

# THE COMFORTERS

BY  
MURIEL SPARK

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with love

To

ALAN AND EDWINA BARNSELY



## Chapter I

ON the first day of his holiday Laurence Manders woke to hear his grandmother's voice below. 'I'll have a large wholemeal. I've got my grandson stopping for a week, who's on the B.B.C. That's my daughter's boy, Lady Manders. He won't eat white bread, one of his fads.'

Laurence shouted from the window, 'Grandmother, I adore white bread and I have no fads.'

She puckered and beamed up at him.

'Shouting from the window,' she said to the baker.

'You woke me up,' Laurence said.

'My grandson,' she told the baker. 'A large wholemeal, and don't forget to call on Wednesday.'

Laurence looked at himself in the glass. 'I must get up,' he said, getting back into bed. He gave himself seven minutes.

He followed his grandmother's movements from the sounds which came clearly through the worn cottage floorboards. At seventy-eight Louisa Jepp did everything very slowly but with extreme attention, as some do when they know they are slightly drunk. Laurence heard a clink and a pause, a tinkle and a pause, breakfast being laid. Her footsteps clicked like a clock that is running down as she moved between the scullery and the little hot kitchen; she refused to shuffle.

When he was half dressed Laurence opened a tiny drawer on the top of the tall old-fashioned chest. It

contained some of his grandmother's things, for she had given him her room. He counted three hairpins, eight mothballs; he found a small piece of black velvet embroidered with jet beads now loose on their thread. He reckoned the bit of stuff would be about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $1\frac{1}{2}$ . In another drawer he found a comb with some of his grandmother's hair on it and noted that the object was none too neat. He got some pleasure from having met with these facts, three hairpins, eight mothballs, a comb none too neat, the property of his grandmother, here in her home in Sussex, now in the present tense. That is what Laurence was like.

'It is unhealthy,' his mother had lately told him. 'It's the only unhealthy thing about your mind, the way you notice absurd details, it's absurd of you.'

'That's what I'm like,' Laurence said.

As usual, she knew this meant deadlock, but carried on,

'Well, it's unnatural. Because sometimes you see things that you shouldn't.'

'Such as?'

She did not say, but she knew he had been in her room prying into her messy make-up drawer, patting the little bottles like a cat and naming them. She could never persuade him that this was wrong. After all, it was a violation of privacy.

Very often Laurence said, 'It would be wrong for you but it isn't for me.'

And always Helena Manders, his mother, would reply 'I don't see that', or 'I don't agree', although really she did in a way.

In his childhood he had terrorised the household with his sheer literal truths.

'Uncle Ernest uses ladies' skin food, he rubs it on his elbows every night to keep them soft' . . . 'Eileen has

got her pain' . . . 'Georgina Hogg has three hairs on her chin when she doesn't pull them out. Georgina has had a letter from her cousin which I read.'

These were memorable utterances. Other items which he aired (in the same breath) such as, 'There's been a cobweb on the third landing for two weeks, four days and fifteen hours, not including the time for the making'—these were received with delight or indifference according to mood, and forgotten.

His mother told him repeatedly, 'I've told you repeatedly, you are not to enter the maids' rooms. After all, they are (entitled) to their privacy.'

As he grew older he learned to conceal the sensational portions of his knowledge, imparting only what was necessary to promote his reputation for being remarkably observant. In those days his father was capable of saying, on the strength of a school report,

'I always knew Laurence would outgrow that morbid phase.'

'Let's hope he has,' Helena Manders had said. Parents change. In those days, Laurence was aware that she half-suspected him of practising some vague sexual perversion which she could not name, would not envisage, and which in any case he did not practise. Then, it was almost to put her at ease, to assure her that he was the same Laurence as of old, that he said, during the holidays of his last term,

'Eileen is going to have a baby.'

'She's a good Catholic girl,' Helena protested; she was herself a Catholic since her marriage. None the less, on challenging Eileen in the kitchen, the case turned out to be so. Eileen, moreover, defiantly refused to name the man. Laurence was able to provide this information.



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'I've always kept up with Eileen's correspondence,' he explained. 'It enlivens the school holidays.'

'You've been in that poor girl's room, reading her letters (behind her back,) the poor thing!'

'Shall I tell you what her boy-friend wrote?' Laurence said tyrannously.

'I'm shocked as you know,' she said, accepting that this made no impression. 'How you, a good Catholic — but apart from that, it's illegal, I believe, to read letters addressed to others,' she said, defeated.

Merely to give her the last word he pointed out, 'Well, you've got them married, my dear. A good Catholic marriage. That's the happy result of my shocking perusal of Eileen's letters.'

'The end doesn't justify the means.'

Pat it came out just as he had expected. An answer for everything. All the same, incidents like this helped to deaden the blow when she realised that Laurence was abandoning, and finally had abandoned religion.

Louisa Jepp sat at the table writing out her football pools as she waited for Laurence.

'Come down!' she said to the ceiling, 'and leave off your snooping, dear.'

As soon as he appeared she told him, 'If Manchester City had won last week I should have got thirty thousand.'

Louisa folded her football coupon and placed it under the clock. She gave all her attention to Laurence and his breakfast.

(She was half gipsy, the dark one and the youngest of a large red-haired family, which at the time of her birth owed its prosperity to the father's success as a corn dealer. The success was owing to good fortune in the first place, his having broken jail while waiting

to come before the Bench, never afterwards returning to his gipsy tribe. It was a hundred and thirty years after this event that Louisa was sitting down to breakfast with Laurence.)

Louisa's hair remains black, though there is not much of it. She is short, and seen from the side especially, her form resembles a neat double potato just turned up from the soil with its small round head, its body from which hang the roots, her two thin legs below her full brown skirt and corpulence. Her face, from the front, is square, receding in planes like a prism. The main lines on her face are deep, they must have been in gradual evidence since she was thirty, they seem carved to the bone. But the little wrinkles are superficial, brushing the surface of her skin, coming and going like innumerable stars when she puckers a smile or unfolds a look of surprise. Her eyes are deep-set and black. Her hands and feet very small. She wears rimless spectacles. She is still alive, not much changed from that day when Laurence came down to breakfast. She was wearing a brown dress, a brown woollen jacket with gilt buttons, and a pair of diamond earrings embedded in her ears.

When Laurence had sized her up, as he always did with everyone, he dipped his fork into a jar and drew out something long, white and pickled.

'What can this be?'

'Chid'lings,' she said. 'They are beautiful.'

He was accustomed to Louisa's food: whelks, periwinkles, milts and roes, chitterlings and sweetbreads, giblets, brains and the tripes of ruminating animals. Louisa prepared them at long ease, by many processes of affusion, diffusion and immersion, requiring many pans of brine, many purifications and simmerings,

much sousing and sweetening by slow degrees. She seldom bought an ordinary cut or joint, and held that people who went through life ignoring the inward, vitals of shells and beasts didn't know what was good for them.

'If you won thirty thousand in the pool, what would you do?' Laurence said.

'Buy a boat,' she replied.

'I would paddle you up and down the river,' Laurence said. 'A houseboat would be nice. Do you remember that fortnight on the houseboat, my first year at prep school?'

'I mean a boat for crossing the sea. Yes, it was lovely on the houseboat.'

'A yacht? Oh, how grand.'

'Well, a good-sized boat,' said Louisa, 'that's what I'd buy. Suitable for crossing the Channel.'

'A motor cruiser,' Laurence suggested.

'That's about it,' she said.

'Oh, how grand.'

She did not reply, for he had gone too far with his 'Oh, how grand!'

'We could do the Mediterranean,' he said.

'Oh, how grand,' she said.

'Wouldn't it be more fun to buy a house?' Laurence had just remembered his mother's plea, 'If you get an opportunity do try to persuade her to take a little money from us and live comfortably in her own house.'

She answered, 'No. But if I won a smaller sum I'd buy this cottage. I'm sure Mr. Webster would sell.'

'Oh, I'd love to think of you having the cottage for your very own. Smugglers Retreat is such a dear little house.' Even as he spoke Laurence knew that phrases

like 'your very own' and 'dear little house' betrayed what he was leading up to, they were not his grandmother's style.

'I know what you're leading up to,' said Louisa. 'Help yourself to the cigarettes.'

'I have my own. Why won't you let father buy the cottage for you? He can afford it.'

'I manage very nicely,' said Louisa. 'Smoke one of these — they come from Bulgaria.'

'Oh, how grand!' But he added, 'How extremely smart and where did you get them from?'

'Bulgaria. I think through Tangiers.'

Laurence examined the cigarette. His grandmother, a perpetual surprise. She rented the cottage, lived as an old-age pensioner.

Her daughter Helena said frequently, 'God knows how she manages. But she always seems to have plenty of everything.'

Helena would tell her friends, 'My mother won't accept a penny. Most independent; the Protestant virtues, you know. God knows how she manages. Of course, she's half gipsy, she has the instinct for contriving ways and means.'

'Really! Then you have gipsy blood, Helena? Really, and you so fair, how romantic. One would never have thought——'

'Oh, it comes out in me sometimes,' Helena would say.

It was during the past four years, since the death of her husband, penniless, that Louisa had revealed, by small tokens and bit by bit, an aptitude for acquiring alien impenetrable luxuries.

Manders' Figs in Syrup, with its seventy-year-old trade mark — an oriental female yearning her draped

form towards, and apparently worshipping a fig tree — was the only commodity that Louisa was willing to accept from her daughter's direction. Louisa distributed the brown sealed jars of this confection among her acquaintance; it kept them in mind of the living reality underlying their verbal tradition, 'Mrs. Jepp's daughter was a great beauty, she married into Manders' Figs in Syrup.'

'Tell your father,' said Louisa, 'that I have not written to thank him because he is too busy to read letters. He will like the Bulgarian cigarettes. They smell very high. Did he like *my* figs?'

'Oh yes, he was much amused.'

'So your mother told me when she wrote last. Did he *like* them?'

'Loved them, I'm sure. But we were awfully tickled.'

Louisa, in her passion for pickling and preserving, keeps up with the newest methods. Some foods go into jars, others into tins sealed by her domestic canning machine. When Louisa's own figs in syrup, two cans of them with neatly pencilled labels, had arrived for Sir Edwin Manders, Helena had felt uneasy at first.

'Is she having a lark with us, Edwin?'

'Of course she is.'

Helena was not sure what sort of a lark. She wrote to Louisa that they were all very amused.

'Did they enjoy the figs?' Louisa pressed Laurence.

'Yes, they were lovely.'

'They are as good as Manders', dear, but don't tell your father I said so.'

'Better than Manders', Laurence said.

'Did you taste some, then?'

'Not actually. But I know they were most enjoyable, Mother said' (which Helena had not said).

'Well, that's what I sent them for. To be enjoyed. You shall have some later. I don't know what they are talking about — "much amused". Tell your father that I'm giving him the cigarettes for enjoyment, tell him that, my dear.'

Laurence was smoking his Bulgarian. 'Most heady,' he said. 'But Mother takes a fit when you send expensive presents. She knows you have to deny yourself and——'

He was about to say 'pinch ~~and~~ scrape', using his mother's lamenting words; but this would have roused the old lady. Besides, the phrase was obviously inaccurate; his grandmother was surrounded by her sufficiency, always behind which hovered a suspicion of restrained luxury. Even her curious dishes seemed chosen from an expansive economy of spirit rather than any consideration of their cost in money.

'Helena is a sweet girl, but she does deceive herself. I'm not in need of anything, as she could very well see, if she took the trouble. There is no need for Helena to grieve on my account.'

Laurence was away all day, with his long legs in his small swift car, gone to look round and about the familiar countryside and coastline, gone to meet friends of his own stamp and education, whom he sometimes brought back to show off to them his funny delicious grandmother. Louisa Jepp did many things during that day. She fed the pigeons and rested. Rather earnestly, she brought from its place a loaf of white bread, cut the crust off one end, examined the loaf, cut another slice, and looked again. After the third

slice she began at the other end, cutting the crust, peering at the loaf until, at the fourth slice, she smiled at what she saw, and patting the slices into place again put back the loaf in the tin marked 'bread'.

At nine o'clock Laurence returned. The sitting-room which looked out on the village was very oblong in shape. Here he found his grandmother with visitors, three men. They had been playing rummy, but now they were taking Louisa's refreshments, seated along each side of the room. One was in an invalid chair; this was a young man, not more than twenty-four.

'Mr. Hogarth, my grandson; my grandson, Mr. Webster; and this is *young* Mr. Hogarth. My grandson is on the B.B.C., my daughter's son, Lady Manders. You've heard him give the commentaries on the football and the races, Laurence Manders.'

'Heard you last Saturday.' This was Mr. Webster, the oldest guest, almost as old as Louisa.

'Saw you this morning,' Laurence said.

Mr. Webster looked surprised.

'With the baker's van,' Laurence added.

Louisa said, 'Laurence is very observant, he has to be for his job.'

Laurence, who was aglow from several drinks, spoke the obliging banality, 'I never forget a face', and turning to the elder Hogarth he said, 'For instance, I'm sure I've seen your face somewhere before.' But here, Laurence began to lose certainty. 'At least — you resemble someone I know but I don't know who.'

The elder Hogarth looked hopelessly at Louisa, while his son, the boy in the invalid chair, said, 'He looks like me. Have you seen me before?'

Laurence looked at him.

'No,' he said, 'I haven't. Nobody at all like you.'

Then, in case he should have said the wrong thing, considering the young man was a cripple, Laurence rattled on,

'I may take up detective work one of these days. It would be quite my sort of thing.'

'Oh no, you could never be a detective, Laurence,' Louisa said, very seriously.

'Now, why not?'

'You have to be cunning to be a detective. The C.I.D. are terribly sly and private detectives will stoop to anything. You aren't a bit sly, dear.'

'I notice extraordinary things,' Laurence boasted casually, lolling his brown head along the back of the sofa. 'Things which people think are concealed. Awful to be like that, isn't it?'

Laurence had the feeling that they didn't like him, they suspected him. He got nervous, and couldn't seem to say anything right. They more and more seemed not to like him as he went on and on compulsively about the wonderful sleuth he would make. And all the time he was talking he actually was taking them in, sleuth-like.

Their presence in his grandmother's house was strange and surprising, and for that reason alone did not really surprise him. Louisa is pouring out tea. She calls the young Hogarth 'Andrew'. His father is 'Mervyn' to her. Webster is 'Mr. Webster'.

Mr. Webster with his white hair, white moustache and dark nautical jacket is not easy to identify with his early-morning appearance — the tradesman in a sandy-brown overall who calls with the bread: Laurence felt pleased with himself for recognising Mr. Webster, who wore brown suede shoes, size ten by Laurence's discernment, whose age might



be going on seventy-five, and who, by his voice, is a Sussex man.

Mervyn Hogarth was thin and small. He had a washed-out sandy colouring. Louisa had prepared for him a thin slice of brown bread and butter.

'Mervyn has to eat often, in small snacks, for his gastric trouble,' Louisa explained. By his speech, the elder Hogarth is a knowing metropolitan product. God knows what he is doing at Louisa's, why he is on sufficiently familiar visiting terms for first names and gastric confidences. But Laurence was not a wonderer. He observed that the elder Hogarth wore unpressed flannels and an old ginger tweed jacket with the air of one who can afford to go careless. The son Andrew, with full red lips, was square and large-faced with glasses. He was paralysed in the legs.

As Louisa asked Laurence, 'Did you have a nice outing, dear?' Andrew winked at him.

Laurence resented this, an injustice to his grandmother. He felt averse to entering a patronising conspiracy with Andrew against the old lady; he was on holiday for a special reason connected with a love affair, he wanted a change from the complications of belonging to a sophisticated social group. The grandmother refreshed him, she was not to be winked about. And so Laurence smiled at Andrew, as if to say, 'I acknowledge your wink. I cannot make it out at all. I take it you mean something pleasant.'

Andrew started looking round the room; he seemed to have missed something that should be there. At last he fixed on the box of Bulgarian cigarettes on Louisa's sideboard; reaching out he opened the box and helped himself to one. Mr. Webster tried to exchange a glance with Louisa disapproving of her