, which made piano-playing and even lusty singing possible until far into the night. The flat was small and smelt of ancient things with which Gildas had not contended. In the sitting room shadowy photographs of Italian lakes had been hung high up by a previous tenant. There was a deal cupboard containing sheet music, always untidy, always open, a table covered with (usually fresh) newspaper, and a fierce little upright sofa upon which no one sat. Gildas possessed, apart from his radio, no modern technology: no typewriter of course or word processor or hi fi or television, but also no vacuum cleaner. Even the brooms and brushes, also inherited, were old and bald. Nothing was cleaned, except (imperfectly) plates and cutlery. Anything which fell on the floor stayed there and was dealt with by passing feet. The floor of the bedroom was covered with tangled garments. Jack and Ludens deplored and pitied but did not exactly disapprove of Gildas's chaos. They worried about him. Since parting company with the priesthood he could almost be said to have become demoralised. Almost, for somehow he remained someone, a slightly mysterious someone, whom they respected, and they gave him the benefit of every doubt.

Gildas was said to be a solitary man, but he depended very much, or so Jack and Ludens told each other, upon his few close friends. He and Jack were indeed very old friends, having been at school together in Yorkshire, whither Gildas's Methodist parents had moved from



Wales in search of elusive employment. Gildas could not be said to be a successful man. His musical aspirations had dwindled, he never became a composer, and he had lost his choir. He had, after being ordained an Anglican priest, also lost his faith, whether or not by reason of Marcus Vallar's criticisms. He worked in an evangelical bookshop in Bloomsbury. Jack Sheerwater, on the other hand, was a success, he was a well-known painter and had even become a rich one. There was some truth in Jack's claim that Marcus had 'set him up'. Marcus had quarrelled with Jack as he had quarrelled with Gildas and with Patrick; but before he disappeared from their lives he had, it seemed, given Jack a 'vision' with which he had lived ever since. Alfred Ludens could not, as yet, be classified as either a success or a failure, and did not himself know which he was or whether he was moving up or down. Ludens had met Jack, who was a few years his senior, and through Jack Gildas, in London at a series of lectures on Italian painting. Ludens, then twenty, was studying history at University College. Jack had lately been appointed a teacher at the art school where he had been a student. Gildas, not long ordained, was a young curate with command of a choir. Patrick Fenman was a penniless poet from Ireland whose aim, successfully achieved, was to become a penniless poet in Soho. He had published some poems and was able plausibly to style himself 'a literary man'. He met Jack, and then Gildas and Ludens, in they could never remember which Soho pub, perhaps the Fitzroy, perhaps the Wheat-sheaf, perhaps the York Minster. They adopted the Irishman and were already a little 'group' when Marcus Vallar burst upon them, as Jack said, 'like Halley's Comet'. Some time had elapsed since that event.

Gildas, the Welshman, was very thin and not exactly deformed but twisted, his nose crooked, his head inclining to his shoulder, his hands (although he played the piano so beautifully) seeming to be put on back to front. Jack compared him to a parched contorted tree off which little dry things were always falling. His ill-shaven face, textured like old brown faded paper, was wrinkled, often with suspicion or anxiety or quizzical doubt, or with sadness. His head was rather small, his dry dark hair was fuzzy, over mild brown eyes he wore spectacles with small round lenses. He was the one who stood in corners and watched. Jack Sheerwater was never in a corner, he came from Yorkshire where his father was a self-made businessman. He was built on a large scale, soon to be threatened with stoutness, but still self-confidently handsome, blond, his bright untidy hair falling with careless charm almost to his shoulders. He had a fair, glowing complexion and prominent blue eyes. He dressed stylishly in an old-fashioned Bohemian mode

and dyed his own shirts. A pre-Raphaelite painter might have posed him as Sir Galahad, or more likely Sir Lancelot, but his face was harder than that of an Arthurian knight and he could equally well have passed for a latter-day soldier, some calm commander, and, with his authoritative nose and powerful staring eyes, had been said to resemble the Duke of Wellington as portrayed by Goya. His voice, retaining some northern vowel sounds, was authoritative and deep. His success as a painter still surprised him and, if he had not met Vallar, he might well have been content with less provided he could be happy. This he certainly was, and was talented too; and enjoyed making others happy, glad to be well off not least because he could be generous. The remoter ancestors of Alfred Ludens were Jews in Poland, his paternal grandparents had come to England as children. His second name, also considered amusing, was presumed to be a Latinised version of a Polish name. He knew little of his forebears. His father, now retired, had taught classics at a minor public school in Somerset where Ludens had been educated free of charge. His mother vanished when Ludens was an infant and was later reported dead. A stepmother (gentile) took her place and presented Ludens with a halfbrother. This pair, unpleasing to him, also vanished when Ludens was fourteen, by which time he had developed the mysterious speech impediment which troubled him at rare intervals. His father still lived in the house where Ludens had grown up, had no Jewish friends, never spoke of Jewish matters, and had never visited the synagogue. Ludens, becoming as he grew up aware of Judaism as a historical phenomenon, attempted to feel Jewish, but usually preferred to say that he had no sense of identity, a claim which astonished Jack and was envied by Gildas.

Ludens was a fairly tall, thin, long-legged young man with a good deal of straight dark hair which, rising above his brow, swept behind his ears and bestowed itself neatly down the back of his neck. He had high cheek-bones, a long nose, expressive nostrils, long narrow brown eyes and a sensuous mouth with a large lower lip. He had a kindly benevolent though clever expression and what Gildas called a daft Jewish grin. He suffered from an intermittent stammer. He had had, so far, a successful academic career, with a first-class and a doctorate, and now held a coveted though not lucrative 'readership' at a London college, which involved some teaching and some time to write and study. In the small circle where his talents were known, much was expected of him. Ludens belonged firmly to the old school of historians who believed that a historian must know the whole of history. He was criticised by some for scattering his talents too widely, and for being,