

JOHN BOWEN
AFTER THE RAIN

PENGUIN BOOKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
FABER AND FABER

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*For My
Mother and Father*



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Inky pinky spider, climbing up the spout,
Down came the rain, and washed poor spider out.
Out came the sun, and dried away the rain.
Inky pinky spider, climbing up again.

Children's nursery rhyme

原书缺页

原书缺页

CHAPTER ONE

THE RAIN-MAKER

THERE are no beginnings in history; all that belongs to pre-history and imagination. Chains of events and ideas stretch backwards and forwards through time, and can be traced in either direction by people who have a fancy for that sort of thing, but traced to no beginnings, and each end is a different question mark.

History is too big for beginnings that we can apprehend, but men are not big. Men are small, and each man has a beginning when he is conceived, an end when he dies; the before and after of *those* events are not comprehensible by his understanding, and so have no part in his life as a man. And, just as each man has his own beginning, so the chain of events and ideas of which I have spoken have a beginning *for him*; that is the moment when they come within his own personal experience.

So that, while for some folk the Flood began at the seventh (eighth? ninth? thirtieth?) day of steady rain, for others only when the level of the water reached the top of the television set or the turkey carpet, for still others at that very moment when the water itself reached out for them to overwhelm them with cold and suffocation, for me it began in the basement of Foyle's Book Shop in the Charing Cross Road, almost a year before Mr Uppingham detonated whatever it was he detonated, and covered the earth in rain.

The Book Buying Department was in Foyle's basement. A little counter was set off from the girls who sorted or despatched the new books that lay about in profusion elsewhere in the basement, and behind this counter there was a room to the right where the Buyer ^{lived} when he was not buying, along with the confidential ¹⁹⁴⁵ dusty catalogues that told him whether a textbook was out of date or not. He seemed to me an incongruously cheerful man. I always expected a Buyer to be sympathetically depressed; so many of his clients had come down in the world.

He was a very useful barometer, that Buyer. I could tell which literary reputations were still sound as I watched him going through a suitcase of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors, discarding perhaps a third of the books. 'No good taking Scott nowadays,' he would say cheerfully, 'Bulwer Lytton? - oh, my dear chap! George Eliot - we get that kind of stuff by the ton. Froude . . . Grote - *What* a lot of copies Everyman must have printed of Grote! Dickens, yes. Trollope, yes. Peacock, yes. Fielding, yes - oh no; it's *Amelia*, I'm afraid. Not Thackeray. Not Smollett. Not Gissing. I'll give you twenty-five shillings for the lot.' - and so they would begin a journey through whatever processes were necessary before they reached their final end on the Sixpenny Shelf.

I was selling review copies to Foyle's at that time, and went pretty regularly to the Buying Department every fortnight or so, and I grew to recognize most of the other regular clients. I myself was of the aristocracy; all the books I brought were new, and I had a good price for them. This put me in a class with the elderly Kensington lady in a purple hat, who used to come in with a string bag full of detective stories, which she had bought to read and sell again; books from the libraries, she said, were full of germs. I remember that I once told her that even Foyle's books were handled by somebody before she bought them, but she said that one found a better class of customer at Foyle's than the people who went in libraries.

Below this lady and myself in the scale there were the students in corduroys with Oxford histories and textbooks on mathematics. Below them were those who were students no longer - middle-aged folk in reduced circumstances, who were hurt when the Buyer told them that their textbooks were out of date, but so much had hurt them already that the news did not make much of a dent in what was already so depressed. Below them again were the thin-nosed men, their cheeks bestubbed, their raincoats dirty, their grey flannel shirts collarless, who brought the suitcases full of standard authors. Some of them would stand mute while the Buyer made his literary judgements; one man invariably grumbled. 'Thought I might get thirty-five for this lot,' he would say.

'Twenty-five.'

'There's some good books there: there's some fine reading. I thought I might get a shilling each for those Every-mans.'

'They'll all go on the Sixpenny Shelf, I'm afraid.'

So the grumbling man would stuff the Froude, Grote, and Bulwer Lytton back into his suitcase, and go off remarking scornfully that he could sell the lot easily enough at the Chancery Lane Bookshop.

Mr Uppingham had a suitcase when I met him in Foyle's, but it contained no standard authors – or not, at any rate, standard to me – and his raincoat was perfectly clean. He had shaved; he wore rimless spectacles; he looked like an American, but he was not – I never knew where he hailed from, because his speech had been so refined that not a trace of regional accent remained. He opened his suitcase on the counter of the Buying Department, and he took from it a damp pair of nylon bathing trunks, which had spoiled the dust-jacket of the book that lay beneath. This was *Rain Making and Rain Breaking*. Most of the other books in the suitcase were similar in subject – *Principles Governing the Utilization of Dry Ice*, *Rainfall*, *Harvest from the Clouds*, *I Shot a Cannon in the Air*, *Problems of Irrigation*, *Texan Odyssey*, and at least a dozen others. The pages of some of the books had been removed, and Mr Uppingham very properly pointed this out to the Buyer. 'Ay tore out those pages,' he said, 'Ay tore them out mayself. Ay found them delusive.'

'I suppose they'll be in the catalogue,' said the Buyer, 'Those of them in English at any rate. I'm not sure we can do anything with this.' He handed back to Mr Uppingham a very filthy copy of *La Pluie*.

'But it is part-new,' said Mr Uppingham. 'Not all the pages are cut.'

'A pound for the lot?' The Buyer pushed aside those books from which pages had been torn. 'After all, it's a specialized field.'

I said, 'I didn't know it had a literature at all.'

'Oh, may dear fellow,' said Mr Uppingham. 'It hasn't. Those books are worthless, quaita worthless. Really you

might say that the only valuable information in them are the marginalia that Ay have mayself contributed.'

'I can't take these books if you've written in them,' said the Buyer.

'As Ay see it,' said Mr Uppingham, 'the contract between us has already been completed, may good man,' and he tucked the credit slip the Buyer had given him into the top pocket of his jacket. 'Good-bay, and thank you.'

I said, 'I'll go with you, sir, if I may. There are one or two questions I should like to ask you.'

'You are not from the po-lice?'

'No, I'm a journalist.'

'Bay all means then,' said Mr Uppingham, 'Ay should not care at this stage of may career to be at loggerheads with the Press.'

I was at that time a journalist of the superior, ill-paid sort, working for *North Latitude*, a magazine intended to be an equivalent to and as successful as the *New Yorker*. We worked very closely to the *New Yorker* formula. Several pages of liberal comment would be followed by some tenuous short stories, essays in nostalgia, and poems that were either funny or intellectually intense. The text was interspersed with joke drawings and unintentionally comic bits cut out of other magazines. Our critics wrote of the Arts in a tone of urbane irritation, and we laid great stress on features distinguished for their objective reporting; I had been hired as one of the objective reporters at a flat salary of fifteen pounds a week. As it happened, Londoners who liked that kind of thing continued to subscribe to the *New Yorker*, and our magazine barely lasted a year. It folded, in fact, a couple of months after my meeting with Mr Uppingham, and was mourned at great length ('the contraction of any market at all for good writing', 'the imminent death of the little magazines', 'the menace of television') by those people who might have saved it by buying the magazine instead of whining about it after it was gone. However, they were paid for their elegies, I suppose, whereas a subscription to *North Latitude* would have cost three guineas a year.

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It had been my thought that Mr Uppingham might serve as copy for our 'On the Spot' columns, as indeed he did to the tune of four long paragraphs under the heading 'Undampened', which began, 'It was our pleasure yesterday to drink coffee with a professional rain-maker,' and ended, 'Water polo, anyone?' I sent a copy of these paragraphs, together with my own much longer version of the story, to a friend who knew the Science Editor of the *News Chronicle*, and landed a job as a Special Correspondent, accompanying Mr Uppingham to Texas.

The principle on which the State of Texas engaged Mr Uppingham was simple: it couldn't do any harm to try him, and he would not be paid unless he were successful. A certain number of inches of rain must fall within two days of the conclusion of his attempt; the State of Texas had had truck with rain-makers before. The principle on which Mr Uppingham proposed to make the rain was just as simple in its essence, but much more difficult to understand. 'Ay dare say,' he had explained at that first meeting, 'Ay dare say you did Chemistry at school?'

'Yes.'

'And Ay dare say you remember that if you pass a direct current through water by means of electrodes, haidrogen collects around one electrode and oxygen around the other. Twice as much haidrogen as oxygen.'

'Yes.'

'Well, there you are.'

'Where am I?'

'If you can turn water into haidrogen and oxygen - into air, dear boy, do you see? - all you have to do is reverse the process, and you have water again.'

'But how?'

'What is lightning, dear boy, if it is not Nature's own version of this process?'

I stopped to take thought. 'Lightning doesn't have any electrodes,' I said, 'and it doesn't go on for long enough. Anyway, lightning isn't always accompanied by rain; I'm sure I've heard of dry lightning. And even when it is, the rain often comes first.'

'Exactly. Ay have often had occasion to say it; Nature is deplorably unscayentific. What is required, dear boy, for any scayentific process is control.'

'Just control?'

'And a catalyst. The only contribution you might say Ay have made is the discovery of a catalyst.'

'And what is it?'

'May dear boy,' said Mr Uppingham, 'if Ay were to tell you that, it would make you as rich as Ay hope to become mayself.'

He wouldn't tell me. He wouldn't tell anyone what his catalyst was. The whole thing was preposterous. He had bought for his Texan experiment (from some dump of surplus stores, I assume) a small barrage balloon, and he adapted it secretly to his purposes. He filled it with hydrogen and oxygen in the proportions of two to one, and added some of his catalyst; whether it was gas, liquid, or solid, nobody knew. Then he discovered that the balloon would not leave the ground. By this time he was getting a great deal of rather frivolous publicity, and holidaymakers began to flock to the scene of his experiment. I believed, and still do, that Mr Uppingham was not as stupid as we made out, because it was discovered at that point that he had rented a large area of the ground round about his 'construction shed', fifteen miles north of Cisco, Texas, and he now made money by selling concessions to the hot-dog, hamburger, and soft drink stalls that sprang up near the shed for the service of the tourists whose numbers increased every day. Even if the experiment itself were to be a failure, Mr Uppingham was pretty sure to make by these methods a sum considerably greater than his expenses.

He set to work again on the balloon, attaching to the top of it a helicopter blade, which was to be driven by a motor that he would carry with him in the basket. This motor would also supply the current needed for the electrolysis. Mr Uppingham himself intended to be in the basket to start the process going, and watch developments. The theory was that, once the process had begun, valves would open at each end of the balloon, rain being expelled as a spray from one valve, while

THE RAIN-MAKER

fresh quantities of air were drawn in through the other; this would not be as pure as the artificial 'air' used to start the process, but it would do. The balloon, tethered by cable to a lorry, would move about shedding its spray of rain all over the State, and from the lorry food and drink would be sent up to Mr Uppingham, and petrol for the motor.

Now that I have explained all this in detail, you may imagine the kind of articles that flip journalists were writing about Mr Uppingham. Cisco filled up with the feature-writers of American and European periodicals. *Punch* sent a peer, and *Paris-Match* a husband-and-wife team. Money filled the tills of the bars and drug stores of Cisco and its neighbouring townships. Hotels and rooming houses had never had it so good; whether he made any rain or not, the local citizens had cause to thank Mr Uppingham. As I have said, I myself never believed at the time he intended getting more than the profits from the concessions he had sold, with the added possibility of selling his life story afterwards to some national magazine.

The Uppingham Story ended on 8 August 1965.

The morning was fine and clear, with the usual prospects of baking heat to come; that part of Texas had been without rain for nine years, and the vegetable covering of the earth had been withered away by the sun. All the correspondents and agency photographers were stirring early in Cisco that morning, for the balloon was to go up at eleven o'clock. I had been luckier in my lodgings than most, for I was staying with the mother of an old friend from the days I had spent at Indiana University, and, after a breakfast of orange juice, coffee, and scrambled eggs, with bacon grilled until it was brittle and dried on crêpe paper, I walked out to join my breakfastless colleagues at the site of the shed, stepping delicately among the little town of tents and trailers that had grown up around it. There we waited with the ever-growing crowd until Mr Uppingham appeared at ten.

The balloon was no more than a collapsed sheath of silk on the truck; a State Trooper guarded it, and swapped jokes with some of the people close to him. Another truck was parked at a little distance away; it contained the cylinders of gas with

which the balloon was to be filled. Mr Uppingham ordered this second truck into position, and began to superintend the operation.

As before, the balloon did not at once leave the truck to which it was attached by cable, but only took on shape as the cylinders of gas were emptied. This was a slow business, and the crowd grew bored. They stood about and shouted to their wandering children, or they sat on cushions on the tops of automobiles and trailers, and conversed with one another over the heads of the people on the ground. Most of them were lightly dressed, and all of them were sweating in the strong sun, which, as the *putt-a-putt* of the motor sounded thinly in the air and the balloon began to rise beneath the rotating helicopter blade was suddenly obscured, so that everyone fell silent, and looked up.

It was not the balloon, of course, which had obscured the sun; that, though rising steadily, was still too close to the truck. No, a large cloud had come up from the west, and as Mr Uppingham stepped into the basket, and as the cable was paid out and the balloon rose higher and higher into the air, other clouds came and joined the first, covering the sky like a padded quilt, and blotting out the sun. All time seemed to slow down as Mr Uppingham rose in his basket towards the cloud quilt above him, which, as it grew thicker, seemed to come down to meet the balloon.

On the roof of one of the trailers, a trap door opened as a child was sent to fetch its mother's wrap. Suddenly the air grew chilly, and a shiver seemed to run through the crowd. A car was seen to drive furiously up the road from Cisco, and the people on foot made room for it, since it bore some sort of official pennant. The car stopped by the truck, and a middle-aged man in a light suit and a wide hat got out, and spoke sharply to the man at the winch. 'Get him down,' he said, 'the deal's off.'

'Don't know as how I could do that,' said the man.

'The deal's off.'

'Does *he* know?' The man at the winch pointed into the air, where Mr Uppingham could be seen, a tiny figure looking down at the people.