

Kingsley Amis



One Fat Englishman



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THE ANTI-DEATH LEAGUE

Kingsley Amis

Lieutenant James Churchill had been reasonably pro-death before he made love to Catharine, and before he realized what the appalling nature of Operation Apollo was. Officially, he and his fellow officers had a seventy-five per cent chance of survival. Unofficially, he'd been told, there was none. Then someone started the Anti-Death League and there suddenly seemed a way out of the horrors to come.

Kingsley Amis's story of sinister military plans, spies, double agents and triple bluffs is set against a background of indolent officers' fun and games, with women, with each other and with a hidden new weapon of which only one person knew the true purpose.

TAKE A GIRL LIKE YOU

Kingsley Amis

‘The best novel Mr Amis has written; it has the comic gusto, the loathing of pretension that made *Lucky Jim* so engaging and high-spirited . . . But what makes *Take a Girl Like You* really brilliant and original is the combination in it of Mr Amis’s own peculiar and heartening brand of humour with a deep compassion for and understanding of people, particularly women’ – Elizabeth Jennings in the *Listener*

When attractive little Jenny Bunn comes South to teach, she falls in with Patrick Standish, a schoolmaster, and all the rakes and rogues of a provincial Hell Fire Club. Her Virgin’s Progress, amid orgy and seduction, makes an uproarious comedy.

‘Incendiary stuff . . . a really formidable blaze. This is his most *interesting* so far . . . and no less funny than the first’ – Karl Miller in the *Observer*

‘Mr Amis’s best novel. This must be one of the most variously funny novels in the language’ – *Punch*

Penguins Books

One Fat Englishman

Kingsley Amis, who was born at Clapham in 1922, was educated at the City of London School and St John's College, Oxford. At the age of eleven he embarked on a blank-verse miniature epic at the instigation of a preparatory school master, and he has been writing verse ever since. Until the age of twenty-four, however, he remarks: 'I was in all departments of writing *abnormally unpromising*.' With James Michie he edited *Oxford Poetry 1949*. Until 1963 he was a university teacher of English; he is a keen science-fiction addict, an admirer of 'white jazz' of the thirties, and the author of frequent articles and reviews in most of the leading papers and periodicals. His novels include *Lucky Jim* (1954), *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), *I Like It Here* (1958), *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), *One Fat Englishman* (1963), *The Anti-Death League* (1966) and *I Want It Now* (1968). Of his other fiction, *My Enemy's Enemy* (1962) was a book of short stories, he wrote *The Egyptologists* (1965) with Robert Conquest, and *Colonel Sun* (1968) was published under a pseudonym. *A Frame of Mind* (1953), *A Case of Samples* (1956) and *A Look Around the Estate* (1967) are the titles of his books of poetry, and he is also the author of *New Maps of Hell* (1960 – a survey of science fiction) and *The James Bond Dossier* (1965), which he terms 'belles lettres'. His later publications are *The Green Man* (1969), *Girl, 20* (1971), *On Drink* (1972), *The Riverside Villas Murder* (1973), *Ending Up* (1974), *Rudyard Kipling and his World* (1975), *The Alteration* (1976. Winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award), *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* (edited; 1978) and *Jake's Thing* (1978). Kingsley Amis has two sons and a daughter.

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To Jane .

Chapter I

‘What’s he like?’

‘Oh, you’ll find him pleasant enough, I should imagine. Very ready to laugh. Not much sense of humour, though. He’s a bit fiercely Danish.’

‘You mean that’s why he doesn’t have much sense of humour? Because of this being fiercely Danish?’

‘Not necessarily, but no doubt there’s some connexion. The Scandinavians are dear people but they’ve never been what you might call bywords for wit and sparkle, have they? Any more than the Germans. Still, what I really meant was, he’s apt to get sort of extra Danish when his wife’s about. Which is most of the time. I suppose he feels he has to work at the Danish thing. You see, she thinks she’s American, but according to him she’s Danish.’

‘Which of them is right?’

‘Well, in a way they both are. Legally she is. She was born in Denmark and her parents brought her over here when she was about ten. They settled down in Idaho or Iowa or somewhere. Then when she was twenty-one or -two she went back on a visit and met Ernst and stayed on and married him. That was just about the time he was starting his job on what you would call the faculty at the university in Copenhagen. Then he got sabbatical leave and got a year’s appointment at Budweiser and of course brought Helene and the kid with him. So she’s an American citizen who’s spent well over half her life in another country, the one she was born in. It’s a curious –’

‘Does it matter which she is, Danish or American?’

‘Oh, I think so, don’t you? Don’t you think that sort of thing always matters terribly? Anyway, it certainly does in this case. She wants them to stay on over here, he says. He wants them to go back to Copenhagen when he finishes at Budweiser next summer. If not before. He doesn’t like it much.’

‘At Budweiser?’

‘Over here in general. He finds himself strongly –’

‘How long has he been in the United States?’

‘Six weeks, about, but –’

‘First trip?’

‘Yes, but you must try to remember, Joe, that these days people know really quite a bit about America before they ever arrive here, what with films and television shows and these little things who sing and even the odd *book* I suppose you’d have to say, and visiting Americans and all the –’

‘Know? Quite a bit? How true a picture do you think is given by this kind of stuff?’

‘Well . . . it’s an introduction, anyway.’

‘Would you like some more in there?’

‘Thank you, just a small one.’

The man who had been asking all the questions, a tall thin-nish American of fifty called Joe Derlanger, moved some yards off. The man who had been giving all the answers, a shortish fat Englishman of forty called Roger Micheldene, sat and thought for a moment. Then he removed his tan-and-slate tweed jacket.

Even in the shade of the trees by the swimming-pool it was very hot, much hotter than it had any right to be in the last week in October. Sweat crawled and tickled among the thin wisps of red hair on the crown of his head. There was a small trough of it in the fold behind each knee. He creaked with it whenever he moved. He would have liked to take off far more than his jacket, but knew he was the wrong shape for this. For instance, his mammary development would have been acceptable only if he could have shed half his weight as well as changing his sex. The lateral fusion of his waist and hips made the wearing of braces necessary. After more thought he removed these too and stuffed them into a pocket. A couple of inches broad, scarlet with royal-blue silhouettes of fish, they had gone down rather satisfactorily at home, but over here might seem no more than affected.

Although he normally made a point of not conforming to American usage or taste in the smallest particular, Roger did not want to look affected today. He did not want to look fat

either, but all he could do about that was to stay as fully clothed as was consistent with not dying of heatstroke. He opened the top few buttons of his shirt, peeled it from his chest, blew several times into the aperture, and rebuttoned.

Joe Derlanger came back from the place by the changing-huts where the outdoor drinks were kept, carrying two huge gin and tonics. He wore a yellow towelling shirt over what Roger saw as a pair of elongated bathing shorts with a pattern reminiscent of cushion-covers in typists' flats. On his feet were what Roger had heard called sneakers. Apart from the natural endowment of thick blue-grey hairs on forearms and calves, he wore nothing else that was visible. He looked a good twenty degrees cooler than Roger felt. Good luck to him, Roger thought to himself. Or fairly good luck to him. If being cool meant dressing like a child there was a clear case for staying hot.

Joe handed Roger his drink with a glance of intimate grimness, like a gang-leader dealing out small arms before a job. 'What does he do exactly, this Ernst Bang? Bang? Is that really a guy's name? What does he do, anyhow?'

'It's quite a common name in some parts of Scandinavia. He's a philologist. Germanic, naturally.'

'Philologist. That's words and syllables, isn't it?'

'That kind of thing. Ernst is something of an authority on the North Germanic languages, especially Early Icelandic and Faroese.'

'Sounds compelling, doesn't it? But what do they want with an Early Icelandic buff at a place like ...? Wait a minute.'

He had turned in his chair, looking over towards the point, a hundred yards away, where a track left the metalled road to curve round in front of the house. Here a large green-and-brown car was moving. It began to raise a cloud of dust.

'This must be them now.' Joe got up and faced the house, fifty yards away in a different direction. He called in a voice of great volume and harshness of tone: 'Grace. Grace, they're here.'

'All right,' the reply came in a voice of at least equal power and only about a major third up the scale.

‘Well, come on down.’

‘All right.’

With a shrug and a jerk of the head, Joe moved to the nearby shelter and pulled more chairs out of it, arranging them round the concrete walk by the pool. He did this in the manner of a sadistic animal trainer. If anything looked like starting to go wrong for an instant there would be an outbreak of violence. This policy, Roger had noticed, marked all Joe’s dealings with the world of objects.

Of the seven deadly sins, Roger considered himself qualified in gluttony, sloth and lust but distinguished in anger. The first time the two men met, an incident with a briefcase lock had suggested to him that here was a formidable rival in the last-named field. Only that morning Roger had gone into the bathroom to find all the towels very tightly tied by their corners to the chromium rail. The knots appeared to have been consolidated with water. He had wondered why this was until his own towel had twice fallen to the floor from the smooth metal. Joe seemed not to include people in his programme. He was one down on Roger there.

‘I meant to tell you about this boy Irving Macher,’ Joe said as he strove with the chairs. ‘Brilliant young Jewish kid from New York. They don’t come any smarter than that. In his junior year at Budweiser. On the staff of the *Lit.* there and already –’

‘Junior year? Is that what you call the first year?’

‘No, it’s what we call the last year but one. And this novel of his. It is honestly the most sizzling thing you ever saw. It just about turns your insides over. It’s about –’

‘You mentioned it last night.’

‘Oh, did I? Well, you can have a look at it tomorrow. We’re all just wild about it. Hoping to rush it through for April.’

‘What advance are you paying?’

‘Two thousand, maybe two-five.’

‘That’s a lot for a first novel.’

‘Ah, shows we believe in the goddam thing. You’ll be able to take it, won’t you, Rog?’

‘Well, the last few American firsts we’ve done haven’t

gone down at all well, I'm sorry to say. 'There's a definite feeling against them on the Board at the moment.'

'This is something really exceptional.'

Talking and watching the car, which was now pulling up near the house, had told on Joe's vigilance with the chairs. The last of the bunch tried to lurch away from him towards the pool. He brought it back with a sharp twist of its arm, following this up with a kneeing in the behind. It squealed across the concrete on its iron toes.

Roger watched coldly, but felt his heart beating. 'I'm looking forward to seeing it,' he said.

'For Christ's sake where is that woman?' Joe asked himself aloud. Then, using his whole tall body to wave, he shouted: 'Hallo. Come on over here. Down here.'

Five people approached over the gravel of the driveway and the clipped green grass. Three of them, two men and a woman, were unknown to Roger. Of the remaining two, who were talking animatedly to each other, one was Dr Ernst Bang, Otto Jespersen Reader in Language Studies at the University of Copenhagen and currently Visiting Fellow at Budweiser College. The other was Roger's reason for being here now.

He got to his feet in good time and drew in his stomach, which had earlier started feeling tight, an impressive achievement for such a stomach. Memories ran in his brain. They were displaced by present longing when he took in his reason's variegated fair hair shining in the sun, face with thin but prominent mouth, rather top-heavy body in a white dress with small blue and green things on it, long bare brown legs. Sixteen days to decide it one way or the other, he thought.

There were greetings and introductions. Roger relegated for later inspection, if that, the young man called Nigel Pargeter whose sole right to have turned up seemed to be that he was English. An American girl of college age, whose name Roger missed, deserved instant inspection, if nothing more. She was dark and looked foreign, though not in the usual sense of never smiling. She moved her hips and shoulders about a lot, too. But she was very clearly the property of Irving Macher.

Roger always remembered how quickly and completely he hated the author of *Blinkie Heaven*. Long afterwards it occurred to him that he had felt exactly the same excited repulsion on meeting a television producer, also American, at the Mirabelle. The chap had monopolized throughout the evening the attention of the fashionable Jesuit whom Roger had set out to impress and whose dinner he was paying for out of his own pocket: £5 10s. on wines alone. It was easy to underrate Mother Nature's early warning systems.

Brown-haired and freckled, with a mild crew-cut and a light-weight get-up of blue shirt and drill trousers, Irving Macher had nothing noticeable about him but a pair of restless grey eyes. Their restlessness indicated that there was nothing much for them to see rather than that they could not take in what they saw. This air of having found out a great deal by the age of twenty-one focused Roger's hatred. He would do something about Macher's air.

For the moment there were more important things on hand. Roger had last seen Dr Bang three days earlier and fifteen miles away. With Mrs Bang the figures were eighteen months and getting on for four thousand miles. And yet it was Dr Bang who laughed and shook Roger's hand for ten seconds and grasped his shoulder and told him how good it was to see him. Mrs Bang smiled slightly and gave Roger her cheek, or rather her jaw, to kiss in the way she had. He searched her manner for circumspect self-restraint, but could find none. Had it really been she, and not her husband, who had been away in Idaho or Iowa with the small Bang when he made his (unforewarned) descent on their house just off Budweiser campus? Yes, it really had.

'How are you, Helene? You're looking frightfully well.'

'Yes, I'm fine, thank you. What a lovely place this is and how kind of Mr and Mrs Derlanger to invite us over.'

'Oh, they always make a great thing of entertaining . . . You like it at Budweiser, I gather? They found you a reasonable house, anyway.'

'Yes, and the neighbours are fun, they're so kind, they're always in and out, and all the kids . . . I think the one who has most of a ball is Arthur.'

At the sound of this name Roger stiffened, a reaction fated to pass unnoticed in one of his figure. He also crossed himself mentally. He had always thought it malignly significant that every other Arthur he had met or heard of was well over thirty. Even at five years old there had been a dreadful maturity in Arthur Bang's regard, in the deliberate way he turned his head and seemed to reflect before he spoke. What must he be like now, rising seven? 'Oh yes, how is Arthur?' Roger asked solicitously.

'Just fine. He goes to this little farm school place where a lot of the faculty kids go, and the teachers are most impressed with him, especially his study habits and aptitudes.'

'Splendid, splendid.' This was an understatement. Without wanting to, Roger recalled trying to make verbal love to Helene in Regent's Park with Arthur looking up at him appraisingly from his push-chair, trying to hold her hand in the small room at Oskar Davidsen's while Arthur spat no. 91 (fried forcemeat cakes with red cabbage, meat jelly and beet-root) at him. School. Of course. It had had to come. Roger felt the emotions of a traditional French lover whose mistress's husband's reserve class is recalled.

'He's growing so fast. He was just a baby when you last saw him wasn't he?'

'When I first saw him he was.' And no mean performer even then, the little bastard, inverting over the knee of Roger's new suit a whole dish of his grandma's homemade quince preserve, sent all the way from Idaho or Iowa for the purpose.

'Well, it must be three or four years since we met, mustn't it?'

'It was April 1961 in London,' Roger said, doing his best to dispel shock and disappointment from his voice.

Dr Bang rarely stayed out of any conversation as long as this. Now he said in his uvular Danish tones: 'These women have no sense of time, have they, Roger? Oh yes, of course, we know, all of us, they've got other much more -'

'Oh yes we do have a sense of time, it's just that you didn't get around to appreciating it yet.'

'You hear that? Isn't it monstrous? There's nothing I can do about it, it seems. Try as I may, she's incorrigible. *Do have*