

The Players
Come Again



Amanda
Cross



R A N D O M H O U S E
N E W Y O R K



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Designed by Amy Hill

To Grace K. Baruch

1936–1988

“The sweetness of this content overflowing runs down the walls of my mind, and liberates understanding. Wander no more, I say; this is the end. The oblong has been set upon the square; the spiral is on top. We have been hauled over the shingle, down to the sea. The players come again.”

—VIRGINIA WOOLF,
The Waves



Part One



Chapter One



ate that year as the eighties were beginning to run out, with Christmas and the end of the semester looming, Kate Fansler found herself at a loose end. Her study of Henry James and Thomas Hardy, which had taken far too long to write, as academic books always did, had finally been published to general approbation and the usual snappy remarks about American scholarship that passed for a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Kate had spent about four months in a state of abject relief, cleaning up her desk and trying to make amends for the many old letters long unanswered and the new letters inspired by the appearance of her book. This fallow period had its advantages, but it was beginning to pall. Into this vacuum crept the insidious realization that she never again



wished to publish a work of literary criticism. Unfortunately she did not, on the other hand, wish to “look into her heart and write,” as the poet’s muse had instructed him. Many women and men she knew had abandoned criticism for examinations of their personal lives and experience, and while she compulsively read the products of their internal examinations with interest and occasionally startled recognition, she had no desire or inclination to go and do likewise. Excluded alike from literary studies and memoirs, she wondered if another project would ever occur to her.

Into this desert of intention there intruded an editor from one of the six biggest publishing houses dominating the book world. They were all owned and, one understood, directed as to the bottom line by vast organizations whose principle product was oil, or motor cars, or widgets. Kate had so far had nothing whatever to do with them.

The editor’s name was Simon Pearlstine, and he had astonished Kate by inviting her to a very expensive and extended lunch, a remarkable act from one whom she had never met or heard of. But he, it soon transpired, had heard of her.

“From many people,” he assured her as they were shown to their table. “You have quite a reputation among scholars. Won’t you have a drink? I can’t drink at lunch anymore, but you must, please.”

“You,” Kate said, “will have soda water and lime, a lettuce leaf, and decaffeinated coffee. I will have a vodka martini on the rocks with lemon peel, and whatever the waiter most heartily recommends.” It turned out that not the waiter but someone further along in the hierarchy took their order, and was delighted to recommend what he assured Kate would be a masterpiece of a lunch. She acquiesced in her most ladylike

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manner. Doubtless Mr. Pearlstine wanted something, and she was prepared to enjoy herself while discovering what it was. She requested, and was granted, a Beaune wine with her main course, and settled happily back to listen and, she was certain, refuse.

Simon Pearlstine seemed ready to circle around the point of this lunch as she sipped her exquisite martini.

“What do you know about Emmanuel Foxx?” he asked.

“What everyone knows; perhaps a trifle more, given my profession,” she answered, wondering why he was playing at twenty questions; well, it was his invitation and his expense account. “I do teach the British novel,” she added, by way of explaining her immodest claim.

“And what do you think of him?”

“Meaning what?” Kate asked, considering another martini and deciding that she would wait for the Beaune. “He is a novelist of the first rank, as we say when a writer has accumulated a madly impressive body of criticism. He is one of the major figures of high modernism. He is right up there with Joyce and Lawrence and Woolf and Conrad, perhaps more influential in the long run than any but Joyce and Woolf. Two decades ago I would have said Conrad and Lawrence, but no longer. How extended a lecture did you require?” She smiled at him, to take away the sting of her question.

“Do you personally like him?”

“Do I curl up with him on long winter evenings? No. My greatest affection, as my last book might suggest [she wondered if he had read it, and referred to it with some self-consciousness] is for a slightly earlier time. I also suspect,” she added, letting the martini induce abandon, “that he rather overestimated the amount of energy women expend on sex.



But that may be more a function of my age than his verisimilitude.”

“May I call you Kate?” Pearlstine asked, having considered her remark. Kate nodded. “I’m glad you said that,” he continued, “because I think you are probably right. One of the defenses of the veracity of his portrait, you know, is that the protagonist is based on his wife. Some even think she helped him to write *Ariadne*, though that opinion’s rather recent.”

“I’ve heard it,” Kate said.

“And you believe it?”

“I don’t think so. It’s an intriguing possibility, but there is little evidence. I mean, if you read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which Gertrude Stein wrote, and then read some of Alice Toklas’s own works written after Stein’s death, you might argue that the style of *The Autobiography* resembles Toklas more than Stein. I’m not saying, you understand, that Toklas wrote it, and my knowledge of American literature is close to feeble anyway. I’m just suggesting that there’s some outside evidence of how Toklas wrote.”

Had Simon Pearlstine known Kate better he would have understood, indeed he may have guessed if he was a man of sharp perceptions, that she was talking in her wandering mode, a habit she had long since developed for saying nothing while seeming friendly and responsive, rather as a Shakespearean actor in repertory keeps on with his speech till he remembers what play he’s in. Kate wondered when Simon Pearlstine would come to the point, or even if he had one.

“I see what you mean,” he said now, “and it is an opinion of great significance in the light of what I want you to do.” Here they were interrupted by the waiter with their lunch, and the ceremonial opening of Kate’s wine bottle. The waiter

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offered her some to taste, and she did so with evident delight.

"Hadn't you better let it breathe?" Simon asked.

"The rest of the bottle can breathe along with me," Kate said, smiling. "Don't you think you'd better tell me what you want from me that is worth this elegant wine?"

"I want you to write a biography of Gabrielle Foxx."

Kate choked on her wine, which was sacrilege and a terrible waste. She began coughing, and found it difficult to stop.

"Do I do the Heimlich maneuver?" Pearlstine asked. The waiter and the maître d' had also rushed over.

"I'll be all right in a moment," Kate said, coughing away. "Just ignore me if you can." She sipped water and with increasing success tried to breathe naturally.

"Sorry," Pearlstine said when the fit seemed over. "I hope your reasoned response will not be so violent—unless, of course, it's positive."

"I've never written a biography."

"I know that. But you used biographical material with a most enviable delicacy in your book on James and Hardy. And I thought you might be in a mood to consider a different sort of challenge." He paused, but didn't seem to want Kate to speak just yet. "Every book on Foxx speaks of her as an aspect of him, a major event in his life. I think it's time she was the subject of her own story. And if you add the fact that his famous protagonist is a woman, you seem to me to have a very strong argument for a biography. We are prepared," he added, in an offhand manner as he returned to his salad, "to offer a handsome advance. Very handsome."

Kate was about to speak, but again he stopped her. "Don't answer now. Eat your specially recommended lunch; drink your wine. Let's talk about cabbages and kings. Let's arrange



to meet in exactly two weeks, same time, same station, and talk about it further. Try to keep from deciding upon a definite no until after your second lunch. May I ask that of you?"

For the first time Kate looked at Pearlstine seriously. She had had him neatly pigeonholed: editor, persuader, and, as were all those in publishing these days, master salesman. But something about him seemed to whisper of more than that. Kate considered an intelligent editor to be almost as rare as a patient doctor and, therefore, equally welcome even if, at the moment, one had no pressing need for either.

"I'll think about it," she said. "But aren't there many biographies of Foxx himself that have scoured the sources for material on Gabrielle? I know biographies must be constantly rewritten, but surely biographers don't actually ignore material or make things up where documentation is available."

"True. There hasn't been a Foxx biography since Mark Hansford's, and that was mainly notable for the new pictures he dug up, I understand from someone in the Goddard family. Foxx's son married a Hilda Goddard. I think a woman doing Gabrielle's biography would be likely to have new insights; anyway, I admire your work and would like to publish something by you. Think about it, that's all I ask."

"I can certainly agree to that," Kate said. Simon Pearlstine reached under the table, and magicianlike, produced a copy of the Hansford biography. Kate took it, placing it on her side of the table, and sipped her Beaune to emphasize her promise to reread Hansford and think about a life of Gabrielle. It is a distinct tribute to the elegance of Beaune wine that the idea did not seem absolutely and finally impossible.

Having enjoyed her lunch and wine and having, in that enjoyment, sacrificed an afternoon of work, Kate went off to a

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much-touted exhibition at the Metropolitan and listened on her audio enabler (or whatever it was called) to the mellifluous tones of the curator of painting (or whatever he was) at that exalted institution.

IT WAS THEREFORE considerably later in the evening when Kate finally settled down with Mark Hansford's biography of Emmanuel Foxx. The edition Pearlstine had given her was a new one to mark the tenth anniversary of the biography's original publication. A new preface for this edition by the author mentioned that he had originally missed the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Ariadne* by a year, but that he had been enabled to publish his biography only a year later thanks to Dorinda Goddard Nicholson, to whom he had dedicated the original edition of his biography, and whose kindness and generosity had allowed him to finish his biography quickly and, he believed, well. Dorinda Goddard Nicholson, he explained, was the niece of the woman who had married Emmanuel Foxx's son and the heir of many pictures of the Foxx family. This new, anniversary edition of his biography, while in no way less indebted to the generosity of Dorinda Goddard Nicholson, he would like to dedicate to his wife, Judith. The new preface was followed by a list of illustrations, and indeed these were the heart of the book. Each of them was from the collection of Dorinda Goddard Nicholson or photographed by her, except for a few that had been lent by someone named Anne Gringold, who had herself taken photographs of members of the Foxx family in past years. Kate found the names and connections confusing, but decided to postpone that puzzle for later contemplation.

The pictures were indeed wonderful, and almost all of



them published for the first time. Chief among these was a stunning 1926 portrait of Emmanuel Foxx, taken by a renowned photographer of the period who had been paid by Sig Goddard, Dorinda's father. By this time Foxx was of course famous and had been frequently photographed, but this particular picture had a unique quality of perception rare even in brilliant painted portraits by great artists. Hansford explained that it had not previously been published because Foxx had not liked it, so all copies not destroyed by him were in the possession of Sig Goddard, who had paid the bill. Kate wondered what had persuaded the Goddards to cough it up at this particular moment; perhaps it had only recently been discovered in some cupboard. Kate could see why Foxx had disliked it. It had been taken shortly before the publication of *Ariadne* when Foxx's reputation was high, but not as high as it would be after the publication of that masterpiece. Chapters of the novel had already appeared in some avant-garde publications, and expectations for its publication as a whole were at their height.

Foxx, his familiar leonine head (indeed his hair resembled nothing so much as a mane) flung back as he sat, one leg crossed over the other and his hands clasped like a fighter's in a pose of self-congratulation, in a chair which, with its high back and squared-off arms, oddly resembled a throne, had a look of profound self-satisfaction. It was a look one might imagine on the face of Mephistopheles after striking the bargain with Faust. Seen in retrospect, once one knew of the great literary accomplishment lying only a year in the future, the portrait hardly seemed in its pose of grandeur to claim too much. Foxx was now dead about fifty years, and that he had known or guessed at his immortality as a great writer and

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refused any becoming modesty in contemplation of that reputation seemed only to add to his accomplishment. But at the time the photograph must have been seen as claiming too much, too soon. Other pictures taken then by the same photographer were, at the time of Hansford's biography, famous: he had reproduced only one of them. It was a picture of Gabrielle standing awkwardly at a window out of which she stared as though eager to ignore the photographer.

Kate studied Gabrielle's face; her photograph was placed in Hansford's book across from the picture of Emmanuel Foxx: each portrait occupied a whole page, and acquired, in contrast, a startling effect. Foxx faced the camera's gaze in triumph; she avoided it in shame. Or was this only Kate's fancy? Kate had once gone to speak at a woman's college in a large room furnished like a grand parlor but capable of holding rows of folding chairs. On one wall hung two large portraits of the man who had given the money for the room—it bore his name—and his wife, who had herself attended the college. During the announcements preceding her talks and the somewhat extended introduction of herself, Kate had gazed fascinated at the pictures. The man declared himself to the world, staring forth, if not in arrogance, certainly with astonishing assurance. But the woman was merely looked at. She had on her best dress, her pearls, her hair had been carefully arranged. But she seemed simultaneously to allow herself to be stared at and to deny its necessity. He looked, she was looked at, that was what it amounted to.

Gabrielle had refused to admit she was being contemplated. She had looked away from the camera toward some place outside the scene being photographed. The photographer, perhaps not content with only a profile of her, had



caught three quarters of the averted face, caught in addition the reflection of her face in the window so that if she appeared to acknowledge anything in that room, it was herself.

The photographs in Hansford's book had been divided into two sections: the first, early in the book, comprised the by now familiar pictures of Foxx when young, Gabrielle when young, and places in England where they had spent their youths; the second section, twice as large, was of pictures provided by Dorinda Goddard Nicholson, most of them new, all of them clearly the strong selling point for this otherwise unmemorable biography of which Kate, at any rate, remembered few if any revelations from her first reading.

The Goddard pictures, as Kate thought of them, the ones here published for the first time, were not only of Emmanuel Foxx but also of his wife, Gabrielle, his son, Emile, his daughter-in-law, Hilda; there was also a picture of Dorinda herself, Anne Gringold (whose connection with Dorinda Kate could hardly fathom), and Nellie, Emmanuel Foxx's granddaughter, taken after she had arrived in the United States. The mysterious Anne Gringold had provided a picture of the house in which Gabrielle had lived in London in the 1950s, and Nellie had taken a picture of Gabrielle a few years earlier, long after Emmanuel Foxx's death and before she had moved to London. In this picture Gabrielle had aged, but she looked straight at the camera, as though to say "Yes, look at me, I am here." There was also a picture of Gabrielle and Nellie together, apparently taken by Nellie with one of those self-timers that can be set, allowing the photographer to hurl herself, grinning with triumph, into the picture just before the click of the shutter. Both of these pictures had apparently