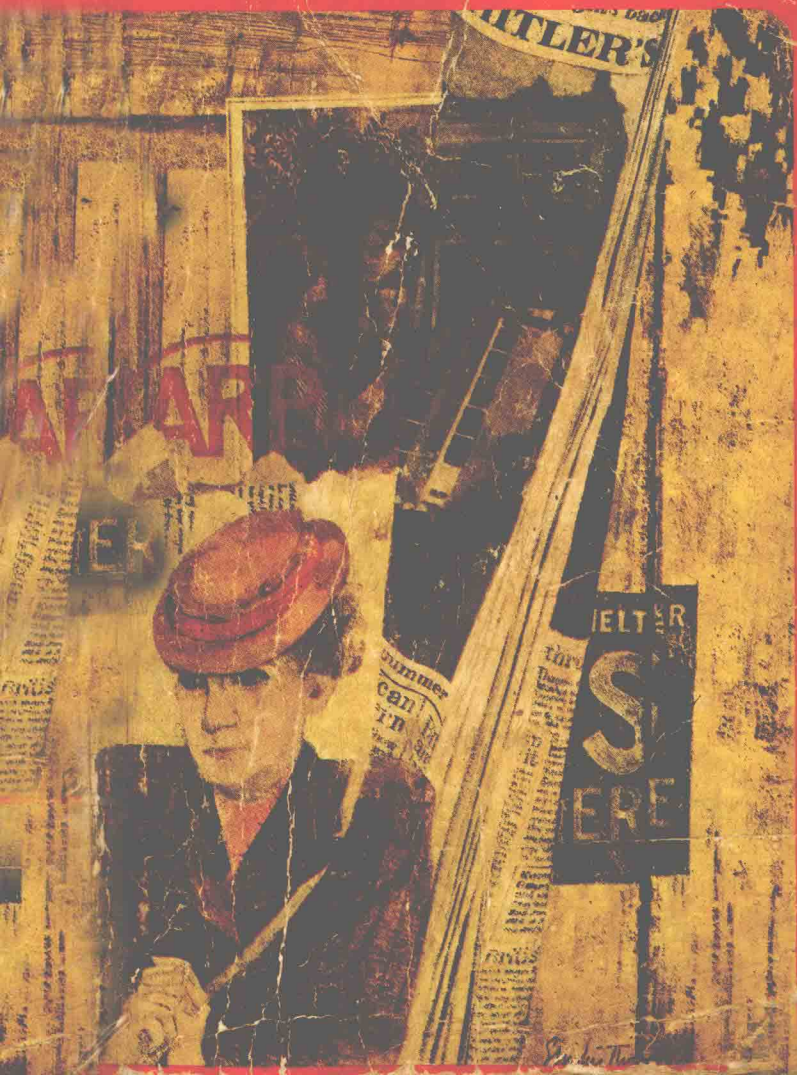


The Demon Lover & other stories

Elizabeth Bowen



The Demon Lover and Other Stories

Elizabeth Bowen comes from a County Cork family and was educated at Downe House School, Kent. She began writing short stories when she was twenty. Her first book, a collection of stories called *Encounters*, was published in 1923; she married in the same year.

Since then she has written stories, novels, and criticism as well as the history of her family home, Bowen's Court. She was made a C.B.E. in 1948, and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1948, and from Oxford University in 1956. Seven of her books have previously been published in Penguins, the latest being *The Death of the Heart* and *The Heat of the Day*.

Elizabeth Bowen's husband, Alan Cameron, died in 1952.

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In the Square

At about nine o'clock on this hot bright July evening the square looked mysterious; it was completely empty, and a whitish reflection, ghost of the glare of midday, came from the pale-coloured façades on its four sides and seemed to brim it up to the top. The grass was parched in the middle; its shaved surface was paid for by people who had gone. The sun, now too low to enter normally, was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away; two or three of the may trees, dark with summer, caught on their tops the illicit gold. Each side of the breach, exposed wallpapers were exaggerated into viridians, yellows and corals that they had probably never been. Elsewhere, the painted front doors under the balconies and at the tops of steps not whitened for some time stood out in the deadness of colour with light off it. Most of the glassless windows were shuttered or boarded up, but some framed hollow inside dark.

The extinct scene had the appearance of belonging to some ages ago. Time having only been thrust forward for reasons that could no longer affect the square, this still was a virtual eight o'clock. One taxi did now enter at the north side and cruise round the polish to a house in a corner: a man got out and paid his fare. He glanced round him, satisfied to find the shell of the place here. In spite of the dazzling breach, the square's acoustics had altered very little: in the confined sound of his taxi driving away there was nothing to tell him he had not arrived to dinner as on many summer evenings

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before. He went up familiar steps and touched the chromium bell. Some windows of this house were not shuttered, though they were semi-blinded by oiled stuff behind which the curtains dimly hung: these windows fixed on the outdoors their tenacious look; some of the sashes were pushed right up, to draw this singular summer evening – parched, freshening and a little acrid with ruins – into the rooms in which people lived. When the bell was not answered, the man on the steps frowned at the jade green front door, then rang again. On which the door was opened by an unfamiliar person, not a maid, who stood pushing up her top curls. She wore a cotton dress and studied him with the coldly intimate look he had found new in women since his return.

By contrast with the fixed outdoor silence, this dark interior was a cave of sound. The house now was like a machine with the silencer off it; there was nothing muted; the carpets looked thin. One got a feeling of functional anarchy, of loose plumbing, of fittings shocked from their place. From the basement came up a smell of basement cooking, a confident voice and the sound of a shutting door. At the top of the house a bath was being run out. A tray of glasses was moved, so inexpertly that everything on it tinkled, somewhere in the drawing-room over his head.

‘She’s expecting you, is she?’ said the sceptical girl. He saw on the table behind her only a couple of leaflets and a driver’s cap.

‘I think so.’

‘You know I’m expecting you!’ exclaimed Magdela, beginning to come round the turn of the stairs.

‘Sorry,’ said the girl, stepping back to speak up the staircase. ‘I didn’t know you were in.’ Turning, she disappeared through a waiting door, the door behind the dining-room, which she shut. ‘Do come up, Rupert,’ said Magdela, ex-

tending her hand to him from where she stood. 'I'm sorry; I meant to come down myself.'

Of the three drawing-room windows two stood open, so she must have heard the taxi: her failure to get to the door in time had been due to some inhibition or last thought. It would have been remarkable if she *had* yet arrived at the manner in which to open her own door – which would have to be something quite different from the impulsive informality of peacetime. The tray of glasses she had been heard moving now stood on a pedestal table beside a sofa. She said: 'These days, there is no one to . . .' Indeed the expanse of parquet, though unmarked, no longer showed watery gloss and depth. Though it may have only been by the dusk that the many white lampshades were discoloured, he saw under one, as he sat down beside her, a film of dust over the bulb. Though they were still many, the lamps were fewer; some had been put away with the bric-à-brac that used to be on the tables and in the alcoves – and these occasional blanks were the least discomfoting thing in the dead room. The reflections in from the square fell on the chairs and sofas already worn rough on their satin tops and arms, and with grime homing into their rubbed parts.

This had been the room of a hostess; the replica of so many others that you could not count. It had never had any other aspect, and it had no aspect at all tonight. The chairs remained so many, and their pattern was now so completely without focus that, had Magdela not sat down where she did sit, he would not have known in which direction to turn.

'How nice it was of you to ring me up,' she said. 'I had no idea you were back in London. How did you know I was here? No one else is.'

'I happened to hear . . .'

'Oh, did you?' she said, a little bit disconcerted, then added quickly: 'Were you surprised?'

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‘I was delighted, naturally.’

‘I came back,’ she said. ‘For the first year I was away, part of the time in the country, part of the time in the north with Anthony – he has been there since this all started, you know. Then, last winter, I decided to come back.’

‘You are a Londoner.’

She said mechanically: ‘Yes, I suppose so – yes. It’s so curious to see you again, like this. Who would think that this was the same world?’ She looked sideways out of the window, at the square. ‘Who would have thought this could really happen? The last time we – how long ago was that? Two years ago?’

‘A delightful evening.’

‘Was it?’ she said, and looked round the room. ‘How nice. One has changed so much since then, don’t you think? It is quite . . .’

At this point the door opened and a boy of about sixteen came in, in a dressing-gown. Not only was his hair twisted in tufts of dampness but a sort of humidity seemed to follow him, as though he were trailing the bathroom steam. ‘Oh, sorry,’ he said, but after a glance at Rupert he continued his way to the cigarette box. ‘Bennet,’ said Magdela, ‘I feel sure you ought not to smoke – Rupert, this is my nephew, Bennet; I expect we sometimes talked about him. He is here just for the night, on his way from school.’

‘That reminds me,’ said Bennet, ‘would you very much mind if I stayed tomorrow?’ Rupert watched Bennet squinting as he lighted a cigarette. ‘They say everyone’s smoking more, now,’ said Bennet. ‘Actually, I hardly smoke at all.’ He dropped the match into the empty steel grate. ‘I took a bath,’ he said to Magdela. ‘I’m just going out.’

‘Oh, Bennet, have you had anything to eat?’

‘Well, I had tea at six,’ he said, ‘with an egg. I expect I’ll pick up something at a Corner House.’ He stooped to pull up

a slipper on one heel and said: 'I didn't know you had visitors. As a matter of fact, I didn't know you were in. But everyone seems to be in tonight.' When he went out he did not shut the door behind him, and they could hear him slip-slopping upstairs. 'He's very independent,' said Magdela. 'But these days I suppose everyone is?'

'I must say,' he said, 'I'm glad you are not alone here. I should not like to think of your being that.'

'Wouldn't you?' she said. 'Well, I never am. This is my only room in the house – and, even so, as you see, Bennet comes in. The house seems to belong to everyone now. That was Gina who opened the front door.'

'Yes,' he said, 'who is she?'

'She used to be Anthony's secretary, but she wanted to come to London to drive a car for the war, so he told her she could live in this house, because it was shut up at that time. So it seemed to be quite hers, when I came back. She is supposed to sit in the back dining-room; that was why I couldn't ask you to dinner. But also, there is nobody who can cook – there is a couple down in the basement, but they are independent; they are only supposed to be caretakers. They have a son who is a policeman, and I know he sometimes sleeps somewhere at the top of the house – but caretakers are so hard to get. They have a schoolgirl daughter who comes in here when she thinks I am not about.'

'It seems to me you have a lot to put up with. Wouldn't you be more comfortable somewhere else?'

'Oh,' she said, 'is that how you think of me?'

'I do hope you will dine with me, one night soon.'

'Thank you,' she said, evasively. 'Some night that would be very nice.'

'I suppose the fact is, you are very busy?'

'Yes, I am. I am working, doing things quite a lot.' She told him what she did, then her voice trailed off. He realized that

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he and she could not be intimate without many other people in the room. He looked at the empty pattern of chairs round them and said: 'Where are all those people I used to meet?'

'Whom do you mean, exactly?' she said, startled. '. . . Oh, in different places, different places, you know. I think I have their addresses, if there's anyone special . . .?'

'You hear news of them?'

'Oh yes; oh yes, I'm sure I do. What can I tell you that would be interesting? I'm sorry,' she said suddenly, shutting her eyes, 'but so much has happened.' Opening her eyes to look at him, she added: 'So much more than you know.'

To give point to this, the telephone started ringing: the bell filled the room, the sounding-box of the house, and travelled through windows into the square. Rupert remembered how, on other summer evenings, you had constantly heard the telephones in the houses round. It was tonight startling to hear a telephone ring. Magdela stared at the telephone, at a distance from her – not as though she shared this feeling that Rupert had, but as though something happened out of its time. She seemed to forbid the bell with her eyes, with that intent fixed warning intimate look, and, seeming unwilling to leave the sofa, contracted into stone-stillness by Rupert's side. At a loss, he said: 'Like me to see who it is?'

'No, I will; I must,' her voice hardened. 'Or they will be answering from downstairs.'

This evidently did happen; the bell stopped an instant before her fingers touched the receiver. She raised it, listened into it, frowned. 'It's all right, Gina,' she said. 'Thank you: you needn't bother. I'm here.'

She stood with her back to Rupert, with her head bent, still warily listening to the receiver. Then: 'Yes, it's me now,' she said, in an all at once very much altered tone, 'but . . .'

After Gina had let in Rupert she went back to continue to wait for her telephone call. *She* always answered from the foot of the stairs. Before sitting down again, or not sitting down, she went through from the back to the front dining-room, to open the window overlooking the square. The long table and the two sideboards were, as she always remembered them, sheeted up, and a smell of dust came from the sheets. Returning to the room that was hers to sit in, she left the archway doors open behind her, so that, before the blackout, air might pass through. The perspective of useless dining-room through the archway, the light fading from it through the bombed gap, did not affect her. She had not enough imagination to be surprised by the past – still less, by its end. When, the November after the war started, she first came to sleep in the closed house, she had, as Anthony's mistress, speculated as to this former part of his life. She supposed he had gained something by entertaining, though it did not seem to her he had much to show. While she stayed faithful to him she pitied him for a number of reasons she did not let appear. Now that she had begun to deceive him she found only that one reason to pity him. Now she loved someone else in a big way, she supposed it was time to clear out of this house. She only thought this; she did not feel it; her feelings were not at all fine. She did not know how to move without bringing the whole thing up, which would be tough on Anthony while he was in the north.

As to her plans for tonight – she never knew. So much depended – or, she might hear nothing. She wondered if she should put in time by writing to Anthony; she got out her pad and sat with it on her knee. Hearing Bennet's bath continue to run out she thought, that's a funny time for a bath. Underneath where she sat, the caretaker's wife was washing up the supper dishes and calling over her shoulder to her policeman son: the voice came out through the

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basement window and withered back on the silence round.

She wrote words on the pad:

Since I came here one thing and another seems to have altered my point of view. I don't know how to express myself, but I think under the circumstances I ought to tell you. Being here has started to get me down; for one thing it is such a way from the bus. Of course it has been a help; but don't you think it would be better if your wife had the place all to herself? As far as I can see she means to stay. Naturally she and I do not refer to this. But, for instance, if she had two nephews there would be no place for the other to sleep. . . .

. . . And looked at them with her head on one side. She heard Bennet come down the flights of staircase, rigidly dropping his feet from step to step. He pulled up with a jingle of the things in his pockets and thought of something outside her door. O God, don't let him come bothering in here, you see I might get this done. But he did: leaning his weight on the door handle, and with the other hand holding the frame of the door, he swung forward at her, with damp-flattened hair.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but shall you be going out?' She kept a hold on her letter-pad and said fiercely: 'Why?'

'If not, I might have your key.'

'Why not ask your aunt?'

'She's got someone there. You mean, you might go out, but you don't know?'

'No. Don't come bothering here, like a good boy. What's the matter with you, have you got a date?'

'No,' he said. 'I just want some food in some place.'

He walked away from her through the archway and looked out at the square from the end of the dining-room. The lampless dusk seemed to fascinate him. 'There are quite a lot of people standing about,' he said. 'Couples. This must be quite a place. Do you suppose they go into the empty houses?'

'No, they're all locked up.'

'What's the good of that, I don't see?'

'They're property.'

'I should say they were cracked; I shouldn't say they'd ever be much use. Oh, sorry, are you writing a letter? I say, I thought they were taking the railings away from squares; I thought the iron was some good. You think this place will patch up? I suppose it depends who wants it. Anybody can have it as far as I'm concerned. You can't get to anywhere from here.'

'Hadn't you better push off? Everywhere will be shut.'

'I know, but what about the key?'

But her head turned sharply: the telephone started ringing at the foot of the stairs. Bennet's expression became more hopeful. 'Go on, why don't you,' he said, 'then we might know where we are.'

Gina came back to him from the telephone, with one hand pushing her curls up. 'So what?' said Bennet.

'That was for her,' she said. 'It would be. I got my head bitten off. No place for me on that line. You'd think she was the only one in the house.' She picked up her bag and gave him the key out of it. 'Oh, all right,' she said. 'Here you are. Run along.'

He thumbed the key and said: 'Oh, then it wasn't your regular?'

'Nothing of mine,' she said. 'Regular if you like . . . Look, I thought you were going to run along?'

Just before Bennet shut the front door behind him he heard a ghostly click from the telephone at the foot of the stairs – in the drawing-room the receiver had been put back. Whatever there had been to say to his aunt must have been said – or totally given up. He thought, so what was the good of *that*? Stepping down into the dusk of the square, that lay

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at the foot of the steps like water, he heard voices above his head. His aunt and her visitor stood at one of the open windows, looking down, or seeming to look down, at the lovers. Rupert and Magdela for the moment looked quite intimate, as though they had withdrawn to the window from a number of people in the room behind them – only in that case the room would have been lit up.

Bennet, going out to hunt food, kept close along under the fronts of the houses with a primitive secretiveness. He made for the north outlet of the square, by which Rupert's taxi had come in, and at last in the distance heard the sound of a bus.

Magdela smiled and said to Rupert: 'Yes, look. Now the place seems to belong to everyone. One has nothing except one's feelings. Sometimes I think I hardly know myself.'

'How curious that light is,' he said, looking across at the gap.

'You know, I am happy.' This was her only reference to the words he had heard her say to the telephone. 'Of course, I have no plans. This is no time to make plans, now. But do talk to me – perhaps you have no plans, either? I have been so selfish, talking about myself. But to meet you after so much has happened – in one way, there seemed nothing to talk about. Do tell me how things strike you, what you have thought of things – coming back to everything like you have. Do you think we shall all see a great change?'