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The Victorian Chaise-Longue

Marghanita Laski



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TO JOHN HAYWARD

*'I am dying in my own death and the deaths
of those after me.'*

T. S. ELIOT

‘WILL you give me your word of honour,’ said Melanie, ‘that I am not going to die?’

The doctor said, ‘It’s a stupid thing to ask of me. Of course you’re going to die, and so am I, and so is Guy, and in the end even Richard is going to die. What you’re really asking me is whether you’re going to die soon of tuberculosis, and to that the answer is no, though I’m not giving any word of honour about it.’

Melanie reared up from the nest of pillows. ‘Why not?’ she demanded. ‘Why won’t you, if you’re really sure?’

The doctor said sternly, ‘Lie down.’ He waited until she had obediently let herself sink back into the big square pillows, their pink linen cases faintly shining with the glaze the good laundries still gave the good linen, lending their pale pink glow to the pretty little pale face with its fuzz of child-soft yellow hair. ‘Jumping about like that,’ he said with mock reproof. ‘Do you wonder I won’t give any promises?’

But Melanie felt safer now, she in her nest and he with a smile on his face. She smiled back, meaning to say only that she loved and trusted him, and the doctor wondered again how it was

that Melanie's smile seemed always to invite delights he was sure she had never known. 'It's a long time since I've seen you smile like that,' he said; yes, it was a long time, now that he came to think of it, not since - 'It's all right to smile now,' said Melanie, 'now that I know I'm not going to die,' but she could not help her voice rising in interrogation as she ended.

The doctor sighed. 'If I'd known how obstreperous one negative reaction would have made you,' he said, 'I'd never have told you about it.' He twitched his chair closer to her bed and for the hundredth time misjudged its weight and wondered irritably why Guy had never told Melanie that papier-mâché chairs with fancy inlays might look very pretty in a lady's bedroom, but that gentlemen visitors wanted something a bit more substantial to sit on. 'Now listen to me,' he said. 'Because you've managed to be a good obedient girl so far, we've been able to conquer what might have been a very nasty little flare-up, and if you let yourself get perfectly well and we keep a steady eye on you, there's no reason why anything of the sort should ever occur again.'

'Not even if I have another baby?' asked Melanie.

'Well, I wouldn't have *too* many,' said the doctor cautiously, 'but the trouble was lying in wait before you started Richard, you know. I doubt it

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would have become active so quickly if you hadn't been pregnant, but, of course, it might have flared up at any time.'

'It was lucky it waited so long, though, wasn't it?' said Melanie, smiling again.

'Very lucky,' said the doctor grimly. Melanie should never fully understand how lucky it was that after they'd decided to take the chance of letting the pregnancy continue, the suspicious patch had become active only after the baby had become viable, so that the urgently performed induction could give her a healthy son. 'But that was only – let me see – only seven months ago,' he said, continuing his train of thought rather than the conversation. 'There's not got to be any high jinks, not for a long time yet. We'll spend the summer just as peacefully and quietly as we can, and as soon as the weather starts to get nasty, off you go to Switzerland, with that husband of yours to keep a firm eye on you.'

'And Richard,' said Melanie, still unable to be sure that what was left unsaid need not be feared or distrusted.

'And Richard,' the doctor agreed. 'Nanny looking forward to going among foreigners?'

'Sister says she is,' said Melanie. She was beginning to sparkle. Soon, the doctor knew, she would become excited and giggling and vivacious, and soon after the still scanty store of health would be burnt up, and tomorrow Melanie would

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be lying back exhausted, pleading feverishly again that he would promise that she wasn't going to die. 'But in the meantime,' he said with emphasis, 'we've got to go on exactly as we've been doing, no frolics, no excitement, the very utmost care and circumspection. You've got to treat yourself as if —' his eyes roamed round the pretty bedroom, over the creamy silky paper on the walls, the shiny cream curtains printed with huge pink roses, the rosewood bedhead decked with cavorting French brasses, and then to the mirror on the lace-frilled dressing table, rosy-flushed cherubs clambering in and out of wreaths of coloured posies, and there he found his analogy and ended, '— as if you were a piece of Dresden china.'

'Who's a piece of Dresden china?' asked Guy, coming in, carrying two glasses of sherry. 'Is my Melly a piece of Dresden china, then?' he asked playfully, handing one glass to the doctor and then sitting on the bed, not forgetting first to set his own glass on the bedside table in order to hitch up the soberly striped trousers, insignia of the rising young barrister, the clubbable likeable rising young man. Why don't I really like him? the doctor asked himself again. I never really expected — after all, I've known Melanie almost since she was a child — and once again he thrust the obtrusive thought away, telling himself fiercely that he'd no patience with a lot of that

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psychiatrical nonsense, anyone would be jealous of a young man so well endowed, so confidently expectant, that he could afford to leave a practice barely established in order to accompany his wife to Switzerland for six months. And a good thing too, he decided unkindly; for all Master Guy's pretty ways with her, he doesn't look like a man who's been deprived of what he fancies these last months. 'I was telling Melanie that that's the way she's got to look after herself,' he said shortly.

'And so she shall,' Guy reassured him. 'Shan't you, my pretty love?' He began to play with her fingers, and his voice took on the mock – and yet not so mock – pomposity of his humour as he continued, 'The use of the phrase Dresden china as a synonym for expensive fragility suggests that there were lamentable gaps in Britain's nineteenth-century supremacy over world markets. And how strange that it should be the Germans, themselves almost synonymous with heaviness, clumsiness, everything that is the antithesis of the object of which we speak, who have provided the very phrase that leaps into your mind when you feel the need to warn Melanie that she must be the object of our incessant, our unremitting care –' it needed a new breath, after all, to complete the sentence; Guy took it as unobtrusively as possible, and ended triumphantly '– as of her own.'

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'How clever you are, darling,' said Melanie adoringly. 'You make me feel so silly compared with you.'

'But I like you silly,' said Guy, and so he does, thought Dr Gregory, watching them. But Melanie isn't the fool he thinks her, not by a long chalk, she's simply the purely feminine creature who makes herself into anything her man wants her to be. Not that I'd call her clever, rather cunning – his thoughts checked, a little shocked at the word he had chosen, but he continued resolutely – yes, cunning as a cartload of monkeys if ever she needed to be. But she won't, he told himself, and wondered why he felt so relieved to know that Melanie was loved and protected and, in so far as anything could possibly be sure, safe.

Now he watched her pouting and saying to Guy in pretended distress, 'Dr Gregory won't promise me that I'm not going to die,' and husband and wife, their hands still clasped, looked almost furtively towards the doctor, not daring to let their faces betray either amusement or apprehension.

The doctor pushed back his chair and stood up. 'You're trying to force my hand, young woman,' he said, 'and I'm not going to let you get away with it. This is the very last time I'm going to make my little speech. Fourteen months ago, seven months before young Richard was born, Dr Macpherson and I discovered a suspicious

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patch on that left lung of yours, and both of us suggested that it wouldn't be a bad idea to count this particular baby out, and start in with a new one when we'd got everything cleared up. But rightly as it turned out – or as I hope it's going to turn out – we agreed to let you keep your baby on the clear understanding that if things got any worse, there wouldn't be any baby till next time and that next time might be a good deal further away as a result. When we said this, we both hoped, as you know, that the suspicious patch would remain just that, but it turned nasty, as these things are apt to do, and though, by the greatest good fortune, we've presented you with a fine bouncing baby, you've got to remember for a long time yet that you've had a lot of active tuberculous bacilli floating around in you as well.'

But Melanie had stopped listening. She liked the speech to be made, liked its solemnity that centred so decisively in herself, but after the happy ending, she never listened to the warning. 'Dr Gregory talks as if it was he who made the baby,' she said to Guy, 'but it wasn't, it was us, wasn't it?'

'Alone we did it,' agreed Guy, but added courteously to the doctor, 'though I will admit that we had some very necessary help in the process. I went up to see him just now,' he said to Melanie. 'He was lying on his tummy having his bottom wiped, and sucking his thumb furiously.'

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‘Oh the darling!’ cried Melanie. Her eyes swept from her husband to the doctor, and she demanded, ‘When am I going to see him properly, not just held up at the door, here, here, here?’ She thumped the bed beside her where the baby should lie and had never lain.

The doctor sighed, knowing that his warnings had been useless, wondering whether he should again remind her that every kind of excitement and intensity must be resolutely avoided – but excitement and intensity, he had always known, were Melanie’s response to life. For eight months she had obediently lain still in bed, but with the stillness of taut anger and resentment and never the demanded relaxation. Her large blue eyes had spoken passionately of misery and impatience and yearning with little need for the voice she had been bidden to use so sparingly, to speak only of essential needs and never waste her breath on complaint or love. Each day as he came into the room, the doctor had looked to see if Melanie’s eyes were yet resigned, but now he knew that they would never be, that they always would be resentful and angry until he could once again allow them to be gay.

You had to reckon, said the doctor to himself, that with Melanie as much energy went into lying still as most women spent in a day at the sales. He repeated the warning again. ‘You’ve only had one negative reaction, you know, only one, and