

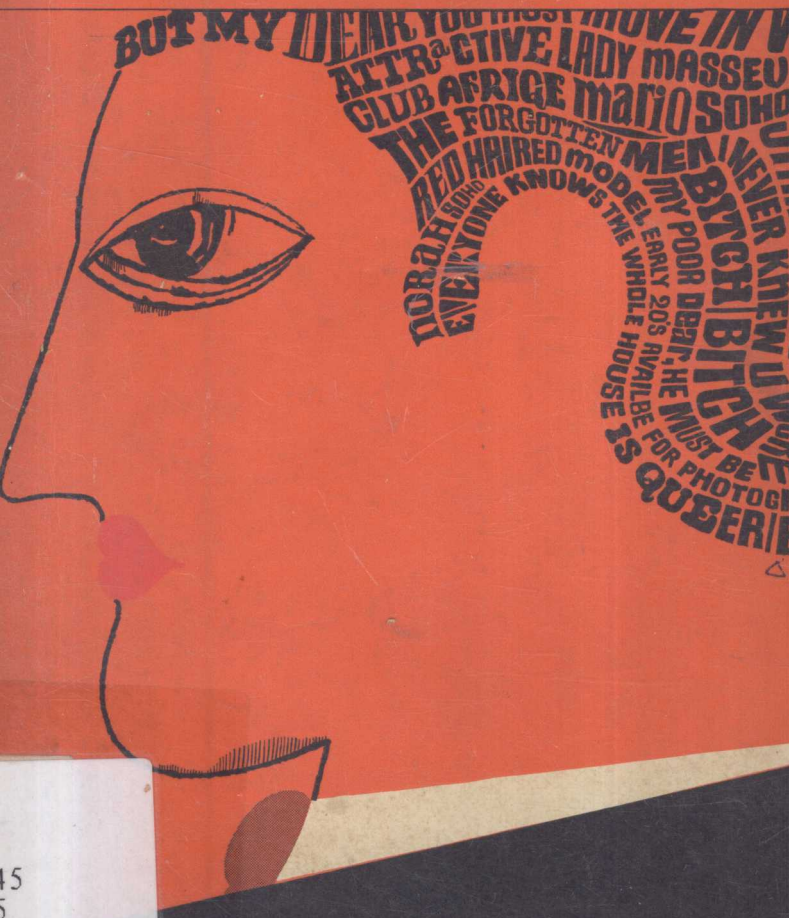


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The Birdcage

John Bowen



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THE BIRDCAGE

JOHN BOWEN

John Bowen was born at Calcutta in 1924 and sent back to school in England when he was six. He read history at Pembroke College, Oxford, and later went on to a graduate fellowship at the Ohio State University and later a scholarship at the Kenyon School of Letters. For a time he was a journalist and then worked as a copywriter in a large London advertising agency. While working as Copy Chief in another agency in 1960 he decided to try earning a living as a writer. John Bowen had started his first novel, *The Truth Will Not Help Us*, while hitch-hiking in California. He published *After the Rain* (in Penguins) in 1958, *The Centre of the Green* in 1959, and *Storyboard* in 1960. He has written two children's books, and a book of some of his television plays, *The Essay Prize*, was published in 1962. He has written criticism of theatre, literature, and television, and he broadcasts fairly often. Like one of the characters of this book, he is a script consultant to the Drama Department of a television company. John Bowen lives in London.



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THE BIRDCAGE



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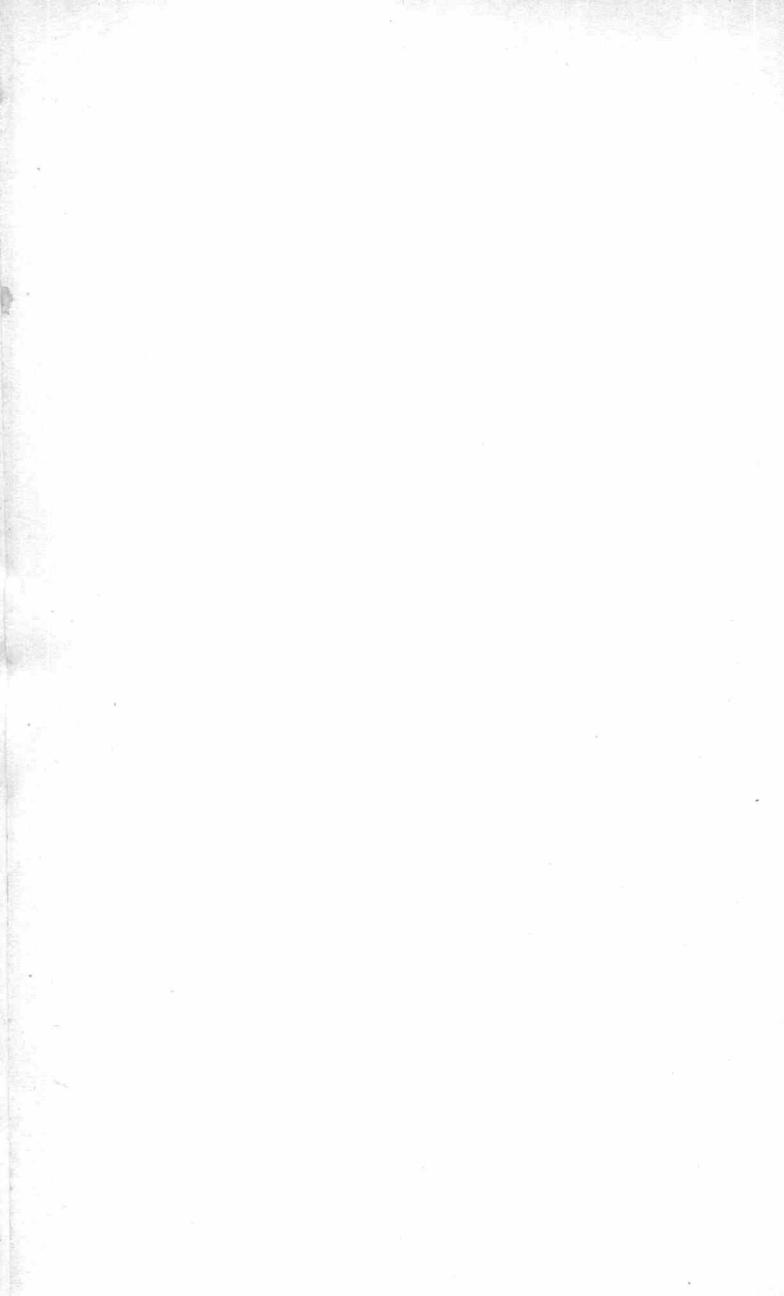
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FOR
CHARLES MONTEITH

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SEMI-ATTACHED

PETER ASH and Norah Palmer sat together at a table at Quadri's in the Piazza San Marco, drinking black coffee with ice-cream in it. Peter Ash wore a shirt of pale blue, open at the neck, and fawn-coloured terylene trousers held up by a belt which was fastened almost uncomfortably tightly to hold in check the plumpness against which he tried so frequently, and so ineffectively to diet. Norah Palmer wore saxe-blue shorts, cut like a skirt, and an olive-green blouse of poplin. Her nose was just beginning to peel, and the strong sun had brought more freckles to her face than were usual for her in London. Sun glasses lay on the table in front of Peter Ash and Norah Palmer. Peter Ash had blond hair of the kind which is always called 'fine' because it will fall out in middle life. There was a beach-bag by his side; it contained swimming costumes, two towels, and two damp and sandy paperbacks. The time was half-past six of an evening in July. Peter Ash and Norah Palmer were on holiday together; they had taken their holidays together for nine years. They were (if you insist on the word) tourists, but of a superior sort. They had spent the afternoon, as they had spent every afternoon of their holiday so far, swimming and taking the sun at the Lido, and, because they were sensible as well as sensitive people, they had chosen neither the free beach, which was always crowded, nor any of the beaches

of the big hotels, which were expensive, but a modest beach with cabins at modest prices, down by the hospital.

Peter Ash and Norah Palmer had spent the *afternoon* at the Lido. They did not spend their mornings there. They were not mad for the sun. It is easy to overdo the sun. Besides, how foolish to be in Venice, and see nothing! Almost as foolish as to be in Venice, and do nothing else but see the sights, in and wearily out of a thousand interesting little churches, through the interminable galleries of Galleries, finishing the Basilica only to start the Doges' Palace. Oh, they had noticed, had Peter Ash and Norah Palmer, the parties of inferior and unsophisticated tourists, German and American and (not to be chauvinistic) often English, with hot feet and aching eyes, dragging through the cultural round – the Frari, the Scuola san Rocco, the Accademia, the Ca d'Oro – checking each off against the guide book until at last they could say they had done the lot, and it was time to go on to Florence and start all over again. None of that for Peter Ash and Norah Palmer! They had not come to Venice for that. In the mornings they would rise at a sensible time, and take breakfast in the garden of the Locanda, where each table was shaded by an umbrella, and cages of yellow birds were set against a wall. They would breakfast together in the shade on milky coffee with rolls and jam, and they would offer, as conversational counters to the maid who served them, the simple phrases of Italian learned during the winter at evening classes. Over breakfast they would decide which sight to see that morning, and after breakfast, off they would go to see it, allowing the sight a sensible time to be seen, allowing (as one might expect) the larger sights a longer time, but never too long because, as Peter Ash would tell you, after a while the eye tires so that all pictures, all pieces of architecture or statuary, begin to seem the same, and that's the time to stop. After all, he would say, there's nothing to prevent one's going back and looking again, and

Norah Palmer would agree, although somehow they never did go back and look again.

So Peter Ash and Norah Palmer would spend the morning in Venice itself, seeing some sight or other, and they would take coffee or a glass of something at Florian's, which is on the shady side of the Piazza San Marco in the mornings. There Peter Ash might glance at the *Guardian* – one of the many conveniences of Venice is that English newspapers (and German, and French, and American) are on sale in the Piazza from eleven in the morning. And then perhaps they might see another smaller sight, as it might be the Carpaccios at the tiny Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, or they would stroll the streets of the shopping area, where Norah Palmer would examine the goods in the windows while Peter Ash stood indulgently by, and they would discuss what they might buy to take back at the end of the holiday to their flat in Beaufort Street – since the sensible course would be to wait until then to buy it, when they would know how much money they had left.

In some such easy mingling of culture and shopping, the morning would pass until it was time for Peter Ash and Norah Palmer to happen across a little Rosticciera for the lightest of light lunches before taking the boat to the Lido. And after the Lido, sleepy from the sun and sticky with dried salt, they would stop off at Quadri's, which is on the shady side of the Piazza San Marco in the afternoons, to spin out an ice, and listen to the bands (two on their own side of the square, and one opposite at an almost deserted Florian's), which took it in turn to play, so that the music was like stereophonic sound at an epic film, continually changing its direction and distance. James Morris, in his excellent book on Venice, which both Peter Ash and Norah Palmer had read, suggests that the drummer at Quadri's sometimes indulges 'in something precariously approaching jazz'. Perhaps he does, but not at six thirty of an evening in July. This evening the musicians of Quadri's were playing 'I'm Getting

Married in the Morning'. They transformed it. They took it, and squeezed it, and made it Italian. The rumpy-tumpty tune was stretched and sugared until it would carry the easy agony of a heart which is broken once a day and twice on Sundays (when God may be expected to join in). 'I'm Getting Married in the Morning', the strings lamented, 'Ding! Dong! the Bells Begin to Chime'. The violinist's face twitched in renunciation, and the prolonged throbbing call of the tenor sax summoned the strollers in the Piazza to this sad communion, but the strollers, who were used to it, merely continued to pass and re-pass before Peter Ash and Norah Palmer, and to feed the pigeons.

The bands played, and the people passed, the mechanical Moors on the clock tower beat at the bell that marked the half hour, and Peter Ash and Norah Palmer sat in chairs of plastic plaited to look like wicker, and drank black coffee with ice-cream in it, and watched the people and the pigeons and an old woman who sold maize for the pigeons, and who stood, with her head bent in the hot sun, in an attitude of patient crucifixion. Most of the people were in the shade; most of the pigeons were in the sun, and they had dispersed themselves intelligently between groups of those who fed them, so that there should be maize for all. From time to time, Peter Ash and Norah Palmer noticed, something would startle a group of pigeons (or perhaps they were simply bored), and then they would rise together in a great grey whirr of wings, and circle the square before settling somewhere else. Pigeons are not bats. They have no radar, and, since both pigeons and people were so thick in the Piazza, sometimes a pigeon would collide with a person. And this may explain why, although plump and well-fed in the tourist season, the pigeons of Saint Mark look much more ratty and battered than those of Trafalgar Square. Said Norah Palmer to Peter Ash. Who did not reply.

For Peter Ash and Norah Palmer were quarrelling; they were snapping and sniping at each other in a desultory way.

It was not important. It had begun as the merest conversation. Perhaps Norah Palmer had lain in the sun a little too long. She had the ghost of a headache. It would disappear while they changed for dinner into clothes a little less casual, a little longer of sleeve. It would have gone altogether by the time they had decided where they would eat that evening. Meanwhile it was there – a ghost between her eyes – to fret her. And besides, her nose was peeling.

It was nothing at all; they were quarrelling about nothing, were Peter Ash and Norah Palmer. It had begun as chat, and had gone on to intelligent disagreement, and perhaps that ghost of a headache in Norah Palmer had fretted away the tolerance that allows argument to continue amiable, or perhaps Peter Ash had too meticulously reckoned that it was Norah Palmer's turn to pay for the ices since he himself had paid both for their cabins at the Lido and for the tickets back, and somehow disagreement had curdled into acidity. But it was nothing. Silence would cure it. Time would cure it. One cannot live together for nine years without going through a great many quarrels, most of them more serious than this one. Their quarrel was aimless. It stopped and started; it reached out a finger to tap at this, to probe at that. Disagreement became acidity; acidity became criticism; criticism became mockery. 'The trouble is; you don't respect me,' said Peter Ash to Norah Palmer.

'No. Of course I don't respect you. Why should I? I know you far too well, my dear.'

'I don't mean as a person. As an artist.'

'An artist? Really! The conceit!'

'As an interpretative artist.'

'I don't respect you in anything you do.'

And that was it. They did not speak again. The argument was over. They sat in silence until, after some while, Peter Ash summoned the waiter, and, glancing coldly at Norah Palmer, paid the bill. They walked, keeping a distance between them, to the *vaporetto* stage. Peter Ash bought the

tickets. On board the *vaporetto*, they stood on opposite sides of the deck. They left the boat at the Rialto, and walked through the streets back to the Locanda where they lodged. Since the streets were narrow and crowded, they were forced to walk together.

Peter Ash saw quite clearly that they were in a ludicrous situation. He did not demand respect for himself. It would be foolish to expect respect, in that sense, to last through nine years of intimacy. For his part, he did not, in that sense, *respect* Norah Palmer. One accepted people. One learned to accept them without respect. That was what living together meant. Affection, he had always believed, was more important than respect. But for his *talent* (such as it was), for his vocation (it was not too strong a word) as an interpretative artist – for that he was entitled to respect. Without it, the whole thing was impossible. If Norah Palmer did not respect him as an artist, it would be better to break up.

They would make up this quarrel, Peter Ash decided, as they had made up all the others, by not referring to it. They would go through the rest of their holiday together, and he would make a special effort to be considerate and conciliatory. He wanted to be sure that Norah Palmer enjoyed this holiday, since he was decided that it was to be their last together. He would say nothing. They would go every afternoon to the Lido. Every morning they would see a different sight. They would choose a different place to eat every evening, and they would sample at every dinner a different Venetian speciality. Every night they would take their coffee in the Piazza, and a drink at Harry's Bar. All would go on equably. It would not be fair to Norah Palmer if it did not. But, when they returned to London, they would break up. The whole thing was impossible, and could not go on.

Peter Ash and Norah Palmer had lived together for nine years. They lived in sin. Well . . . sin . . . that was not quite the word you could apply to Peter Ash and Norah Palmer.

Where there is no guilt, there can hardly be sin. Peter Ash and Norah Palmer felt no guilt in not being married. It was a matter of convenience for them both, a matter of being sensible about tax. Put together, as the incomes of married people *are* put together by Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inland Revenue, a great deal of surtax would have to be paid on the incomes of Peter Ash and (as it would then be) Norah Ash. As things were, Peter Ash paid a little surtax, and Norah Palmer paid none.

It was not that Peter Ash and Norah Palmer had any intrinsic objection to the married state. There was nothing religious in it. Peter Ash and Norah Palmer were not religious people; they were agnostics, not atheists, and regarded such matters as irrelevant to the problems of man in society. If they had decided to start a family, Peter Ash and Norah Palmer would have married in a registry office without fuss. It is socially uncomfortable for children, after a certain age, if their parents are unmarried; one would have had to think of that. Besides, each child represents an allowance off tax. Meanwhile, since both Peter Ash and Norah Palmer worked, since both enjoyed the work they did, since neither felt any need for children, since neither felt even that he would be 'good' with children, they continued as they were. Worldly persons, mocking the Tax Laws, would often mention that they knew a couple who lived together out of wedlock to save tax. This couple was always Peter Ash and Norah Palmer.

Peter Ash and Norah Palmer enjoyed their work because both had jobs of a cultural nature, such as intelligent persons might be expected to enjoy, and take some pride in doing. These jobs were not only cultural with a big C – Cultural – they were also cultural with a small c; that is, they had a social value. The greatest social problem of an urban industrial civilization in the mid-twentieth century, as Norah Palmer would tell you, is the problem of leisure. Most people in such a civilization do not have jobs of a Cultural or a cultural nature, which they can enjoy; the jobs of most people

are boring and monotonous. If the intelligence, if the aesthetic responses of people are not used, they may become useless, and the jobs of most people do not engage intelligence or demand such responses. Worse! – with increasing automation, many people's jobs do not even take up very much time. Boredom can corrupt the spirit as well as the intelligence. Peter Ash and Norah Palmer shuddered when they thought of the consequences to urban industrial civilization if the problem of leisure were overlooked. They felt that, while those who created Art were perhaps more to be admired, those who applied Art to the problem of leisure might be more respected. Well, the two functions were not really separable, of course. But that is what they felt.

Norah Palmer worked in the script department of a commercial television company, and had read English at Cambridge. She could give a sensible opinion on most matters concerning the arts, but she did not claim specialist knowledge outside her own field of literature – and English literature at that; Norah Palmer read French, as she read music, without too much difficulty, but not by choice. She tried to be (and so did Peter Ash) what is called an intelligent layman; only a specialist might be able to give the answers, but at least she could ask the questions. Both Norah Palmer and Peter Ash 'kept up' with the arts. They knew what was going on. Indeed, they needed professionally to do so. If Norah Palmer and her colleagues had not kept a sharp eye on literature and the theatre, television drama would have sunk to a pretty low ebb, you may be sure, lacking fertilization by those sister arts. And as for Peter Ash, why it might be said that his responsibility was even heavier. The composition of the television audience is catholic, intelligence-wise and culturewise. Advertising copywriters, dentists – some of the most forward-looking and perceptive minds of the community are among its members, and it may reasonably be argued that those who watch television plays are drawn from the most serious section of what researchers call