

The Bay of Angels

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By the Same Author

A Start in Life

Providence

Look at Me

Hotel du Lac

Family and Friends

A Misalliance

A Friend from England

Latecomers

Lewis Percy

Brief Lives

A Closed Eye

Fraud

A Family Romance

A Private View

Incidents in the Rue Laugier

Altered States

Visitors

Falling Slowly

Undue Influence

I read the *Blue Fairy Book*, the *Yellow Fairy Book*, and the stories of Hans Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, and Charles Perrault. None of this was groundwork for success in worldly terms, for I was led to think, and indeed was minded to think, of the redeeming situation or presence which would put to rights the hardships and dilemmas under which the characters, and I myself, had been labouring. More dangerously, it seemed to me that I need make no decisions on my own behalf, for destiny or fate would always have had the matter in hand. Although I was too sensible, even as a child, to believe in a fairy godmother I accepted as part of nature's plan that after a lifetime of sweeping the kitchen floor I would go to the ball, that the slipper would fit, and that I would marry the prince. Even the cruel ordeals undergone by the little match girl, or by Hansel and Gretel, would be reversed by that same principle of inevitable justice which oversaw all activities, which guided some even if it defeated others. I knew that some humans were favoured – by whom? by the gods? (this evidence was undeniable) – but I was willing to believe in the redeeming feature, the redeeming presence that would justify all of one's vain striving, would dispel one's disappointments, would in some mysterious way present one with a solution in which one would have no part, so that all one had to do was to wait, in a condition of sinless passivity, for the transformation that would surely take place.

This strikes me now as extremely dangerous, yet parts of this doctrine seemed overwhelmingly persuasive, principally because there were no stratagems to be undertaken. One had

simply to exist, in a state of dreamy indirection, for the plot to work itself out. This was a moral obligation on the part of the plot: there would be no place for calculation, for scheming, for the sort of behaviour I was to observe in the few people we knew and which I found menacing. This philosophy, the philosophy of the fairy tale, had, I thought, created my mother, whose strange loneliness was surely only a prelude to some drastic change of fortune in which she need play no active part. I therefore accepted as normal that she should spend her days sitting and reading, engaging in minimal outdoor activity, for surely these were the virtuous prerequisites for vindication of some sort, for a triumph which would confound the sceptics, whom I was also able to recognize. She was a widow; I was hardly aware of the lack of a father, for I accepted that the road to validation was in essence one of solitude, and rather than engage in some productive occupation I preferred my mother to wait for the solution to her situation to be presented as none of her own volition.

I was thus aware of her unhappiness but able to bear it, with the help of the knowledge and indeed wisdom I had culled from my reading. As a child I did not perceive her longings, which had been cruelly cut short by my father's premature death. Nor was I much interested in him, for he belonged to prehistory; I had no image of him other than as a face bending over me, and a photograph of a slim young man in an academic gown. Even the photograph conformed to my belief, for it showed someone who was not quite grown up, and therefore a fit companion for my mother who was not quite grown up either, a woman in embryo whose maturity was still far off. This made me comfortable with my own position, a fit descendant of a couple on the verge of existence who were merely undergoing some form of trial and who were surely approaching some beneficent outcome which would make even my father's death assume acceptable proportions. He had died, and my

mother had survived his death. Her unhappiness, I was confident, would be overturned, as any term of trial must be. It sometimes seemed to me that my father's disappearance had merely prepared the way for a story very much like the ones I was so fond of reading. I was not then aware of the universal desire for a happy ending: I would not have understood such an abstraction. But I did know, or was convinced, that our story would have a happy ending, not realizing that there is no proper ending in human affections until time provides an ending to which all must submit.

The fact that we were of the same species (even my absent father contributed his very real silence to our own relative silence) merely emphasized the gulf that existed between ourselves and the harsher world outside our flat in Edith Grove. At least I assumed that it was harsher: how could it not be? When my mother walked soundlessly from one room to another, sat reading in the quiet afternoons, or carefully watered the plants on our little balcony, I was not aware of any lack or discrepancy in our lives, or not until some outward agency disrupted our slow peaceful rhythm. Our street was nearly silent, almost abandoned by the late morning: I could be trusted to make my own way to school. After I had done my homework in the evening I would take up my position at the window. I liked to watch the lights go on in other houses, as if preparing for a wayfarer's return. My reading had conditioned me to think in terms of wayfarers, so that footsteps on the pavement gave me an agreeable sensation that the stories contained enough authenticity to justify the fact that I still read them.

No visit disturbed our evenings, nor did we wish for any. It was only at the weekends, when my mother said, 'Better put your books away. The girls are coming,' that I resigned myself to a lesson in reality which would be instructive but largely unwelcome. I feared this lesson on my mother's behalf; I knew

instinctively that her good manners were inadequate protection against the sentimental tactlessness of our visitors, who surely thought their presence something of a comfort to my mother and even to myself. 'They mean well,' said my mother. 'They are good women.' But we both knew that this was a lame excuse.

'The girls', as opposed to 'the boys' (their husbands, twin brothers in the hotel business), were as devoted as two sisters might have been, although they were not related. Rather it was my mother and I who were related to them, through my great-grandfather, who had married twice and had raised two separate families, one eventually resulting in my father and the other in the boys, who did not accompany their wives on these visits, although they might have done, on some vague grounds of consanguinity. What family feeling there was seemed to be in the gift of the girls, Millicent and Nancy, who faithfully kept up with my mother, whether through charity or genuine interest. It seemed to intrigue, even to excite them, that a woman of my mother's age could live without the presence of a man; they regarded her with pity, with anxiety, but also with curiosity, as if in her place they would have gone mad. They had little self-control, were obtuse, and kind, but also avid. Neither had children. Their days seemed, to hear their anecdotes, full of activity: shopping, maintenance, which was of a high order, visits, and then back home to the boys for dinner and an evening of bridge, at which they would complain incessantly, their beautiful complacency fracturing slightly to reveal a perhaps unguessed-at discontent.

Despite their physical perfection, which impressed and unselfishly delighted my mother, they were women whose very real innocence was but one feature of their glossy appearance, nurtured solemnly, and thus providing a fit basis for compliments. Drawn together by the accident of their marriages, they remained devoted to each other by virtue of an extraordinary

similarity of temperament. They were sensuous, but not sensual, felt relieved that neither one of them was entirely satisfied by their husbands' company, took refuge in material comfort and busy social arrangements. Marriage was no less than their right; it was also their alibi, protecting them from any form of censure, and may have been entered into precisely for that reason. My mother was well aware of this, as they may not have been; I deduced this from her kindness, which had something protective about it, as if they needed to be sheltered from certain realizations. I accepted them as a fact of nature. Their anxiety, unusual in very handsome women, was directed towards my mother, for whom they felt genuinely sorry. Their visits were mercy visits, in the sense that there are mercy killings, with the same admixture of motives.

I disliked them because they interrupted our peaceful lives, with their incessant suggestions as to how my mother might improve her solitary condition. I disliked them because these suggestions made no provision for myself. She was urged to, in their words, socialize, and offered the occasional invitation to their parties, which she attended with a martyr's stoicism. I was also aware that they discussed her, deriving some comfort from her sadness, her obvious inactivity. I could see that they meant well, since their visits were occasions of lavish generosity: boxes of cakes were produced, a beautiful pineapple, and cartons of strawberries brought up from the car by Millicent's driver; at the same time I was puzzled that their real kindness gave them no legitimization in my eyes. My favourite myths did not apply to them, for I could not in all conscience see them as the Ugly Sisters. I simply perceived that they had not waited, and therefore had not been rewarded, as my mother would surely be rewarded. It is not impossible that they perceived this as well.

'You both look splendid,' said my mother with a smile. This fact at least was incontrovertible. The girls habitually looked

splendid since most of their time was devoted to that end. Millicent in particular was immaculate; her beautifully manicured hand frequently patted the upward sweep of her imposing coiffure, which was cared for every day by a local hairdresser who had no objection to sending one of his juniors to the house in Bedford Gardens to brush away any imperfections that the early morning might have wrought. Millicent was the younger of the two, plump, wide-eyed, expectant. Nancy, by contrast, was tough, imperious, a heavy smoker, granted seniority by virtue of having lived abroad, in various of the brothers' hotels, mainly in the region between Nice and the Italian border. I saw that she could be relied upon to look after Millicent, but that neither of them would look after my mother. Once, when some malaise or illness had kept my mother at home, they had sent a deputy, 'poor Margaret', who had been adopted as a child by Nancy's parents and who performed the valuable function of looking after both girls. She lived in a flat in Nancy's house, which was conveniently situated in the same street as that occupied by Millicent and her husband Eddie. I disliked Margaret even more than the girls, since I sensed that she was willing to break out, could hardly be constrained, in fact, and only conformed to others' plans for her because she was too lazy, or perhaps too fearful, to strike out on her own. In this she differed from my mother, who, though passive, had not altogether forgone courage, as I, and perhaps the girls, were obliged to recognize.

'If only you'd learn to play bridge,' lamented Millie, to which Nancy rejoined, 'Leave her alone. How do you know she hasn't got a secret life?'

This was taken as a risqué remark, although it would have been quite in order for my mother to take a lover (I thought 'a suitor'), in which case they would have been shocked, and even disappointed. They did not suggest that she get a job. In the 1950s it was thought quite reasonable for women to stay

at home and live a peaceful semi-detached semi-suburban life. The great awakening, which was supposed to benefit my generation, had not yet taken place. My father had left a little money, the remains of a legacy, which was supplemented by a small annual cheque from some investments: we lived frugally but decently, unlike the girls, who served mainly as showcases for their husbands' success. This too was thought quite normal at the time, although they seemed to me idle and pampered. Their discontent, which they would furiously have denied, came from purposelessness. In any event, although enjoying the spectacle of their prosperity, I preferred the propriety of our own circumstances, which seemed to fit in with the preordained plan which I knew from my early reading. I did not know, nor, I think, did my mother, that circumstances can be changed, or at least given a helping hand. There seemed to be something natural, even unavoidable, about our lives, which may be why they were so peaceful. Any dissent, any criticism, came from the girls, fascinated as they were by our unmanned condition. Our function was to set their own lives on course, to bring their many advantages into relief. My mother played her part. I merely looked on.

‘What eyes that child has,’ said Nancy. ‘Has she nothing to do?’

‘She reads a lot,’ said my mother. ‘We both do. Zoë, have you thanked the girls for the strawberries?’

It was true that I read a lot, but by now I had graduated to adult reading. Dickens had my full attention, for surely in those novels he was telling the same story of travail and triumph. The additional benefit, apart from the eccentric characters, with their eccentric names, was that many of these travails were undertaken by young men of peerless disposition. This was welcome proof that such life experiences were universal, and, more important, could be, and usually were, brought about while suffering an initial handicap – wicked step-parents,

an indigent family – which the heroes (for David Copperfield and Nicholas Nickleby were undoubted heroes) could circumvent with little more than their own blamelessness to guide them. This struck me as entirely beautiful, and convinced me that one must emulate their efforts, that one must never be discouraged by the unhelpfulness of others. Not that I had ever experienced such an obstacle at close quarters: what I took for wickedness was in fact worldliness, as my mother explained to me. The unapologetic presence of our visitors, their peculiar blend of restlessness and complacency, which was discordant, was essentially harmless, though it occasionally sought relief in imprecations, in disapproval of others, principally of my mother and myself. I saw – in Nancy's hoarse smoker's laugh, in Millicent's delicate hand smoothing her hair – a quality that was alien to our own lives, faintly undesirable. Sometimes my mother's eyes had a look of tiredness, and she was obliged to turn her head away for a brief moment, as suggestions for improvement, or rather self-improvement, came her way. These visits, which I now see were undertaken for more merciful reasons than mere curiosity, were in essence a form of female solidarity before that condition had been politicized. They were concerned for any woman living on her own, with only a child for company. At the same time they were fearful that such ivory-tower isolation might be catching. They wanted my mother to be reinstated in society for their sakes as much as for her own. They genuinely pitied a woman who had no status, but they also translated this lack of status as failure in the world's terms.

What distinguished my mother was a form of guilelessness which they had, perhaps regretfully, laid aside. This was what I saw: they had exchanged one condition for another, and may not have been entirely compensated. My mother was their crusade: they also usefully saw her as a pupil. When they rose

to leave, the frowns disappeared from their faces, the concern evaporated, and their embraces were genuine. They were glad to get back to their own orbit, with its comprehensible distractions, glad to have done their social duty, even if the results were so sadly lacking. My mother, shaking cushions after their departure, would be more silent than usual, and I somehow knew I should not intrude on her thoughts. I reflected that Nancy and Millie were characters, no less and no more, and that any confrontation – but none had taken place, nor would take place – would be unequal. My mother was bound to succeed, for she was untainted by the world's corruption and thus qualified for remission from further ordeals. This was slightly less affirmative than my previous beliefs. I comforted myself that even David Copperfield had had moments of downheartedness.

On the whole I was happy. I liked my school, I liked my friends; I liked the shabby charm of our flat, from which a light shone out in winter to guide me home. I liked our silent streets, the big windows of the houses in which artists had once lived: I liked its emanations of the nineteenth century. The only difference was that I no longer thought in terms of wayfarers; such people had now become neighbours, or, once I was out of their orbit, pedestrians. That we were somewhat on the margin of things did not disturb me, although the girls, making their way by car from Kensington, complained of the distance, as if they had been obliged to cross a frontier, or to go back in time. It is true that our surroundings were a little mournful, perhaps unnaturally so to those habitual shoppers. I, on the other hand, cherished them as a place of safety. The street lamp that shone outside my bedroom window I accepted as a benevolent gesture on behalf of the town council, the man who swept the leaves in autumn as a guardian of our decency. I was hardly aware of the sound of cars, for fewer people drove

then. Even footfalls sounded discreet and distant, and the clang of an iron gate was sometimes the only sound in the long afternoons.

This struck me as an ideal state of affairs. But as I grew older I began to be aware that my mother was less happy than I was. Her eyes had a distant look, and she turned her head slowly when I spoke to her, as if she had momentarily forgotten that I was there. She was still a young woman but she was slightly careworn, as if her thoughts were a burden to her. She was also more silent, nursing what I later came to understand as grief. She was entirely lucid, had devoted her life without complaint to a child who may not have been rewarding (but I did not think that then), and by dint of suppressing almost every healthy impulse had maintained both her composure and her dignity. Hence her silences, her very slight withdrawal from myself. Her survival depended on a control which had not previously been in default. For the first time I began to wish that my father had lived, but selfishly, as young people do, in order to leave me free. I knew, with my increasingly adult perceptions, that it was not in my gift to deal with such a deficit, that my mother's loneliness was acute, that regrets, long buried, had begun their insidious journey to full consciousness . . . My mother was a good woman, too good to give way to self-pity. This austerity of behaviour denied her close friends. I think she exchanged only the most obvious pleasantries with our neighbours, keeping her most painful thoughts fiercely to herself. To voice even one of them would have constituted a danger.

Her sadness, I thought, was brought on by the knowledge that life's opportunities had definitively passed her by, and also by virtue of the fact that the redeeming feature, or presence, had not manifested itself. She was thus cast into the category of the unwanted, the unsought. I perceived this on certain lightless afternoons, when there was no joyous voice to greet

me when I returned from a friend's house, from noisy friendly normality. I perceived it, no doubt correctly, but it burdened me. I wanted no part of her passivity. I was young and not notably unfeeling, but I did not want to be a partner in anyone's regrets. Had I been of an age to understand the full implications of this dereliction I should have resented it strenuously. As it was I began to see some virtue in the girls' remonstrances, though in truth they had little but themselves to offer by way of compensation for her solitude. Therefore, when I put my key in the door one afternoon and heard Millie's festive voice exclaiming, 'Now, I'm counting on you, Anne. There'll only be a few people. Nice people. I know you'll like them,' I was inclined to add my own encouragements to hers.

My mother murmured something placatory.

'Nonsense,' said Nancy. 'You have to make a bit of an effort in this life if you want to get anywhere. And as far as I can make out you're not getting anywhere.'

'Six-thirty,' said Millie. 'I'll send the car for you.'

After that it would have been difficult to back down.

My mother's expression, after they had left, was bemused, resigned, even cynical. I took it as a good sign that she went into her bedroom and opened her creaking wardrobe door. Everything in our flat creaked, a sound I found friendly. Now I saw, perhaps for the first time, that it was rather gloomy, that my mother's room was in perpetual shadow, too conducive to nostalgia, to introspection. On her dressing-table was the photograph of the young man in the academic gown whom I did not remember. His face was steadfast, obedient, not quite up to the task of growing up, certainly not of growing old. I regretted his absence, as I had not done when still a child, with my mother to myself. Now I had her to myself, but was no longer a child, was beginning to feel a hunger for wider experiences, for a life outside the home, even one as well ordered as ours. Perhaps precisely for that reason.

‘Do I look all right?’ asked my mother, on that next Friday evening.

I thought she looked beautiful, in her simple blue dress and jacket. She was plainly agitated, and had it not been for the car being sent would have thankfully abandoned the whole adventure. When Tom, Millie’s driver, rang the bell, we were both in a state of high concern. It was almost a relief when she left, and I was thankful for the hour or two I could spend on my own before her return. I thought of her among those nice people and hoped painfully, not that she was enjoying herself – that would have been too much to expect – but that she was not feeling too lonely. For a woman as shy as my mother social occasions on which she was unaccompanied were a nightmare. That was why Millie’s pressing invitations, offered, or rather insisted upon for entirely defensible reasons, were, more often than not, gratefully refused.

But she had not refused this one, and it was at Millie’s party, on that Friday evening, that she met her second husband, my stepfather-to-be, and thus changed both our lives.

My mother's fate having been settled according to the archaic principles of natural justice, and the conditions for her redemption having thus been met, I was now free to cast off on my own. I was sixteen, nearly seventeen, and the timing was providential. I had no doubt that we should all be entirely happy. I loved Simon, who, at our first meeting, embraced me with Jewish cordiality, making no distinction between my mother and myself. It was my first contact with genuine expansiveness and I warmed to it. Standing in our flat in Edith Grove he revealed its shabbiness, and thus deducted much of its charm. He was a big man, who seemed to smile all the time, delighted to have found a woman as unspoilt as my mother. He later told us that he too had had to be prevailed upon to attend that epochal party, for, although naturally gregarious, he was aware of the lack of a companion in these most public of circumstances. He was a widower, who, since the death of his wife, had devoted his life to business, or rather to 'business interests', as he termed them. He exuded a pleasant air of health and viability, which did something to mitigate the fact that he was rather old: he was self-conscious about his age, which he dismissed as 'nearly the wrong side of seventy', but he was so obviously fit, and so benignly energetic, that I soon overlooked this fact.

I knew that he could be relied upon to take care of my mother, which seemed to me our prime concern. By this stage I knew, or suspected, that she had money worries: the tenancy of our flat had only another year to run, and after that we should have to move into more restricted quarters or take out