STAYING WITH RELATIONS

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Staying with Relations

ROSE MACAULAY

A Novel

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Has the sea form? It breaks, it drifts,
Encountering with the steepy sands.
Has water shape? It slips and shifts,
Thinner than dreams, between thy hands.

Sly, dubious ghost, the blind mist slides
At cockshut up the wasty fell.
The pale, the Protean cloud-shape glides
Through a hundred forms, most mutable.

Shifting as mist, men's secret selves
Slip like water, and drift like waves,
Flow shadow-wise, and peer like elves
Mocking and strange, from the deep caves.

The brook runs bound within its hollow;
The cuckoo needs must cry cuckoo.
As swallows skim, so skims the swallow;
The wild deer does as wild deer do.

Grasp at the wind; aye, bind the mist;
Read the bright riddling of the skies.
But the soul, like slippery eel, will twist
Quick from thy clutch, and trick thine eyes.

It bears no form; it breaks, it drifts,
Encountering with the steepy world.
It holds no shape; it slips and shifts,
Thinner than tunes on the wind skirled.

CHAPTER I

BEING INVITED

I

CATHERINE GREY, a young female, and, like so many young females, a novelist, went to America one autumn and lectured to its inhabitants on the Creation of Character in Fiction. Catherine was twenty-seven, but had, nevertheless, so far only published three novels, for though diligent, she wrote slowly and at some length. If any one should desire to know whether or not she also wrote well, I can but reply that her novels pleased some tastes and not others, and that it is impossible to say more or other than this of any writings, since philosophers have unfortunately failed, down the ages, to arrive at any fixed standards of merit in art. Catherine's novels were probably quite averagely readable, as novels go.

Catherine wrote about people; it was character that engaged her interest and attention. People, their temperaments, habits, and reactions to one another—these seemed to her, and very properly, to be the very stuff of fiction. She had always perceived between one person and another those little differences which it takes the observant and careful eye to remark. People stimulated and absorbed this young woman; they were her hobby. "You're so clever," said the inhabitants of Much Potton, South Devonshire, where Catherine's father had a vicarage. "We're all frightened of you, lest you put us in a book." At this Catherine would smile, scarcely liking to say either that she would put them in a book, which might seem impertinent, or that she would not put them in a book, which might seem neglectful; and, indeed, she scarcely knew whether they desired her to put them in a book or not. But in any case she had lived much too long in Much Potton, South Devonshire, and before that in Prior's Combe, North Devonshire, and before that in Little Morton, Oxon, not to know that, whether she put them in a book or left them out of a book, they would believe she had put them in a book, as indeed they did.

As to London, where Catherine lived in a flat, only going to Much Potton for visits, London seemed less concerned about her books, and not at all concerned about being put in them. The fact is that in London there are so many novelists, male and female, young and old, for ever putting other Londoners into books, and often quite unkindly, that one more or less is scarcely noticeable.

When Catherine lectured on the Creation of Character in Fiction, she spoke so pleasantly and intelligently, and with such interest in her subject, her reading of contemporary and past fiction (English, French, Russian and American), was so wide, and her appearance and manner so likeable, kind, and well-bred, that her audiences were delighted with her, particularly as her mother had been a Philadelphian. She was a nice-looking young woman, with a pleasant oval face of an agreeable olive pallor, dark straight hair sleekly parted and coiled in the neat new manner, kind, candid brown eyes, some sense of humour, and quite a lot of culture. She was among the few novelists (anyhow the few female novelists) who are not bored by writing novels. Indeed, she was not bored by anything. Female creatures are sadly often bored by their own work, and fail to take it seriously; as a sex it seems certain that they lack that concentration and application so necessary for sound results. When gentlemen, as they so frequently and so justly do, refer to the inferiority of the work of ladies in practically every department of life, this, one fears, is one of the reasons which must be offered for it. The other is, of course, one which gentlemen will readily supply for themselves, that ladies possess, as a rule, and as human beings go, sadly small capability and intelligence.

Catherine lectured in late November, and early in December she had a letter from her mother's sister, the widow of an Iowa oil king who had bought an old Spanish plantation in a Guatemala forest, and the recently-wedded wife of an English judge interested in archæology.

The letter was headed: "Hacienda del Capitan, Perdido, Guat, C.A." "Do come right on here," it said, "and pay our little home a visit before you cross over to Europe. You'll just come in for the dry season, only there's no real dry season here, as we lie in a valley in thick forest, and it's rather steamy sometimes, even in the verano. But I'd love to have you see

the villa, which is just on finishing, and looks fine; your Uncle Heck would scarcely know it again. We'll be quite a party for the winter—your Uncle Dickie and myself, Isie and her husband (he's been designing the additions to the villa, you know; he's just quite full of the cutest fancies) and your uncle's four, Claudia, Benet, Julia and little Meg (who is not keeping school this winter owing to Infant Paralysis—I mean the school has it, not little Meg). So you see you will find quite a family party as well as Piper, our manager, a nice man, though quiet, and though the society round is very small but for Indians and ladinos, only a planter or two for miles, and the very clergyman is a half-breed, and has three wives, which for a Catholic clergyman is three too many, still, what with dancing in the ballroom Adrian has made (gold and pink it is) and riding, and having picnic excursions to all these ruined old Indian towns they find about the woods, quite remarkable they are, I'd like to have you see them, you could put them in a book, what with one thing and another we have quite a gay time. It's been a real nice holiday for Isie and Adrian, and they'll stay on till March, when we'll all break up. Your Uncle Dickie is busy all day with these ruins he finds, he just loves to pore over the peculiar carvings those old Indians did on their stones (we've got the cunningest old gate-posts by the by, great frogs holding men's heads in their mouths, and cute bits all over the house). Isie rides and shoots and fishes quite a lot, with little Meg, but Claudia and Benet and Julia are more interested in the way the house is turning out, and keep on suggesting ideas to Adrian. They're quite full of ideas, those three, they've travelled Europe over and seen everything, but mostly palaces, it seems, and they will have it that one room is to be like some big reception room they've seen somewhere in Germany, and another like a ballroom they saw in Prague, and the little old mounds in the park they want turned into artificial ruins and called a Hermitage—I don't know why they want them artificial, seeing that they're real ruins all the time, but Claudia and Benet and Julia say they prefer things artificial. However, your Uncle Dickie won't have the old mounds built up, as he is going to dig into them. The way the Spanish monks built their convent on top of that old Indian palace shocks him to death. Your Uncle Heck used to think it inconvenient, too, but

Dickie's children think it amusing, and I must say the old stone apartments look fine now they're done up. Well, now listen, Catherine, you come right along here at once. You take a passage from New Orleans to Livingstone, and the light railroad runs inland from there as far as the little lake, and from the lake our motor boat takes you down the river quite a way, as far as San Pedro, and there we'll have mules and mozos and the little buggy meet you and bring you right along to Perdido and the Hacienda; why, it's only two days' ride from San Pedro, and you'll love every mile of the trip through those romantic old woods. But we'll write you all about the journey the moment you write us you'll come. Dickie's so pleased with his ruins and inscriptions, I know I'll have quite a job getting him away at the end of the season. I like to see a man, and specially a judge, so busy and so happy, and so quiet. Why, he won't want a thing all day. Now, your Uncle Heck . . ."

But Catherine's Uncle Heck belongs to a past not included in this narrative.

2

Certainly, thought Catherine, she would visit her aunt, her new uncle by marriage, and her step-cousins, at the Hacienda del Capitan, Perdido, Guat, C.A. She loved her little Philadelphian aunt, and she was fascinated by the idea of the old Spanish monastery built after the Conquest out of a Maya palace in a tropical jungle, and now so glorified by the measureless wealth of its owner and the architectural conceits of Adrian Rickaby. Further, she was attracted by her aunt's step-children, whom she had met several times in London. What a setting, she thought, for a novel! Those highly finished products of a modern civilisation so fantastically decorating the ruins of a vast primeval culture with their rococo European art; those elegant creatures of the world tripping, fastidious and unafraid, about primitive forests, among ghosts, savages, and denizens of the wild. . . . For Catherine remembered the young Cradocks as somewhat sophisticated worldlings. Claudia, perhaps two years older than herself, ironic, amused, passionless, detached, elegantly

celibate and virgin in a world where neither state is either usual or commended, a travelled European, a bland mocker, a rather mincing young gentlewoman. And Benedict, called Benet (his father having been educated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), five years his sister's junior, her male counterpart, a fastidious, amused, mincing young gentleman, and more usual, therefore, in his generation than his sister, for in these days it was quite the mode, among young men of intelligence and fashion, to mince. There was something finicking, spinsterish, bachelorish, about these two, a lack of that hearty co-operation with the ends of nature (as their step-mother had said, they did not care about nature) which is so necessary, it is said, for successful married life Then there was Julia, a lounging girl of twenty-one, with heavy blue eyes that rolled lazily in a small white face, and a ridiculous flow of words. Catherine placed Julia as a flirt, a minx, even a rake. She, unlike Claudia and Benet, seemed not to be of the celibate or virgin type.

As to her young cousin, Isie, so recently married to Adrian Rickaby, Catherine knew her scarcely better than she knew her aunt's step-children ; she was twenty years of age, of a very handsome appearance, ingenuous speech, delivered in young American slang that her mother deplored, and robust, jolly outdoor tastes. She would, no doubt, be happy enough in a forest, provided she could ramble about it and pursue its fauna, though ruined Indian buildings she would view with unquickened pulse, seeing them, as her mother did, as little old mounds in the park.

" I shall love to come and stay," Catherine wrote to her aunt.

Then she caught a train to Wigton, Pa, where she was to speak next day at a Woman's Luncheon Club on Fictional Types.

CHAPTER II

TRAVELLING

I

THE light railway ran, leapingly, fifty miles back from Livingstone port, among forests, mangrove swamps, coffee plantations, maize patches, sugar canes, valleys and mountains, and ended at the little lake, which was called Salvador. It had taken the little train four hours to reach the little lake, and it was now noon. The travellers leaped thankfully from the little train and went their several ways, some taking to mules along forest paths, some to various kinds of craft on the lake, others to their homes in the minute pablo of Ceniza, which stood like a brown toadstool patch festooned with scarlet creepers at the lake's head.

For Catherine there waited at a little jetty a white and scarlet motor launch. To this vehicle she was conducted by her cousin Isie, by Benet Cradock, and by an Indian mozo, for these had come to meet her train and convey her up the little lake and the river Merces to San Pedro, where the mule journey would begin. Catherine's luggage was disposed by the mozo in the launch's hold, and the party embarked. A half-breed priest meanwhile talked to them from the jetty in bad Spanish about how he, too, would, if it should be no inconvenience to them, make the journey up to San Pedro in their launch. Benet, in Spanish nearly as fluent as his and more correct, apologized for not being able to take another passenger, owing to the great weight of Catherine's luggage. They continued the conversation until the launch was some way down the lake and the noise of its locomotion drowned that of the clergyman's voice.

"We could have taken him quite well really," Catherine said. "However, I suppose you don't like him."

Isie and Benet agreed that this was the case, Isie adding that the clergyman was a pain where it hurt the most.

"He is the parish priest in our village," Benet said. "If we let him come on the launch we should have him with us

all the way through the forest. Talking. He always talks when he's drunk. When he's sober he's silent, and rather morose. To-day he's drunk, naturally, after a week in Livingstone."

"What does he talk about?"

"Oh, parish shop, I suppose, but we don't really know, because we've never listened. . . . Do you find the scenery agreeable?"

"Remarkably beautiful."

"I suppose in its way," Benet critically allowed, "it is. A shade too barbaric, do you think?"

"Quit it," said Isie. "He's terribly affected, Catherine. So's Claudia. Always picking on nature. The scenery's all right. It's fine. I'm crazy on nature."

How handsome and sensible Isie was, thought Catherine, looking at the brown, strong, beautiful girl beside the fair, fragile-looking youth. A young Diana, beautiful as a forest morning. She had been fishing in the lake before the train came in, and her rod lay by her like a dropped lance. In the creel beside it were six alligator's eggs.

The lovely lake narrowed to its reedy end, and the launch sped up the mouth of the river Merces. And now they were indeed in a dense forest, which came down closely to the river's either side, tree interlocked with tree; trees of all kinds and shapes, their boughs vine-bound and rubber-twined, and linked together by trailing lianas above a riot of white lilies, scarlet salvias and convolvulus, giant purple and orange dahlias, little sunflowers, heliotrope, banksias, orchids, and immense tree-ferns.

It was now excessively hot and moist, after a storm in the night, and felt quite tropical and disagreeable. Wild animals crashed and made their appropriate noises a few yards off within the jungle, and several alligators swam after the launch with open mouths.

"The mother of the eggs," Benet said of one of these. "She will probably pursue us all the way to San Pedro."

A small brown animal like a beaver dived from the bank into the river, barking, and Catherine was informed that here was a nutria, and was pleased and surprised to encounter this little animal, which had so often provided her with fur trimmings, and which she had hitherto ignorantly conceived

to be one of those mythical creatures imagined by the fur trade, like the foxaline, the pony-seal, and the rabbit-skunk. But it seemed that in Guatemala all the animals both of mythology and of the natural history books pressed about her with their gifts of wearing apparel, the snakes and crocodiles offering her shoes, the nutria a fur coat, the birds feathered toques of all the colours of the rainbow.

Squealings and tramplings came from the forest on the left. Isie said, "Plenty of pig in there." And Catherine surmised, from her use of the singular number, that she would fain pursue these animals and take their lives. Animals seen as sport become to the mind meat, and cease to be individual creatures, so that you may feed fishes, but catch fish, ride elephants, but hunt elephant, fatten turkeys and pigs, but chase turkey and pig, throw bread to ducks, but shoot duck, admire moths, but seek to exterminate moth; and some creatures, whom God would seem to have created merely for the chase, such as grouse and snipe, require no plural forms at all. And even as few as two pigs become pig if hunted.

"Peccary, I suppose," said Catherine, retaining the form preferred by her cousin.

The river wound round sudden corners, and each reach was most surprising, most lovely, and most strange, for now it was very narrow and overhung with rich and steaming vegetation that, almost shutting out the sky, turned the river into a green and shadowed lane, and now it widened out into a broad and shallow luminousness, a rippled mirror that held the gaudy noon. Now ravines, gorges, and mountains, pine-clad, could be seen distantly on either side, and Benet would say, "Oh, my dear, how shockingly Swiss," and avert his eyes from such a reminder of that small mid-European republic which he detested; but in the next reach the forest would run lumbering up to the river's brink, and over the travellers' heads tropical trees arched, alligator pears and other delicious fruits dangled, blue jays chattered, humming birds exquisitely darted, monkeys swung by their tails, and a riot of every imaginable sweetness assailed the senses, drifting mingled on the swooning air.

Then the forest would recede a little, and small clearings and plantations made themselves apparent—coffee, maize,

sugar, vanilla, or cocoa, with groups of palm huts dumped among them like bee-hives, and round the huts blossomed cottage gardens of brilliant colours, roses and lilies and trumpet orchids and tropical flowers of practically every description, of which the names are so little known to me that I cannot even mention them.

Neither could Benet. But Isie, rightly or wrongly, called many of them by their names, with the careful learning of the schoolgirl.

"You see, I press," she said. "Do you enjoy pressing, Catherine?"

"Flowers, she means," Benet explained. "Isie likes to keep her verbs intransitive."

"Well, you dumb-bell, we were talking of flowers, weren't we? Catherine knows I didn't mean boy friends."

Isie, it was apparent, took teasing with good temper. A cheerful, tranquil young woman. Possibly, were she to talk for long together in that clear bell-like voice of hers, the voice of young débutante America, confident and assertive, retailing the names of pressed flowers and boy friends, telling anecdotes of the adventures which had occupied her brief career, she might become wearisome in her loud and girlish naïveté, so different from the sophistication of her step-father's children. That brown and supple beauty which delighted the eye—had it been allied to subtlety of wit, or fire of imagination, what a creature would nature, for once in generous mood, have made! But nature, thought Catherine, did not, parsimonious old lady, make such creatures as that more than once in a long age. Nature gave the world its young Isies in their clean and buoyant beauty, and the young Isies lit the fires of imagination or the candles of wit in the souls of those who looked on them, even as the kingfisher which darted, swift and radiant, from bank to bank, inflamed the poet.

2

It was now late afternoon. The river had narrowed, running beneath a tangled roof of boughs, from which long scarlet creepers trailed in green water. Log canoes still paddled up the stream, but the launch could go no farther. It came to

shore at a little clearing, announced by a sign-board on the bank to be San Pedro. Here, beneath a gold and rose-flushed sky, the travellers landed in the forest. Mules and mozos met them, and a little cart, on which Catherine's luggage was piled, behind a very small mule. Mounting taller mules, they rode through the little clearing, in which the tiny village clustered. Out of the clearing a rough track ran.

"The path to Perdido and the Villa Sans Souci," said Benet, as the cavalcade took it.

"You mutt," said young Mrs. Rickaby. "Don't give the Hacienda that name. Catherine will think we're all morons."

"Sans Souci," Benet repeated. "That's what Claudia and I think we shall call it, because it's becoming rather like the Sans Souci palace at Potsdam. But sometimes we think it should be Hadrian's Folly, because of Adrian, and because it's rather like Hadrian's Villa in some ways—I mean in the way it has collected styles from all over the world, and looks so silly. Adrian wants to call it the Follies, and Meg the Bananas, but Belle prefers Villa Maya, and after all it belongs to her. However, as it's always known in the neighbourhood as the Hacienda del Capitan, it doesn't make much difference what we call it. . . . Look, those Indians have grouped themselves like a Vanessa Bell fresco. Rather ravishing."

"A what al fresco?" Isie inquired, but without desire for information.

One of the fresco detached himself from the rest and began, forcibly but without animation, to beat his wife, who, also without animation, howled.

"I've seen things like that in Bloomsbury," said Benet, "only a larger scale."

"Larger scale? What d'you mean, a larger scale, you dumb-bell?" Isie asked.

A thing about her is, Catherine reflected, she doesn't want to know the answers to any of her questions; she's thinking of something else. Absent-minded and self-absorbed.

The track wound round a deep barranca, following the river. The dense wood shut the travellers into a warm green twilight; the moist air steamed with a thousand sweetnesses of evening, as if all the bottles in a perfumery had been broken into clear green soup. All the agreeable scents and spices in the world seemed to blow towards them and kiss them on the