Jerusalem the Golden

A novel by

MARGARET DRABBLE

WEIDENFELD AND NICOLSON
LONDON

Also by Margaret Drabble

A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE
THE GARRICK YEAR
THE MILLSTONE

First published April 1967
Second impression May 1968
Third impression July 1971
Fourth impression October 1973

Weidenfeld and Nicolson
11 St John's Hill, London SW11

ISBN 0 297 74810 6

Printed in Great Britain by
Redwood Press Limited, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

Also by Margaret Drabble

A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE
THE GARRICK YEAR
THE MILLSTONE

Jerusalem the Golden

Clara, Margaret Drabble's new heroine, has been brought up in the nonconformist North and taught the narrow, provincial view that all enjoyment and amusement are wicked and likely to lead to retribution. Well educated but not at all academically inclined, Clara is strongly of the opinion that a more colourful and more complicated life must be led by people elsewhere. Her Jerusalem is London and once she escapes from her oppressive background and her fright of a mother and reaches the Golden city she says 'Yes' to everything and is perpetually making up for lost time. With a single-minded, earnest vigour which she owes, ironically, to her upbringing, she seeks intrigues, emotional complications, human extravagance and passion, with few scruples and little notion of the chaos she is creating around her.

For Judith Landry

First published April 1967
Second impression May 1968
Third impression July 1971
Fourth impression October 1973

Weidenfeld and Nicolson
11 St John's Hill, London SW11

ISBN 0 297 74810 6

Printed in Great Britain by
Redwood Press Limited, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

Chapter 1

CLARA never failed to be astonished by the extraordinary felicity of her own name. She found it hard to trust herself to the mercy of fate, which had managed over the years to convert her greatest shame into one of her greatest assets, and even after years of comparative security she was still prepared for, still half expecting the old gibes to be revived. But whenever she was introduced, nothing greeted the amazing, all-revealing Clara but cries of, 'How delightful, how charming, how unusual, how fortunate,' and she could foresee a time when friends would name their babies after her and refer back to her with pride as the original from which inspiration had first been drawn. Finally her confidence grew to such an extent that she was able to explain that she had been christened not in the vanguard but in the extreme rearguard of fashion, after a Wesleyan great aunt, and that her mother had formed the notion not as an unusual and charming conceit, but as a preconceived penance for her daughter, whose only offences at that tender age were her existence and her sex. For Mrs Maugham did not like the name any more than Clara and her school friends did, and she chose it through a characteristic mixture of duty and malice. When Clara explained this to people, she found that they merely laughed, and the thought of people laughing, however indirectly, at her mother's intentions, gave her a deep and secret pleasure.

The reversal of fortune was in fact so complete that Clara

sometimes found herself wondering whether she had not gone so far as deliberately to seek a world in which her name could be a credit and not a shame. Her social progress had certainly taken her far enough from her starting point. On the other hand, time had converted liabilities other than her name into assets, and things surely more integral to the nature of her progress. Her intelligence, which was considerable, must for instance have played some more significant and guiding role: the name question was merely a piece of luck. Her intelligence, like her name, had been as a child a source of great trouble to her, for it too had singled her out, when her one desire had been to be inconspicuous. It made her an object of ridicule and contempt from the earliest age, and some of her most frightful memories were of her mother, grim-faced, ill concealing her resentment, as she flipped through those predictably shining school reports. She wished at such moments that she could fail examinations as other children did, and her most cherished subject was geometry, in which her marks were sometimes quite comfortably low. And yet at the same time she doubly resented her mother's resentment, for her mother herself was no fool, she had never herself possessed the lovely blessing of stupidity: she had merely crushed and deformed and dissembled what gifts she had once had, in deference to what? To a way of life perhaps, to a town, to a suburb in a town in the North of England.

But Clara, try as she might, found it hard to dissemble. And always, at the back of her mind, there was some faint hope that some day it might pay off, that some day she might find herself somewhere where she might win. So she cultivated, stubbornly, discreetly, her inclinations, and in the end it was this same intelligence which in her home town was so sourly disowned, so grudgingly deprecated, that got her out of it and transported her incredibly, mercifully, to London. When she received her first term's cheque for her State Scholarship Allowance, she stared at it for some time as she contemplated the fact, the printed fact before her, the final vindication of her

lonely belief that there was more than one way of life in England. And see, there was, for somebody somewhere had thought that intelligence was worth paying for. Even her mother could not annihilate ninety pounds by mere disapproval: the cash payment spoke to Clara's industrial heart decisively. Money was there, and in her hand, and moreover money would continue to arrive at settled intervals, being the gift of a settled politic faith, and not a mere whim of authority. At times she felt a certain shame about taking the money, as though she were being paid for displaying or exercising some horrific deformity, like the dwarf in the circus, like the fat lady, like the woman with the hairy chest. And she never learned to take a simple pleasure in her own abilities; they remained for her a means, and not an end, a bargaining power rather than a blessing. Yet nevertheless, as the years rolled by, she grew more bold about the power, for if intelligence were a deformity, then it was certainly not as rare or as disfiguring a one as she had expected, and there were plenty of people who found it acceptable. As with the name, it was simply a question of finding the people to take it; all she had to do was seek a place, a place other than Northam, where her eccentricities might go unmarked, where indeed, more hopefully, they might be greeted with delight.

And as far as people went, she had not done too badly. She had to make do with some unsatisfactory substitutes at times, for it took her some time to learn her way about, and she was in her third year at University before she met the Denhams: but then she had to acknowledge that if she had met them earlier, at the age of eighteen, straight out of Grammar School, raw, uninitiated, desirous, she might not have been capable of seeing them for what they were, for at that age all people who were not from Northam seemed at first sight equally brilliant, surrounded as they were by a confusing blur of bright indistinct charm. Moreover, even if at that age she had recognised their distinctions, her recognition would have been of no use to her: she would have admired, silently, in servile envy. Whereas

when she did finally discover them, at the age of twenty two, she had at least learned words and signs and gestures; she knew at least the outlines of their world. Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if she had missed them, and whether a conjunction so fateful and fruitful could have been, by some accidental obtuseness on her part, avoided: she did not like to think so, she liked to think that inevitability had had her in its grip, but at the same time she uneasily knew that it had in some ways, been a near thing.

For the truth was that her first sight of Clelia had not impressed her. In the light of future impressions, she found it hard to credit this disturbing historic recollection: it seemed to convict her of such gross insensitivity. Nor did she like the implications of accident that this initial blindness carried; she felt, looking back, like a lover who had met and passed by, indifferently, without recognition, the one love of his life, distracted from his destiny by the need for a drink, or a fixed intention to have an early night. Though it was not as though she had missed her for long; the time lag, between meeting and recognition, had been infinitesimal. Infinitesimal, but sinister. Clara would have found it more satisfactory if, upon vision, upon the instant of meeting, a sudden lightning had descended: if she could have said then, this is the kind of thing I have been looking for, and if this is not it, then it is nowhere else.

But in mercy to herself, to her own perceptions, she had to acknowledge that the circumstances of their meeting had been colourful and confusing enough to excuse a good deal of distraction. For she had first seen Clelia in the dressing room of a theatre, and she had never been in such a room before. She was so amazed by the novelty of finding herself there at all that it took her some time to distinguish its various occupants, though she was solicitously introduced to each in turn by her escort, and introduced, she later assumed, to Clelia too, though she could not remember even a smile or a handshake; that first contact dropped from her memory as though it had never

happened, and she would look for it sometimes, and sometimes she and Clelia would try to recall it together, sadly, pleasantly, nostalgically, but it had gone forever. Her main pre-occupation at the time, she remembered, had been a desire to recognise the people whom she had just seen, ten minutes earlier, upon the stage, so that she could say to the right people that she had much enjoyed the evening. Although she was quite ignorant of the etiquette of such occasions, she rightly took this to be her duty; she could tell that she was right by the way that Peter, after introducing her, politely echoed her sentiments, although he had expressed quite other sentiments whilst sitting beside her in the auditorium.

She had confidence in Peter, for he was familiar with such places, and it was under his guidance that she was there; she admired him for being able to conceal his views, but she admired him even more for the sophistication of having them, as she herself had no views whatever about the spectacle which she had just witnessed; an evening's reading of modern English poetry was not an event that she felt herself competent to judge. She had listened, she had paid attention, but she had no opinions, either about the poems themselves, or about their delivery. She could tell that some of the poems were long and some short, some simple and some obscure; she could even tell which were descriptive, which erotic, and which political, but beyond that she could not go. She was always baffled by that ready phrase, so common in her home town, 'I don't know much about it but I know what I like', for she herself was so perpetually aware that without knowledge she had no means of liking or of disliking. Of French literature she knew something, and might have ventured, after hesitation, to prefer Zola to Hugo, but of English literature she knew little. She was aware that she might nevertheless, despite this ignorance, have had some attitude towards the readers, but she had not; their skills were as alien to her as the skills of football players, and she would no more have dreamed of preferring the one called Eric Harley to the one called Samuel Wisden than she would have

thought of making comments about Danny Blanchflower and Stanley Matthews.

She had, however, found plenty to watch. Being in a theatre at all was in itself a rare amusement, and she had stared with curiosity at the four readers, who were all real poets in their own right, though they did not all read their own poems; for some reason more subtle, she assumed, than mere perversity, they had shuffled their works amongst themselves, with a few quite extraneous additions. Margarita Cassell's written works were, she noticed, sparsely represented, though she had more than her fair share of the declamation; the reasons for this were fairly evident, as her talents clearly lay more in the spoken than in the written word. Clara liked watching Margarita Cassell, because she was beautiful, and because she wore a nice dress, and because she was wholly audible, and yet she had a lurking suspicion that she was the soft option, that she was there expressly to amuse such people as her own uninitiated self, and this suspicion effectively undermined her pleasure. She liked to like things, if at all, for the right reason. And all in all, she was glad that she had Peter and his views to back her up, in the desert wastes of her own interested indifference. She even found that his views did in some way give some slight shape to her own vestigial parched buds of inclination, for when he had whispered to her that he thought Denham was superb and Harley awful, she noticed in herself a slight but unmistakable flutter of surprise; for was not Eric Harley so well-articulated, so clear, so strong, and Denham so monotonously even and undramatic? Though that in itself was, she saw, quite possibly the point.

Peter, unlike Clara, had the advantage of being upon home ground, for he himself wrote poetry, and he also claimed the honour of being acquainted with Samuel Wisden. It was this acquaintance that had drawn him to take Clara to the poetry reading in the first place; he like the idea of appearing by her side as an intimate of published writers. And he knew that Clara, unlike some of his other girls, was susceptible to such

impressions, and that she would be suitably affected by his claims to a foothold in the poetic world. And she had been impressed: she had even gone so far as to look up some of Samuel Wisden's works before attending the reading. They were shy, lyrical, lower middle class pieces about young men in cheap suits in parks and on railway stations; she had pictured some plain and sensitive man, given to riding bicycles, and was agreeably surprised when she found that a motorbike was more the image that he evoked, for he was flamboyant, leather-jacketed, and he had a fancy hair cut. She liked such floutings of expectation. Eric Harley, whose poems were highly sophisticated, obscure and ambitious, turned out to look far more like the Samuel Wisden of her imagination; he had an accent which she recognised as northern, though well overlaid by American, and he was wearing a very old suit. Margarita Cassell, the only one whose fame had filtered through to the regions where Clara lived, looked just as a poetic actress ought to look; she was middle aged and beautiful, flippant and intense, strident and informal. Her dress was of pale shining embroidered silk, and she read with great emotion, and when Peter said, finally, in Clara's ear, that she was not good, Clara knew that she had known it, for how could anything so pleasant be good; and yet she was nevertheless grateful, for such colourful badness, for the drab empty stage, with its bleak abstract backcloth, and its ill-rehearsed lighting changes, demanded such relief.

Of the four performers, Sebastian Denham was the only one to exude real authenticity. He was, for one thing, the oldest; the programme said that he was in his early fifties. He was also the most famous, though Clara could not have known this had she not looked him up in various works of reference, because before she had been invited to the Poetry Reading she had not so much as heard of him. As she looked through the list of his published works in the library catalogue, and read the comments on him in the Penguin Guides, and inspected his career in the programme notes, she felt ashamed that some-

one of such evident distinction could have eluded her consciousness so entirely. His reputation was clearly as firm as a rock; adjectives such as 'classic' and 'masterly' abounded in the vicinity of his name. And when she stopped to consider that she could name, offhand, no living English poets other than T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves (and was not Eliot dead?) she had to concede that there was room in the literary world for other fixed stars. She noted that he was the only poet (apart from Miss Cassell, whose virtues were non-poetic) to be represented on other evenings of the National Poetry Week, and that he had top billing. His very appearance was a kind of guarantee, because if he was not a real poet, in such a place, he was nothing, for he clearly had not been selected on decorative grounds like the embroidered Margarita. He was not ugly: he was dull. No ulterior motives, no ephemeral yearnings, nothing more than the gift itself could have placed him there, upon that wooden platform. He wore a suit and glasses, and the programme said that he was a lawyer in his non-creative life. He looked so unlike a poet that Clara felt that he could be nothing else, that he was unmistakably the real thing, and she found in his solid, impassive cultured countenance a guarantee of worth. His poetry she could not understand. It was about subjects of which she knew nothing, and the scansion of it was regular, and it rhymed. She could not have said more about it, and luckily nobody asked her to do so.

And when she came face to face with Mr Denham, in the large and shabby dressing room, she found it surprisingly simple to shake his hand and to say that she had so much enjoyed the evening. He replied, unremarkably, that he was glad; clearly he expected and hoped for no more original a salutation. He stood quietly, with his back to the wide dusty mirror, smiling affably, mild, adult, dissociated. Margarita Cassell, on the other hand, though her age might have equalled his, seemed genuinely anxious for opinions: when Samuel Wisden introduced Peter and Clara to her, and when she had made polite enquiries about Peter's mother, with whom she had once been