

**MALACHI  
WHITAKER**

**The Crystal  
Fountain**

and other stories



CARCANET

*The Crystal Fountain*  
*and other stories*

By Malachi Whitaker

*Frost in April* (1929)

*No Luggage? Stories* (1930)

*Five for Silver* (1932).

*Honeymoon and other stories* (1934)

*Selected Stories*

(Hour-Glass Library, Dublin, 1946)

*Selected Stories*

(Jonathan Cape, 1949)

Non-fiction

*And so did I* (1939)

# *The Crystal Fountain and other stories*

MALACHI WHITAKER

*Introduction by Joan Hart*



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## *Introduction*

Malachi Whitaker's last book — a kind of autobiography called *And so did I* — was published early in 1939. Her press-cuttings book contains twenty-six enthusiastic reviews. This year I have been unable to find copies of any of her publications. The four volumes of short stories on which her reputation — if it still existed — would rest, were published by Jonathan Cape in the late twenties and through the thirties. In the forties a selection appeared, and a few short stories and occasional pieces were printed in *The Listener* and *John o'London's Weekly*. Then she announced to her family that she had written herself out. That was that. Well, almost. When she died, aged eighty, she left a few unpublished stories and some autobiographical pieces.

Certainly she had written a lot. At twenty, apparently, a fifty-thousand word autobiography! A novel in manuscript fell overboard from a cross-channel boat. There were years and years of tearing up; years and years during which she taught herself to write. Certainly it does not appear that anyone taught her: she just read, and then wrote. 'A born writer,' wrote Vita Sackville-West, reviewing her first published stories.

Marjorie Olive Taylor, the eighth in a bookbinder's family of eleven children, was born in Bradford in 1895. Her father's occupation gave her the opportunity to read the books that were lying around. Leaving school early, she worked for her father until, in 1917 she married Leonard Whitaker. As a writer she adopted the name Malachi, chosen from the Bible. She became Malachi, even to her friends.

Perhaps her juvenile autobiography, and all the years of tearing up, taught her how to write stories. Probably the writing of short stories helped her to find the extraordinary form — apparently quite random, but in fact amazingly controlled — of *And so did I*.

The prevailing tone of her writing — sad, salted with a some-



times violent humour — seems to reflect her native Yorkshire landscape: bleak, open, lit with pale sunshine.

I first became aware of her through her *Selected Stories*, published in 1946. Seeking something that might be acceptable as a 'Morning Story' for the BBC radio programme, I found — and I subsequently broadcast — 'Blackberry Day'. I was delighted to discover among her papers the contract for payment of £16 2s. I wonder how she spent the unexpected cheque. On something enjoyable, I'm quite sure. Her capacity for enjoyment was considerable.

But let her speak for herself. Here, as a preface to my selection from her stories, is her account of how the first one came to be published.

December 1983

JOAN HART

## *Beginnings*

WHEN I saw downs for the first time they were familiar to me because of a cricket field I frequented at the age of four. This was only a small field. The pitch was in a hollow, and a grassy bank rolled gently up from it, to be crowned at the summit by a couple of eastward-bowing sycamore trees.

It was under one of these trees that I composed my first poem, ran home intoxicated across the cricket pitch, through a game in progress, stammered it breathlessly to my father, was given sixpence, and spent it, all within an hour. And almost thirty years later the same thing repeated itself in a more dignified fashion, with an editor in place of a father.

I live now within a few yards of that cricket field. The trees are cut down. A road runs through part of it, but I can still see it in its young-century beauty, feel the early summer warmth, know again the glory of the sun and the daisy that provoked the poem; because at that very moment (I could already read and write, being the eighth of a family of eleven) I became aware that I was in a marvellous place, that I was alive, and that I must say so.

My second poem was not so good. What I really wanted was another sixpence. I repeated my poem, which had given me a lot of trouble, but my father merely said, 'You're too late, lass. Shakespeare said this first, and much better,' and kept his hand in his pocket. So I went and pulled out a loose tooth — we got a penny for things like that — and thought a lot.

Afterwards, when I wrote anything, I would look at it for a long time, grow certain that somebody else had done it better, and tear it up. Anyhow, reading was so much pleasanter. I learned how to be deliberately naughty (I got noise of the ear-splitting kind into a fine art) so that I could be sent to bed where I could read in ecstasy, alone, and not have to look after one or more of my three little brothers.

Luckily for me my father was a bookbinder, so there were always

plenty of books. Sometimes people would leave books at his place to bind, and forget to return them. They were put in an attic, and so was I. It is hard to remember the names of all of them. There was *David Copperfield* — though for many years I never got beyond page forty of him — *Wuthering Heights*, volume after volume of the *Family Herald Supplement*, *Tom Jones*, *Peregrine Pickle*, bound copies of *Tit-bits*, *All the Year Round*, and *To-day*, *Les Misérables* (how I ploughed through that one), *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, *Vanity Fair*, and an old Bible.

The ones I could not read were *Don Quixote* and *Jessica's First Prayer*. There was a Child's Bible which I tried, but did not find suitable after the real one. I would look for words like hell and devil in the real Bible, and simply go on reading, because I liked the rolling sound of the sentences. At my first school I got every Scripture prize going. There was also a book called *Little Meg's Children*, which delighted me at an early age. In that, or another very much like it, there were the words 'Perseverance, paint, and glue, Eighteen hundred and eighty-two.' I thought it a better poem than any of mine. And I was right.

At my second school I was a nasty child. I hated it so much, and was so miserable that I was forced to make a world of my own to get along at all. There was a three-mile walk to it, and that I enjoyed, summer and winter. There was so much to see, so much to do and think about. One of my favourite pursuits was following streams. If they went underground, so did I. But all I got was cold and dirty; I got torn clothes and smackings, too; and atmosphere.

There were no prizes, and no good marks of any kind for me at this school. I did my worst work at examinations, not from nervousness, but from contempt. And the whole of the time I was steadily writing and burning everything I wrote. Only once did I betray myself. We were told to write a story, and mine was read in front of the class. Feeble as it was, it was apparently the best of the lot. I was in an agony of shame. I remember telling the other girls that I had copied it out of a book. Somebody told the form-mistress, and she kept me behind and asked me why I was such a liar. I don't know what I said. All I wanted to do was get away.

About that time I read a story about a child who formed his letters so crookedly that one night they came out of the book, dragging themselves lamely in front of him, wanting to be made

straight. That is what my own sentences still do. For a long time after my first book was published I used to wake in the night while badly expressed and broken paragraphs crept in chains of horror before my eyes. But I am trying to learn tolerance.

The war came then. Still determined to be a poet, I made up a set of windy martial verses, and sold them to a Christmas-card firm for seven shillings and sixpence. At the same time I was working twelve hours a day for from ten to twelve shillings a week. I use that as my excuse. Printed for some reason in mauve ink, these verses had the look of weak cocoa.

At the age of twenty I wrote my autobiography in fifty thousand words. I still have it. It amazes me by its arrogance. All I was not I put in that autobiography. Then I got married and went to live in France. And there I wrote a business novel, which, fortunately, fell overboard from a Channel steamer. I caught a quick view of these sheets of thick paper untidily strewing the sea, not realizing for some time that they were my novel.

Then for six or seven years I wrote nothing. But that did not stop my habit of thinking. My husband and I had a small house built on the top of a hill in Yorkshire, where there was a forty-mile view from the windows. I hadn't very much to do, and I used to look out of the windows a lot at the clouds, and wish that I had half-a-dozen children. It was no use wishing. I hadn't. I swapped an old gramophone for a typewriter — it was, I remember, a Salter Standard — the letters of which were both broken and invisible. It was a heavy thing, but I lugged it around with me, and learned to type on it.

One day in 1926 or '27, I am not sure of the year, I suddenly wrote a story straight through from beginning to end. I was absolutely amazed. I called it 'Sultan Jekker'. It was the first story I had written for a dozen years. At the age of fifteen I had written imitation Jack London, imitation Bret Harte, imitation anybody-who-took-my-fancy stories, and had them in an amateur magazine that used to be sent to my father's place to bind. But 'Sultan Jekker' was not an imitation. It was mine. I wrote it straight on to the Salter typewriter, not stopping to look at the words, which I couldn't have seen anyway.

Well, my first story was written. I showed it to my husband, and he was surprised too. We wondered what to do with it. We had not

seen any of the same sort in popular magazines. But I found a different kind of magazine in the public library. It was called the *Adelphi*. I admired every contributor to this paper. There was a man called D. H. Lawrence, who had written two books that I had read — *Sons and Lovers*, and *Aaron's Rod*. I knew that he knew what he was talking about. He was the best contributor of all, I thought. And I thought, 'Very well, then. Go where the best is, or nowhere at all.'

All the same, I kept that story for a long time. I took it with me on a visit to London meaning to drop it in the letter-box of the *Adelphi*, which was then in Cursitor Street, Chancery Lane. I prowled about Chancery Lane every day for a week, never getting up enough courage to put it in the letter-box. I took it back home with me.

Then one day I put the story into a clean envelope, enclosed a stamped envelope for return — nothing else, not a single word of writing — addressed it very simply to the editor of the *Adelphi*, and posted it. There was an uphill walk of a mile from the post-box. I went back up the hill feeling as if I had committed a kind of crime. My husband tried to console me. 'They can't do anything worse than send it back.'

On the last day of March 1927 I got a letter. At that time I had very few correspondents, and a letter was an event. But this was in my own handwriting; I knew what it was, and did not want to open it. Of course I did open it eventually, and of course it contained my MS. There was also a note from John Middleton Murry, in his own handwriting. 'Dear Sir,' it ran, 'this is a *good* story. Unfortunately, in all human probability the *Adelphi* will be coming to an end after two more numbers, and I am therefore unable to accept it. If, however, you still find the *Adelphi* being published after June next, send your story to me again.'

I believe I could have walked straight off the cliff at the end of the garden, across to the moor top at the other side of the valley without going anywhere near the ground. Such was the effect of these words on me.

I waited to see if the *Adelphi* came out in September. But all the meantime I was writing away like one possessed. I wrote story after story in a trance. Very often they were badly worded. I was unable to get them right. Many of the stories in my first book I

rewrote from ten to fifteen times. 'Frost in April' I typed out eighteen times. Quite boldly I sent a tale to a weekly called *Outlook*. It was taken and printed, and paid for, too, but I hardly noticed it, so hungrily was I waiting for the *Adelphi* to reappear.

In the September it did come out again, and within eighteen months at least five of my stories had appeared in the *Adelphi* — there and nowhere else. I don't believe I sent them anywhere else. I had no other desire than to be with this rich company of writers.

At that time Mr John W. Coulter was assistant editor. He was the first writing man I had ever met, and I thought he was half a god. I went with my husband to that office in Cursitor Street, and Mr Coulter thought that my husband was the writer, and talked to him all the time. We were on our way to Spain, and had our luggage with us. My husband is, above all, a business man, and knows more about the structure of cloth than about books. He was getting in a literary fog, saying yes and no in the wrong places, when I jumped up and said miserably, 'Look here, I wrote those stories.' I can still see Mr Coulter, looking like a schoolmaster behind a desk, with the two of us sitting in front of him like a couple of Will Hay's scholars.

On our return, Mr Murry wrote to say that if I had enough stories for a volume he would do his best, though he could not promise anything, to help me place them with some publisher.

There it was. I didn't have to ask anybody for a thing. It just happened.

One day in March 1929 I went up to meet Mr Murry himself. There was to be a luncheon at some restaurant, and I was asked to go. I was much too frightened to go. I was not used to eating in front of strangers, and did not want to choke. So I went merely to have coffee.

The place was up some stairs. There seemed to be a lot of people, but I only remember Mr Murry, Mr Coulter, Sir Richard Rees, and Dr James Young. I asked the latter if he was *the* Dr Jung, and he said no, a little coldly. My hands trembled so much that I could not lift my coffee-cup. Somebody — I believe it was Dr Young — made me take some wine, and I had alternate drinks of coffee and wine until I came round. They have told me since that they were all much more scared than I was, and I can believe it now.

When I had been there a few minutes I handed my bundle of

MSS to Mr Murry, saying briefly, 'I've brought these'. He had a case, and I had not. He put them in this case, oh so casually, and I hoped he would look after them, as I had not a whole copy of any story; but I am sure that, if he had lost them, I should have been able to write them all again by heart.

However, he kept them most carefully, and sent them to Mr Jonathan Cape. At his place they were read by Mr Edward Garnett, who wrote and told me that he, too, liked them. The next thing that happened to me was the signing of an agreement, and, a month or two after that, the arrival of some proofs. By now I was getting used to amazing things. On 14 October 1929 out came my first volume of stories, *Frost in April*. And then, for weeks, nothing else happened.

My first reviewer was Humbert Wolfe. He was taking Gerald Gould's page in the *Sunday Observer*, while Mr Gould was on holiday. Mr Wolfe was not sure. He sniffed gingerly round my stories. I do not remember his exact words, but he said of one of them that it was 'like a piece of fog cut out and preserved'. I was genuinely pleased with such unique criticism.

Then the late Mr Arnold Bennett gave me half a column in the *Evening Standard*, and for a week or two my name seemed to be in every paper I picked up. I was surprised to discover that I was a printed genius. There was only one dissentient voice. Somebody in the north of Ireland sneered at 'this boy's lemonade masquerading as man's wine'. Nearly everybody called me 'he' because of my biblical name.

Now there are four volumes with my name on the cover. If Mr Murry had not troubled to write to me about that first story, I should have gone on writing, because I could not have helped it. I might have returned to my childish habit of burning everything. Then there might have been a little less work for printers, binders, booksellers; a little less wearying on eyesight, and tongue, and brain. But none of us would have been any wiser, or any more ignorant, than we are now.

MALACHI WHITAKER

*And so did I* (1939)

## *Sultan Jekker*

A FAT man, with loose, light-pink cheeks, was sitting on the side of a flat truck, eating his lunch. He had a torn gabardine raincoat on, and a cap so shrunken by rain that it made his face look enormous. His legs, which were short, did not reach the ground as he sat, and his feet hung inertly, toes pointing inwards. He faced the blank wall of a newly-stuccoed tram-shed, and ate slowly and with a vague sadness from some thick slices of white bread wrapped in newspaper.

He was not alone, there being four or five other men also on the truck, seated around it facing east, north, and west. They discussed starting-prices as they ate, and interlaced their exchange of news with loud and careless oaths. They did not trouble to lower their voices if a woman passed, which was not infrequently; and none of the corporation employees, hurrying in and out of the tram-shed like preoccupied ants, interfered with, or spoke to them. They were navvies, and had come out into the sunlight to eat.

Suddenly the fat man, whose name was Clarence Waterman, gave a loud shout, and said in a surprised, angry voice, 'The bitches! They said they would put some meat in.' He had just discovered that he was eating only bread, but his companions took no notice of him. It often happened this way. The big man lived with two women, who were for ever quarrelling and fighting over him, and sometimes they forgot altogether, in the bitterness of their early morning disputes, to put up any lunch at all for him. He swore he would beat them on his return home, but nearly always he forgot. His companions, who for some reason of their own called him 'Jekker', were proud of him, as they were all married, and thought of him and his two women with envy.

However, he was not to be envied. These women had come strangely into his life, and had as strangely stayed there, without his consent. They were violently jealous and frequently injured



each other, their faces rarely remaining for a week free from marks of intense conflict. Before their coming, he had had peace. He had lived alone in an isolated cottage for fifteen years of his adult life, and at the age of thirty-five, within a fortnight, these two women, strangers, were living in the utmost intimacy with him and each other.

Phoebe, the elder, was a raddled blonde of about forty, with stout, flat feet, on which she wore men's boots, but no stockings. She sold lavender, also peppermint-cordial, which she made herself with essence and questionable water from the well behind the cottage. When these were out of season she hawked bootlaces. She had an impudent and ingratiating manner, and a certain hard stare with which to terrorize timid housewives. She was without a moral standard and had few womanly virtues. The first time she called at Jekker's cottage with her lavender and her cordial, she opened the door after repeated knockings to find the man seated on the hearth with a red shawl twisted around his head, groaning with toothache. Before he could stop her, she had pulled the aching tooth with one turn of her large brown finger and thumb. Later in the evening, she took him down to the inn, and stayed with him until he drank himself insensible. Then she alternately pushed and carried him home, picking him up as he fell. Once arrived, she pulled off his boots and drove him before her into the bedroom. He accepted her without surprise, as a fortnight later he accepted Caroline.

It was really Phoebe who invited Caroline to live with them. They met her at the Vine Leaf, the squalid house they patronized. She picked rags 'on piece', and drank to forget her husband, who, through miscalculation, would have to spend the next three years in gaol. She had reached the maudlin stage, and quiet tears were running endlessly down her cheeks when the inn-frequenters trooped out, disturbing the starry night, rapt with autumn silence. Phoebe, big with beer-engendered kindness, was comforting her, saying, 'Don't cry, lass, there's many a better man, many a better man —'. The usually cautious Phoebe had had too much to drink, and was finding the way with difficulty. Jekker lingered, but she did not care, as she knew he had left the door-key under a stone.

Somehow she reached the cottage with Caroline, Jekker follow-