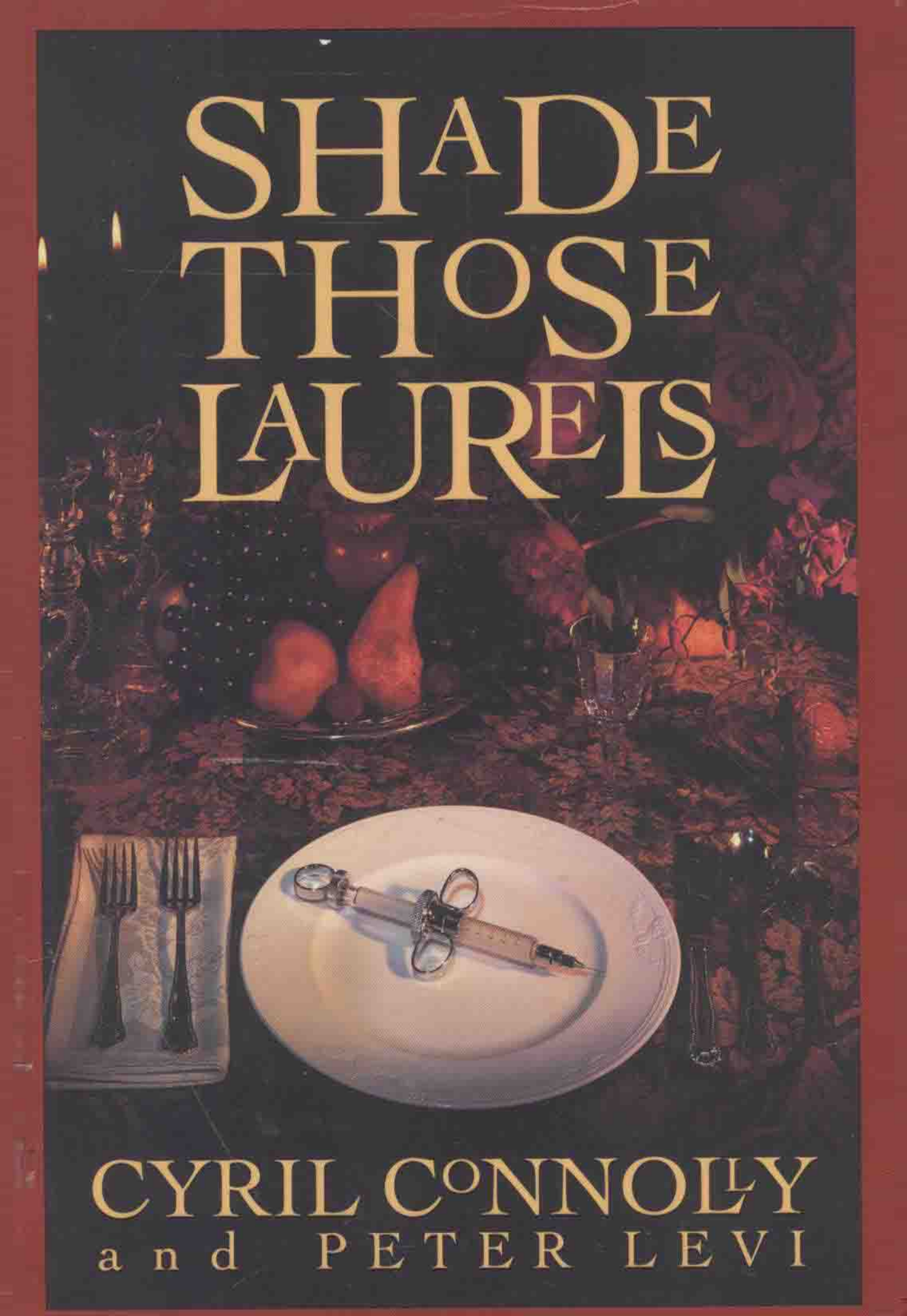


SHADE THOSE LAURELS

A still life composition featuring a white plate with a syringe and a pair of scissors, a fork and knife on a napkin, and a bowl of fruit on a dark, patterned tablecloth.

CYRIL CONNOLLY
and PETER LEVI



SHADIE
THOSE LAURELS

by
CYRIL CONNOLLY

concluded by
PETER LEVI



Pantheon Books New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Connolly, Cyril, 1903-1974.

Shade those laurels / by Cyril Connolly ; concluded by Peter Levi.

p. cm.

I. Levi, Peter. II. Title.

PR6005.0393S5 1991 823'.912—dc20 91-52620

ISBN 0-679-40433-3

Manufactured in the United States of America

First American Edition

SHADE
THOSE LAURELS



for
DEIRDRE

SHADE
THOSE LAURELS



INTRODUCTION

This is a short novel left unfinished by Cyril Connolly; he wrote three parts out of four and published the first part in *Encounter* in March 1956. The second and third parts were typed but not finally corrected: there are small mechanical errors in them, such as personal names altered in *Encounter* but left wrong in the typescript. Since Cyril was a tireless self-critic, who achieved many of his best results in correcting his typescripts and many proofs, this is an important point. Not a line of the last part was ever written, though he did once get out the typescript or the notebook (I recollect a manuscript notebook) a few years before his death, with the idea of finishing the story. It was around that time that he showed me part two, and told me the secret of his plot. In this story, as in all his writings, he was both intimately personal and elusive. The place names and personal names are false trails; Kemble is one of his own family names, but that means little because, like every novelist, he is all his characters and yet stands apart from them all. Those readers who prefer to come upon the *dénouement* in its rightful place had better stop reading this introduction at once.

He told me that the clue to his mystery was the Gassendi Club, an invented Oxford undergraduate dining club of the 1920s, whose members had combined to play a deliberate trick on the public. One had become a publisher, one a critic, and so on, and they worked together in a secret combination to occupy the commanding heights of the literary world. Sir Mortimer wrote none of his books: they secretly wrote them in committee or, as fashion altered, they captured some penniless young writer to transform the style in whatever was the fashionable direction. Sir Mortimer only impersonated a great man, while all the old friends had sacrificed their own careers as writers to the same scheme, for the sake of financial advantage. Julian was the last of the fashionable ghost-writers, but at the fatal dinner party he was being sacked, while the new young man, Stephen Kemble, was being tested for the job. But alas, Sir Mortimer had decided that night to write a book of his own at last. The others could not allow him to do so, as he was too much of a fool or a phoney, or anyway because he wrote so badly.

I do not believe Cyril had worked out his solution in full detail. For example, I am not sure how much Cressida knew (everything perhaps), or quite how they intended to keep Julian quiet for the rest of his life. In the second and third parts I do detect a certain falling off, at least in its present state. The story as first conceived was a light-hearted *jeu d'esprit*, like *Bond Strikes Camp* and *Missing Diplomats*, and the *Sunday Times* version of *White Mischief*. It reminds me of something Edmund Wilson wrote in *Classics and Commercials* (p. 285, quoted by Michael Sheldon in *Friends of Promise*) about those "... who are born with a gift of style, a natural grace and wit, so that their jobs have the freshness of *jeux d'esprit* and sometimes their *jeux d'esprit* turn out to stick as classics". But I suspect he planned *Shade Those Laurels* at too great length, and therefore got tired of it. It exists almost

entirely for the sake of its amazing dinner party. All the same, it is a pity it should get lost, yet in order to be printed it has to be finished: under modern conditions no publisher is interested in printing a mere two-thirds of a novel, even by Cyril. I have taken on the task of writing the final section in a spirit of pure professionalism: I have no illusion about my own prose style or about the subtle and brilliant qualities of Cyril's intellect and senses, or his wide and peculiar learning. My task is to tack a bit of calico on to the end of a wonderful fragment of tapestry earlier in taste and period. I am unashamed of doing that in order to preserve what there is of the tapestry.

I have always felt passionately about *Shade Those Laurels*. I read it on the train, going to France and Italy for the first time, in the early spring of 1956, identifying heavily with Mr Kemble. I was an Oxford undergraduate, having just finished classical mods. I had never been abroad before though I was already twenty-five. Switzerland awaited me, with mountains standing up around the lakes and the strange sensation of being greeted as an *Altphilologieprofessor*, and Venice, where you walk out of the station into a Guardi, and Florence, where I lived in the Villa Machiavelli and snow blew in through shut double windows, and the wolves ate a postman. That holiday after mods is usually wonderful, but it was more so for me, because I had left school at seventeen to become a Jesuit and a lot of the fizz in my temperament had therefore been bottled up for eight years. I lavished on Cyril as a writer those affections and loyalties that no doubt ought to have been devoted to duller authors and heavier matters.

I remember one afternoon that winter term discussing with my friend Denis Bethell what we would do if we were Pope, like Hadrian VII. "You," he said, "would begin by canonising Cyril Connolly." Later on, when I got to know

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this admirable writer, who by that time was like a Chinese sage, wreathed suddenly in similes, and who had given up smoking and, later, drink in order to preserve his senses and his consciousness intact for work, my adoration was transformed into a deeper kind of delight. I had joined the throng of those who could not avoid loving him, but there was something more, so that I still find it hard to avoid taking Dryden's words personally, even though there have been so many with more right:

But you, whom ev'ry Muse and Grace adorn
Whom I foresee to better fortune born
Be kind to my remains; and, Oh, defend
Against your judgement your departed friend!
Let not th'insulting Foe my fame pursue
But shade those laurels which descend to you.

PETER LEVI

April 1990
The Orangery
Frampton-on-Severn



As if divining my disappointment: "Read that last sentence again, Kemble," he interrupted.

"*And more, perhaps, than any man living,*" I continued, "Sir Mortimer appreciates and has taught others to appreciate the things which we can touch or see – this visible world."

"Yes, it's good," went on my editor – "so much better than the one we're using. A thousand pities you're not a celebrity: it's names we like on this paper, especially when a famous author, whom most of our readers have never heard of – ha! – gets a knighthood on his birthday. Tell you what: I'll change a letter here and there and we can turn it into something. '*More perhaps than any man now living, Sir Mortimer appreciated the things which he could touch or see!*' I never liked to scrap a good bloke or a good sentence. Take care of this and we'll run you off a proof when you come back – meanwhile don't let him grab it. He mightn't think it funny."

"But really, I can't let you do this – why I'm – "

"It'll pay for your journey. Fair enough?"

And so that very evening I found myself going down to stay with our newest knight, Sir Mortimer Gussage, K.B.E., with a draft of his own obituary in my breast-pocket.

Tallboys was a place I had long been determined to visit: the house has given its name to the *de luxe* edition of his collected works where it is figured on the title page beyond its lime avenue in an almost impertinent perfection. I was under no illusion about the purpose of my invitation, nor for a moment did I suppose that Sir Mortimer would have asked me if I had not been able to mention at a party that I was doing a piece on him for his birthday. By lifting a finger Sir Mortimer could have met anyone in the kingdom. As an unimportant novel reviewer, my privilege had to be earned. And so it happened that, four days later, I found myself sliding into Salisbury station, descending with the misty October twilight, to be met among the churns on the long, cold platform by the great man's most finished masterpiece.

Laurian Gussage stepped forward and shook my hand. "You *are* Stephen Kemble? You *must* be! Daddy will be so pleased you have come." Her voice was low and crisp, her great eyes wide apart – a brownish green – her face rather round, above the grey Paris scarf, were it not for a high forehead from which the dark hair was swept back. She wore broad-waled blue corduroy trousers under a three-quarter-length camel coat and tried to seize my bag. We made our way through groups of clanking soldiers to a small closed Sunbeam Talbot and soon were driving over the river, past the cathedral and out along the Blandford road.

"I wonder what you'll make of Tallboys. Isn't it your first visit?"

"Who's going to be there?" I countered.

"Oh, it's just a family party for Daddy's birthday tomor-

row. There's Daddy and Cressida, that's my stepmother – and Jane Sotheran – 'Sacharissa', you know."

"Gracious!"

"Don't let them both tear you to pieces."

"Are they so carnivorous?"

"Oh no! Not destructive. They just like young men. And then there's Geoffrey 'Ginger' Bartlett – he's Daddy's publisher – and Hugh Curry Rivel, his oldest friend; he's a writer too. And Julian Frere, who's a young Cambridge disciple and supposed to be terribly clever, and that's the lot, except for Norman and Mona."

"Who are they?"

"Norman and Mona Farran; they have the mill nearby but they're always over at the house. Norman's another very old friend of Daddy's and Mona does his letters and typing."

"Are they writers too?"

"Good heavens, no; Norman has a fruit farm."

"And you?"

"I'm trying to be a painter; I feel I've had enough of the written word and '*la vie littéraire*'."

"You think it's a bad life? I'm a would-be novelist, don't forget."

She looked at me reflectively. "I don't think it's life at all."

We had been twisting in the dark along roads which had narrowed stealthily to lanes until at last we crossed a little bridge and shot up a leafy drive while the headlights illuminated a square brick house with a shell-shaped wooden porch. As we drew up with a crunch of gravel and bruising of rosemary, the front door swung open on to a bright pine-panelled hall. While a foreign-looking manservant in a wrinkled white jacket with a button missing was taking my bag and coat away, Laurian pushed me into a large living-room, where the whole alarming party stood assembled

round an open log fire. "I've brought you the new admirer, Daddy," and for the second time in my life I found myself shaking hands with the man whose work had changed it. A "humanist" is perhaps a discredited word, let us say rather – an illuminator, a life-enhancer, a priest-king or a poet in the original sense of "maker"; one who has tried to distil from his imagination an imperishable elixir for the unborn, the discriminating, and the lost. With his pointed bronze beard, his noble brow and piratical blue eyes, his vigorous nose and full rich mouth, by his whole buoyant air of ironical expectation, he suggested the High Renaissance, the man of action who was yet dedicated to poetry and learning, like Sir Fulke Greville of whom he had so understandingly written, Kenelm Digby, or Killigrew, made the subject of his only play. He gave me a warm hand-clasp and a smile of appreciation. "Good of you to come," he boomed. "I don't think you've met my wife."

"Mr. Kemble, your servant, sir." Cressida made me a little curtsey, her two brown arms gripping the pleats of her quilted skirt in a ballet dancer's gesture, and then she lifted her small nineteen-twentyish face up to mine. "Of course, I know all about you." Her voice was a tiny silver bell and every syllable blown out of her mouth like a smoke-ring. She took my arm just above the elbow in a light yet somehow clinging and over-intimate grip, and led me up to the haughty Sacharissa.

"How do you do!" Miss Sotheran's voice was deep and resonant and her greeting went down the scale like a dropped guitar. She, too, smiled and there was something I didn't quite like about that either, for she put out a hand from which all life had been withdrawn so that I appeared to be holding it up with a fearful familiarity.

"And now our merry gentlemen, God rest them," enunciated Cressida. "Mr. Bartlett, our publisher, let nothing him

dismay." I greeted an erect and shambling figure in a blue city suit with a large open porous face and flabby paw. "And Mr. Curry Rivel." A self-consciously "interesting" head with a swivelling Egyptian back to it, posed on the neck like an early photo of Rupert Brooke but shrivelled by the secret processes of middle age; dry lips, pale unfriendly eyes, sandy hair brushed back and whitening at the sides like wind-blown wheat, and a flying hand I seemed hardly to touch, while a high-pitched voice disposed of me by rising on the last syllable. "How do you DO!"

"Oh yes, Mr. Kemble, and I was nearly forgetting, here's someone of your own age to play with. This is Mr. Frere – Julian, behold another acolyte to swing the censer with you for the Knight of the Split Caesura."

A man in his early thirties, and so actually considerably older than me as was obvious to both of us, put down his evening paper. He was tall and almost good-looking; his face dark and intelligent but somehow slightly battered, like an "export reject" of a rather good design. He reminded me of a less suave and rather more *louche* counterpart of Senator McCarthy. "How do you do, Mr. Kemble. Of course I read your novel reviews."

"Yes?"

There was charm in his careless tone. "Or do my level best to: for like all young critics you seem to have forgotten Dr. Johnson – 'a horse that can count up to ten is a remarkable horse, not a remarkable mathematician'." He stuck out a long, grimy, close-bitten finger and pushed my cambric handkerchief further down the breast-pocket.

"I'll thank you not – " I began, but Sir Mortimer clapped his hands, standing erect with one leg slightly advanced like a bronze Aeginetan warrior. "Cocktails at last."

As they were being passed round by the dishevelled ser-

vant (I nearly said "house-boy"), the Norman Farrans arrived, and amid general greetings I was introduced to them. The one man present who was so original as not to write had a quiet face with fine, sad eyes and a mild, doggy look that went well with his old tweeds, while his wife, Mona Farran, was distinctly shabby; she wore coral earrings and there were lumps of grey in her short black hair; her green skirt was too high to my way of thinking and revealed woollen stockings twisted round the knee.

Sir Mortimer offered me a martini. "And how was London? Deliciously noisy, I expect, with Charles Morgan away. You'll find us abominably quiet here, I'm afraid. The recreation of North Wiltshire is the bottle, of South Wiltshire, dressing up. Here on the borderline between them, we seldom dress – not even *lederhosen* – and we don't drink – or at any rate not nearly as much as we should like to. And now, let us go in – Cressida!" He barked her name out in quite a different tone, like a command, and she made a little face at Mr. Curry Rivel as we began to shuffle towards the door, like sand in an hour-glass, all seeming to hold back yet one by one contriving to pass through.

The dining-room was large, high, and like the hall panelled in some pale wood; it looked unexpectedly formal for such an easy-going house – or was it so easy-going? For I noticed that the men were all in dark suits; even Norman Farran's tweed was a peaty black-brown Donegal, while the women, except for his wife, were in low dresses. Laurian too had changed into something white and was beside me again, glowing like a camellia. A glittering crystal chandelier was suspended above the oval Sheraton table where two branching cut-glass candlesticks sent out their wavering sprays. In the centre was a plain rose bowl from which a diminuendo of goblets radiated star-wise in the direction of each guest; we all had an old print with a glass top as a table-

mat and even a written place-card. I dared to hope the heavy capitals were Laurian's, for I found myself put between her and Sir Mortimer.

"Most of us have to share a lady tonight," he said, "so I have given you the best of the bunch and penalised you with myself as your neighbour." His voice had a curious resonance; an irresistible voice in which something profoundly masculine seemed to struggle with an imperishable gaiety and charm; whatever he was saying, his tone made of it a treat, an enlightenment, a special occasion, while his laugh – a single deep, infectious "Ha" – was like the lifting of the cover from a silver entrée dish on a cold morning. I did not know how to reply and mumbled my embarrassment while I looked carefully around me. The table was like this:

I am interested in table arrangement; it belongs to a mummified world which I am too young to remember. I decided that these people must all be where they were for a particular reason. "Sacharissa" was famous enough to be on Sir Mortimer's right – and Cressida? She had given herself an important dud in "Ginger" Bartlett and a consolation

