

*The Complete Stories of*  
MARY BUTTS

*By Mary Butts*

THE TAVERNER NOVELS  
THE CLASSICAL NOVELS  
ASHE OF RINGS AND OTHER WRITINGS

THE JOURNALS OF MARY BUTTS  
*Edited by Nathalie Blondel*

*About Mary Butts*

MARY BUTTS: SCENES FROM THE LIFE  
*A Biography by Nathalie Blondel*

A SACRED QUEST: THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF MARY BUTTS  
*Edited by Christopher Wagstaff*



MARY BUTTS

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*The Complete Stories*

PREFACE BY JOHN ASHBERY

EDITED AND WITH A FOREWORD  
BY BRUCE R. MCPHERSON



McPherson & Company  
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# Preface

JOHN ASHBERY

I FIRST HEARD OF Mary Butts in the summer of 1949 when, after graduating from Harvard, I had moved to New York and taken a summer job at the Brooklyn Public Library. It was a time when I was looking for contemporary writers, especially fiction writers, who had somehow escaped classification in what is now called “the canon.” Only a couple of months earlier my friend Frank O’Hara had introduced me to the then-unknown Jean Rhys, Ronald Firbank, Flann O’Brien and Samuel Beckett (this was in the pre-*Godot* days), and I had stumbled on Ivy Compton-Burnett, Laura Riding and Henry Green. All of whom began to persuade me that there was a lot more to twentieth-century literature than Harvard was then letting on.

My immediate superior at the Brooklyn Library was a man in his forties named Richard Elliott who, rather unexpectedly, turned out to be an expert guide to the esoterica I was interested in, and was himself a talented author of strange short stories of which only a few, as far as I know, were published, in obscure little magazines. Of the many writers he suggested I look into, two in particular have remained favourites: Jane Bowles and Mary Butts.

Except for Mary Butts, all the writers I’ve mentioned so far will doubtless be known to most readers of twentieth-century literature; doubtless she will not be. However, that is about to change. As Patricia Beer wrote in the *London Review of Books* recently: “She is one of the current victims of the fashionable drive to exhume ‘forgotten women writers.’ The category is dreary. Mary Butts is not.”

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Originally published in *From Altar to Chimney-piece: Selected Stories* by Mary Butts, McPherson & Company, 1992. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Yet as recently as 1988, Humphrey Carpenter in *Geniuses Together*, his survey of the 1920s expatriate Montparnasse milieu in which Mary Butts moved, referred to her in passing as “a woman named Mary Butts.” Still, she was admired and encouraged by Pound and Eliot; Ford Madox Ford published her in his *Transatlantic Review* (she also appeared in the American review *Hound and Horn*); she was a friend of Cocteau (who drew her portrait and illustrations for two of her books, and is the model for the character André in her story “The House Party”); had a close relationship with Virgil Thomson (who reportedly once proposed marriage to her); and she seems to have frequented Gertrude Stein’s salon. Of course, these credentials wouldn’t matter if she were a negligible talent—the pages of ’twenties little magazines like *transition* and *The Little Review* are crammed with forgotten names that will doubtless remain so. Butts was an extraordinary original who deserves to be remembered on the strength of her work alone—one of those *femmes maudites* like Jean Rhys or Djuna Barnes, shadowy presences on the fringes of the Lost Generation in Paris. Until recently, despite the efforts of a few stubborn fans (the American poets Robert Duncan, Robert Kelly and Ken Irby among them), none was more spectral than Mary Butts. Then in 1988 her memoir of childhood, *The Crystal Cabinet*, was reprinted in England (Carcenet Press) and America (Beacon Press).

It was not, however, an ideal vehicle to launch a Mary Butts revival, since it will interest mainly those already won over to her fiction. It rambles occasionally when she sets out her ideas on the education of children and Freudian psychology, and tells us almost nothing of her certainly tumultuous adult years in London and Paris. Fortunately, there is now this collection of stories, as well as an omnibus edition of the novels *Armed with Madness* and *Death of Felicity Taverner* with a preface by Paul West (also published by McPherson & Company). The world can decide whether it wants reprints of her first novel, *Ashe of Rings*—actually quite different from the others, in an “expressionist” style rather like that of the extraordinary novella “In Bayswater,” reprinted here—and of her two historical novels, *The Macedonian* and *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra*, as well as the still unreprinted stories and the uncollected and virtually unknown poems.

A biography of Mary Butts is said to be on the way, but until it materialises, our knowledge of the person behind the fictions will remain tantalizingly slight. The charms of *The Crystal Cabinet* lie main-

ly in her evocation of memories of early childhood and of the Dorset landscape which recurs constantly as a setting, a character really, in the novels and the stories. Family relationships are not dealt with in depth. Her brother Tony, obviously an important person in her life, barely appears, and though she speaks fondly of him, Virginia Woolf reported he told her that he had always hated Mary. (Tony was the companion of the writer William Plomer, and committed suicide in 1941.) Hence, it's difficult to know whether to look for traces of Tony in Felix, the heroine's sympathetic gay brother in the *Taverner* novels—he sounds more like Felicity's cruel and capricious brother Adrian in the latter one, just as Adrian's mother and several scheming dowagers in the stories resemble, given certain of her traits set down in *The Crystal Cabinet*, Mary's mother.

We know that Mary Butts was born December 13, 1890, at Salt-erns, the family estate near the Dorset coast. The pleasantly eccentric house was notable chiefly for its collection of William Blake paintings (the phrase, "the crystal cabinet," is taken from Blake). They were acquired by her great-grandfather Thomas Butts, Blake's enthusiastic patron. She was educated at St. Andrews school in Scotland, went to live in London before World War I, and married the poet and translator John Rodker, by whom she had her only child, Camilla, in 1920. She seems to have lived mostly in Paris in the 1920s, with occasional revivifying visits to Dorset. Divorced from Rodker, she married the painter Gabriel Aitken (who designed the jacket of her book *Several Occasions*); they too were later divorced. She spent the last years of her life in Sennen, Cornwall, where she died in 1937, aged forty-six.

Paul West mentions her disjointed, dislocated style, and indeed she can be a difficult writer to "follow." Her fondness for double and even triple negatives ("Nothing upstairs makes me believe anything but that you are all mad, but she is too young to tell nothing but lies"; "It is getting more and more inopportune to suppose women have no secrets unconnected with sex"); her occasional carelessness in indicating who is saying what, to the point where we don't always know who is still in the room; a lapidary terseness that verges on mannerism and is sometimes merely mannered: these traits abound in her stories, which nevertheless succeed oftener than the novels. Perhaps she was aware of this, since in *Death of Felicity Taverner* she tries harder than elsewhere to construct a plot (in this case one rather like that of a detective nov-

el), but it sags under the weight of too many stylistic *trouvailles*, often beautiful in themselves.

I seem to be building a case against her; that is by no means my intention, but since I've begun I should perhaps point to her other flaws before going on to her virtues. It will be noticed that the same character-types appear throughout her fiction, sometimes with the same names: the gay brother (her brother Tony?); the taciturn painter-husband (Aitkin?); the selfish dominating mother; the Russian gigolo-in-Paris, Boris, who is sometimes *méchant* (to lapse into French, *à la* Butts), sometimes (as in *Felicity Taverner*) a perverse savior; and the central female character, sometimes called Scylla, who must confront Charybdises of her own, through whose eyes we see everything and who is Butts herself. The supporting cast includes a number of sharply etched expatriate Americans, sometimes heroic and almost as smart as the Europeans (like Carston, another savior, in *Armed with Madness*); sometimes victims of European corruption (Paul in "The House Party"), sometimes victim-tormentors (Cherry in "From Altar to Chimney Piece"). Indeed, her take on Americans is fresh and unconventional, though it is hard to believe that the Stein-Toklas salon was a coven of satanist bolsheviks, as she seems to be suggesting in "From Altar to Chimney Piece."

The problem is that it isn't always possible to sympathize with these decadent darlings, so determined to put up a brave front in their reduced though hardly indigent circumstances, who have secret access to the earth's magic, who "know," as this passage from *Felicity Taverner* puts it rather too bluntly:

*The Taverners were the kind of people who, if they have to choose, choose a boat and a library rather than a car and a club; cherry blossom before orchids, apples before tinned peaches, wine to whiskey, one dress from Chanel to six "from a shop." . . . They knew what in relation to Chardin has been called "all the splendour and glory of matter." Like him, they were in love.*

This is atypical of the author. Usually she brings on her characters without explaining them, especially in the stories, where there is little room to do so. In the amazing one called "Brightness Falls," a character named Max tells the male narrator: "I feel I've got to tell someone, and it might as well be you. I won't ask you not to repeat it, because you won't be able to." This is in fact true of "Brightness Falls" and of her stories in general. They start just about anywhere. "This happened

in the kind of house people live in who used not to live in that kind of house, who were taught to have distinct opinions about the kind of people who lived in them” is the first line of “The Warning.” They unfold, rather than unroll, with lacunae and bits of seemingly irrelevant information interrupting the flow, and then, having brought us somewhere, they leave us. Thus, at the end of “Brightness Falls,” Max has just finished describing his wife’s and her girl friend’s hilarity after all three had passed through an episode that seems tinged with witchcraft:

*“Anyhow, they got livelier and livelier; out of their clothes and into them again, telephones, taxis, dancing somewhere; more mischief—”*  
*“Did you go out with them?”*  
*“No, I would not do that.”*

End of story. But meanwhile we have been to some extraordinary places without leaving London: the enchantment scene takes place in Lincoln’s Inn, where

*The air was wild and mist-softened, moisture everywhere, but without shine. Like a picture that might easily become another picture, and has to be very good to stay put at all. It was all so dull, a London pool, and not deep enough.*

Before that, when Parmys, Max’s wife, is starting to explain the mystery, he says:

*“I didn’t want to listen, but I found myself attending to noises. In November the third week was still, you remember. A few leaves left to fall, and each one I thought was like a little word that you just couldn’t catch. Light and brown and so few of them—whispers in the air. I used to stand at the window and watch, until I thought of coral and pearl and how red and white they are.”*

Where are we? Where have we come from? But the narrator has already warned us in the story’s opening sentences: “There is no head or tail to this story, except that it happened. On the other hand, how does one know that anything happened? How does one know?”

Paul West likens Mary Butts to a hummingbird, and he is right: we admire hummingbirds because we can’t quite see them; their erratic motion prevents that and is what we like about them. After reading Butts one is left with an impression of dazzle, of magic, but what made it is hard to pin down. Rereading after forty years her marvelous story “Friendship’s Garland” (all the stories set in London as well as the London parts of *Ashe of Rings* have a haze of madness in them, the au-

thor being indeed “armed with madness”—a phrase, incidentally, that I would dearly love to trace), I found that the only thing I remembered from my first reading was a single metaphor. We are in rather sinister company at a café called the Craven.

*Through the noise and the iron streets, even through the racing wind the sun poured, roaring its heat through the wind at the huge buildings and the crowd. Those are the hours when the city pays for being a city, and is delivered over to the wind and the sun and their jackal the dust. All the earth pays, but principally the city. On the other hand, inside the Craven there is no nature at all. These things are not natural, marble like cheese, red velvet, and plaster gilt.*

“Marble like cheese” was all I had retained, except for a sense of the whole story as something evil, glittering, funny and, and the end surreally beautiful, as the narrator sees her face in a mirror looking “half old, like a child’s recovering from a sickness,” and later “like a child that has been dipped in dew.” To remember the stories, even just after finishing them, necessitates rereading them; there is no other way to hang onto their breathless skittering as it evolves before us.

Though Mary Butts was not exactly unknown during her lifetime, she became so almost immediately afterward. Only now, after more than half a century, is the public discovering her. The very features of her writing that taxed earlier readers—her startling ellipses, especially in conversations; her drastic cutting in the cinematic sense; her technique of collaging bits of poetry and popular song lyrics (“Lady Be Good” and “What’ll I Do?”) into the narratives—make her seem our contemporary. So do the freewheeling and disordered lives of her characters, who can be “wired” in a very 1990s way—the homosexual ones, for instance, whom she treats with a sympathy and openness astonishing for the England of her time. One keeps getting the feeling that these stories were written yesterday.

“The old man belonged to the majority who do not approve—say of cats or earrings or ’bus tickets,” she writes in “In Bayswater.” Today that majority is bigger than ever, but so is the minority that opposes it—the minority who approves. We need Mary Butts now, to guide us, “armed with madness,” through mazes and forests to the pure sources of storytelling.



## *Foreword*

BRUCE R. MCPHERSON

MARY BUTTS first “spoke” to me in 1988 or ’89 when the poet Robert Kelly handed me a copy of *Death of Felicity Taverner*. I knew of her very slightly. I was surprised to discover an unknown and free-spirited literary adventurer possessed of an original style from an era I had studied deeply; suddenly there was an exciting distaff counterpart to D. H. Lawrence; and I was appalled that her work had been erased from the history of the 1920s and ’30s.

Her disappearance added to her allure. After her death in 1937, her work fell out of print, with a few minor exceptions, for more than fifty years. She is not the only significant Modernist whose writings dropped from view between the world wars, and in the drastic reordering of the world following the second war; cycles of obscurity and rediscovery happen to writers all the time. But while the works of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes and H.D., along with many lesser English and American women writers, were enjoying a renaissance during the feminist wave of the late 1960s through the ’80s, Butts seems to have been cold-shouldered. Was it for being politically incorrect, or insufficiently feminist, or seeming to embrace an excessively libertine lifestyle, or perhaps for writing work too challenging?—choose whichever you like, but all would be hard to substantiate. The problem, rather, may be that Mary Butts had never quite *arrived* in the estimation of the British literary establishment. In a working lifetime of about eighteen years, she published five novels, a novella, two collections of stories, two pamphlets, various poems scattered in little magazines, and roughly a hundred reviews and essays for prominent journals and newspapers. Given her stylistic originality, one would have thought that would be enough. Her work was mostly praised and even

occasionally anthologized; but sales were modest, her audience small, and her aesthetic allegiances remained with avant-garde writers and composers—French, ex-pat Americans, and British. She died young, leaving a substantial body of unpublished and unfinished work. Her departure, therefore, went unremarked, and her absence quickly forgotten except by poets and outsiders and connoisseurs.

I began to read everything of hers I could find. With *Armed with Madness* (in the form of a xerox copy) I became convinced of her lyrical genius and began to plan how she might be republished. A year or two later I learned I was not alone, that a young English scholar, Nathalie Blondel, had been working with Butts's daughter, Camilla Bagg, in the same pursuit—at first by arranging for an unexpurgated edition of *The Crystal Cabinet*, an autobiographical memoir of her childhood. The difficulty, however, was that no-one remembered her.

My approach was to create a single volume in 1992 for the novel *Armed with Madness* and its sequel *Death of Felicity Taverner*, and at the same time to publish a selection of sixteen stories, titled *From Altar to Chimney-piece*. I did not imagine that the project would grow to include another four volumes by and about her: *The Classical Novels* in 1994; Christopher Wagstaff's compilation of critical essays, *A Sacred Quest*, the year after; and in 1998 Natalie Blondel's stunning biography, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*, as well as an omnibus featuring Butts's first novel, *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*. By century's end, her work had found a small but devoted readership, and captured the attention of academic scholars. Nathalie Blondel's publication of Butts's *Journals* (Yale, 2002), a prodigious feat of scholarship and longhand decryption, fittingly capped a long decade.

Having come so far, how could I escape the rest of the journey? Even before the stock of *From Altar to Chimney-piece* was exhausted, I was investigating MB's uncollected poetry and unpublished fiction (including a first novel in typescript) among her papers at Yale's Beinecke Library. Plans for a revised volume of stories quickly enlarged into this complete edition, and when another young English scholar, Joel Hawkes, proposed an edition of her essays and reviews, a second campaign took shape. So *The Complete Stories* heralds another four- or five-volume project that will bring all but the most fugitive works into print by 2020.

Mary Butts is known primarily as a novelist, but she practiced the short form throughout her career, and an argument could be made that she built her novels, particularly *Armed with Madness* and the historical novels, from smaller units. All the more reason, then, for this new collection of thirty-eight stories, which adds new facets to her oeuvre, and a few surprises for its readers. When planning a “complete” edition of stories the choice is either to offer them in their original collections or to order them by date of composition, supposing the latter can be determined. Each approach has its advantage: either we gauge the development of a writer over time, or we experience the work as her audience did. Butts kept dated journals where she often mentions initiating stories or their completion; but there are ellipses and uncertainties, particularly because so few of the original manuscripts and typescripts are among her papers in the Beinecke and must be presumed lost. (Butts wrote longhand in composition books which were sent to a typist; she would hand-correct the typescripts and, one expects, the typeset proofs.) Some day scholars will have sorted out the details. Meanwhile, the original collections are presented here, but with a proviso.

Mary Butts published two story collections containing twenty-one pieces, *Speed the Plough* and *Several Occasions*. Just before her death, a third collection had been requested for consideration by T. S. Eliot at Faber & Faber (title unknown, receipt uncertain), and its acceptance might have altered significantly MB’s reputation. Instead, under the title *Last Stories*, the volume appeared in 1938 from the publishing house of her great friend and benefactor, Annie Winifred Ellerman (a.k.a. Bryher). A note regarding the thirteen stories preceded the text, reading in part: “None has previously appeared in book-form. They are printed in two groups—first, those written during the author’s last years at Sennen, and then those written from 1925 onwards.” The demarcation (coming at “After the Funeral”) suggests that the arrangement may not be Butts’s. Furthermore, Bryher’s Brendin Publishing ran afoul of English libel laws when one Geoffrey Dunlop threatened to sue for defamation over the story “A Lover”; Brendin was forced to destroy the remaining book stock. The book was well reviewed, but its publication was inconsequential to the larger scheme.

The last piece in *Last Stories* is an epistolary fiction from 1917 titled “Lettres Imaginaires,” which is not to be confused with a novella Butts

wrote in Paris in 1924 and 1926: that book, *Imaginary Letters*, was published in 1928 in a limited edition with drawings by Jean Cocteau, and the text is to be found in the omnibus *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*. “Lettres Imaginaires” clearly heralds its epistolary twin, but the status of *Imaginary Letters* as a novella argues against its inclusion here.

After *Last Stories* comes a section of seven uncollected stories, two of which, “The Master’s Last Dancing,” and “Fumerie,” were transcribed and edited by Camilla Bagg and Nathalie Blondel, and published in 1998 in *The New Yorker* and *Conjunctions* respectively. Both are significant works, and border on the gonzo fictional journalism of another contemporary, Henry Miller, as unlikely as that may sound. Two other pieces, “A Magical Experiment” and “Untitled,” are published here for the first time; they are slighter, but exert their charms nonetheless.

Butts occasionally uses Greek words to express particularly numinous ideas. *Daimon* is not a demon but generally a tutelary or presiding spirit, or perhaps a voice within; whereas *kêr* (pl. *kêrés*) is a lesser and more puckish spirit, represented in popular art, according to Butts, “as little fluttering winged bodies, and imagined as a cross between a bacillus, a boy and a ghost.”

Originally, three different publishers issued Mary Butts’s collections, each with its own house style for spelling and punctuation. For this edition, a standard orthography has been established in general conformity with our other MB editions, referencing *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, third edition, 1934. Occasional stylistic idiosyncrasies according to demands of individual stories, e.g., interior monologue, have been allowed. Obvious errors have been corrected.

This project has been greatly benefited by the on-going counsel of Robert Kelly and Dr. Roslyn Reso Foy; the kind cooperation of Mary Butts’s grandsons and executors of the Estate, Daniel and Edward Israel; and the generosity of the artist Pat Steir in allowing the reproduction of her paintings on the covers of our editions.

*The Complete Stories of*  
MARY BUTTS





# Speed the Plough

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*Speed the Plough*  
*In Bayswater*  
*The Saint*  
*Bellerophon to Anteia*  
*Angele au Couvent*  
*In the Street*  
*The Golden Bough*  
*In the South*  
*Madonna of the Magnificat*

1923





## *Speed the Plough*

HE LAY IN BED, lax and staring, and obscure images rose and hung before him, dissolved, reshaped. His great illness passed from him. It left him too faint for any sequence of thought. He lay still, without memory, without hope. Such concrete impressions as came to him were sensuous and centred round the women of the hospital. They distressed him. They were not like the Kirchner girls in the worn *Sketch* he fingered all day. La Coquetterie d'une Ange. One need not know French to understand Coquetterie, and Ange was an easy guess. He stared at the neat counterpane. A tall freckled girl with draggled red hair banged down a cup of cocoa and strode away.

Coquetterie, mannequin, lingerie, and all one could say in English was underwear. He flicked over the pages of the battered *Sketch*, and then looked at the little nurse touching her lips with carmine.

"Georgette," he murmured sleepily, "crêpe georgette."

He would always be lame. For years his nerves would rise and quiver and knot themselves, and project loathsome images. But he had a fine body, and his soldiering had set his shoulders and hardened his hands and arms.

"Get him back onto the land," the doctors said.

The smells in the ward began to assail him, interlacing spirals of odour, subtle but distinct. Disinfectant and distemper, the homely smell of blankets, the faint tang of blood, and then a sour draught from the third bed where a man had been sick.

He crept down under the clothes. Their associations rather than their textures were abhorrent to him, they reminded him of evil noises...the crackle of starched aprons, clashing plates, unmodulated sounds. Georgette would never wear harsh things like that. She would

wear...beautiful things with names...velours and organdie, and that faint windy stuff aerophane.

He drowsed back to France, and saw in the sky great aeroplanes dipping and swerving, or holding on their line of steady flight like a travelling eye of God. The wisps of cloud that trailed a moment behind them were not more delicate than her dress....

“What he wants, doctor, to my mind, is rousing. There he lies all day in a dream. He must have been a strong man once. No, we don’t know what he was. Something out of doors I should think. He lies there with that precious Kirchner album, never a word to say.”

The doctor nodded.

He lay very still. The presence of the matron made him writhe like the remembered scream of metal upon metal. Her large hands concealed bones that would snap. He lay like a rabbit in its form, and fright showed his dull gums between his drawn-back lips.

Weeks passed. Then one day he got up and saw himself in a glass. He was not surprised. It was all as he had known it must be. He could not go back to the old life. It seemed to him that he would soil its loveliness. Its exotics would shrivel and tarnish as he limped by. “Light things, and winged, and holy” they fluttered past him, crêpe velours, crêpe de Chine, organdie, aerophane, georgette.... He had dropped his stick...there was no one to wash his dirty hands.... The red-haired nurse found him crying, and took him back to bed.

For two months longer he labored under their kindness and wasted under their placidity. He brooded, realizing with pitiful want of clarity that there were unstable delicate things by which he might be cured. He found a ritual and a litany. Dressed in vertical black, he bore on his outstretched arms, huge bales of wound stuffs. With a turn of the wrist he would unwrap them, and they would fall from him rayed like some terrestrial star. The Kirchner album supplied the rest. He named the girls, Suzanne and Verveine, Ambre and Desti, and ranged them about him. Then he would undress them, and dress them again in immaculate fabrics. While he did that he could not speak to them because his mouth would be barred with pins.

The doctors found him weaker.

Several of the nurses were pretty. That was not what he wanted. Their fresh skins irritated him. Somewhere there must still be women whose skins were lustrous with powder, and whose eyes were shadowed with violet from an ivory box. The brisk provincial women passed

through his ward visiting from bed to bed. In their homely clothes there was an echo of the lovely fashions of *mondaines*, buttons on a skirt where a slit should have been, a shirt cut to the collar bone whose opening should have sprung from the hollow between the breasts.

Months passed. The fabric of his dream hardened into a shell for his spirit. He remained passive under the hospital care.

They sent him down to a farm on a brilliant March day.

His starved nerves devoured the air and sunlight. If the winds parched, they braced him, and when the snow fell it buried his memories clean. Because she had worn a real musquash coat, and carried a brocade satchel he had half-believed the expensive woman who had sat by his bed, and talked about the worth and the beauty of a life at the plough's tail. Of course he might not be able to plough because of his poor leg...but there was always the milking...or pigs...or he might thatch....

Unfamiliarity gave his world a certain interest. He fluttered the farmer's wife. Nothing came to trouble the continuity of his dream. The sheen on the new grass, the expanse of sky, now heavy as marble, now luminous; the embroidery that a bare tree makes against the sky, the iridescent scum on a village pond, these were his remembrancers, the assurance of his realities. Beside them a cow was an obscene vision of the night.

Too lame to plough or to go far afield, it seemed as though his fate must overtake him among the horned beasts. So far he had ignored them. At the afternoon milking he had been an onlooker, then a tentative operator. Unfortunately the farmer recognized a born milkman. At five o'clock next morning they would go out together to the byres.

At dawn the air was like a sheet of glass; behind it one great star glittered. Dimmed by a transparent shutter, the hard new light poured into the world. A stillness so keen that it seemed the crystallization of speed hung over the farm. From the kitchen chimney rose a feather of smoke, vertical, delicate, light as a plume on Gaby's head. As he stamped out into the yard in his gaiters and corduroys he thought of the similitude and his mouth twisted.

In the yard the straw rose in yellow bales out of the brown dung pools. Each straw was brocaded with frost, and the thin ice crackled under his boots. "*Diamanté,*" he said at last, "that's it."

On a high shoulder of down above the house, a flock of sheep were gathered like a puffy mat of irregular design. The continual bleating,

the tang of the iron bell, gave coherence to the tranquility of that Artemisian dawn. A hound let loose from the manor by some early groom passed menacing over the soundless grass. A cock upon the pigsty wall tore the air with his screams. He stopped outside the byre now moaning with restless life. The cock brought memories. "Chanticleer, they called him, like that play once...."

He remembered how he had once stood outside the window of a famous shop and thrilled at a placard.... "In twenty-four hours M. Lewis arrives from Paris with the Chanticleer toque." It had been a stage hit, of course, one hadn't done business with it, but, O God! the London women whose wide skirts rose with the wind till they bore them down the street like ships. He remembered a phrase he had heard once, a "scented gale." They were like that. The open door of the cowshed steamed with the rankness that had driven out from life.... Inside were twenty female animals waiting to be milked.

He went in to the warm reeking dark.

He squatted on the greasy milking stool, spoke softly to his beast, and tugged away. The hot milk spurted out into the pail, an amazing substance, pure, and thick with bubbles. Its contact with caked hides and steaming straw sickened him. The gentle beast rubbed her head against her back and stared. He left the stall and her warm breath. The light was gaining. He could see rows of huge buttocks shifting uneasily. From two places he heard the milk squirting in the pails. He turned to it again, and milked one beast and another, stripping each clean.

The warm milk whose beauty had pleased began to nauseate him. There was a difference in nature between that winking, pearling flow and the pale decency of a Lyons' tea jug. So this was where it all started. Dimly he realized that this was where most of life started, indifferent of any later phase. "Little bits of fluff," Rosalba and all the Kirchner tribe...was Polaire only a cow...or Delysia?... The light had now the full measure of day. A wind that tasted delicately of shingle and the turf flew to meet him. The mat on the down shoulder was now a dissolving view of ambulating mushrooms.

"Yes, my son," the farmer was saying, "you just stay here where you're well off, and go on milking for me. I know a born milkman when I see one, and I don't mind telling you you're it. I believe you could milk a bull if you were so inclined..."

He sat silent, overwhelmed by the disarming kindness.

“See how the beasts take to you,” the voice went on. “That old cow she’s a terror, and I heard you soothing her down till she was pleasant as yon cat. It’s dairy work you were cut out for... There’s a bull coming round this forenoon...pedigree...cost me a bit. You come along.”

As yet they did not work him very hard, he would have time to think. He dodged his obligations towards the bull, and walked over to an upland field. He swept away the snow from under a thorn bush, folded his coat beneath him, and lit a cigarette.

“And I stopped, and I looked, and I listened.” Yes, that was it, and about time too. For a while he whistled slowly Robey’s masterpiece.

He had to settle with his sense of decency. It was all very well. These things might have to happen. The prospect of a milkless, meatless London impressed him as inconvenient. Still most of that stuff came from abroad, by sea. That was what the blockade was for. “I’ve got to get away from this. I never thought of this before, and I don’t like it. I’ve been jockeyed into it somehow and I don’t like it. It’s dirty, yes dirty, like a man being sick. In London we’re civilized...”

A gull floated in from the sea, and up the valley where the horses steamed at the spring ploughing.

“A bit of it may be all right, it’s getting near that does one in. There aren’t any women here. They’re animals. Even those girls they call the squire’s daughters. I never saw such boots.... They’d say that things were for use, and in London they’re for show... Give me the good old show...” He stopped to dream. He was in a vast circular gallery so precipitous that standing one felt impelled to reel over and sprawl down into the stalls half a mile below. Some comedian had left the stage. Two gold-laced men were changing the numbers on either side. The orchestra played again, something that had no common tune. Then there swung on to the stage a woman plumed and violent, wrapped in leopard skin and cloth-of-gold. Sometimes she stepped like a young horse, sometimes she moved with the easy trailing of a snake. She did nothing that was not trivial, yet she invested every moment with a significance whose memory was rapture.

Quintessence was the word he wanted. He said...“There’s a lot of use in shows.”

Then he got up stiffly, and walked down the steep track to the farm, still whistling.

When the work was over he went out again. Before the pub, at the door marked “hotel,” a car was standing, a green car with glossy panels

and a monogram, cushioned inside with grey and starred with silver. A chauffeur, symphonic also in green and bright buttons, was cranking her up. Perched upon the radiator was a naked silver girl. A woman came out of the inn. She wore white furs swathed over deep blue. Her feet flashed in their glossy boots. She wore a god in green jade and rose. Her gloves were rich and thick, like molded ivory.

“Joy riding,” said a shepherd, and trudged on, but he stood ravished. It was not all dead then, the fine delicate life that had been the substance of his dream. Rare it might be, and decried, but it endured. The car’s low humming died away, phantom-like he saw it in the darkling lane, a shell enclosing a pearl, the quintessence of cities, the perfection of the world.

He had heard her deep voice. “I think we’ll be getting back now.” She was going back to London. He went into the bar and asked the landlady who she was.

“Sort of actress,” the landlord said. And then, “the war ought to have stoped that sort of thing.”

“Why, what’s the harm?”

“Spending the money that ought to go to beating those bloody Germans.”

“All the same her sort brings custom,” the wife had said.

He drank his beer and went out into the pure cold evening. It was six o’clock by the old time, and the radiance was unnatural.

He walked down the damp lane, pale between the hedgerows. It widened and skirted a pond covered with vivid slime.

“And that was all they had to say about her...”

He hated them. A cart came storming up the hill, a compelling noise, grinding wheels and creaking shafts and jingling harness; hard breathing, and the rough voice of the carter to his beast.

At the pond the horse pulled up to breathe, his coat steamed, the carter leaned on the shaft.

“Some pull that.”

“Aye, so it be.” He noticed for the first time the essential difference in their speech.

Carter and horse went up the hill. He lit another cigarette.

Something had happened to him, resolving his mind of all doubts. He saw the tail lights of a car drawing through the vast outskirts of a city. An infinite fine line went out from it and drew him also. That tail lamp was his star. Within the car a girl lay rapt, insolent, a cigarette at her lips.

He dreamed. Dark gathered. Then he noticed that something luminous was coming towards him. Down the hollow lane white patches were moving, irregular, but in sequence, patches that seemed to his dulled ears to move silently, and to eyes trained to traffic extraordinarily slow. The sun had passed. The shadow of the hill overhung the valley. The pale light above intensified its menace. The straggling patches, like the cups of snow the downs still held in every hollow, made down the lane to the pond's edge. It was very cold. From there no lighted windows showed. Only the tip of his cigarette was crimson as in Piccadilly.

With the sound of a charging beast, a song burst from him, as, soundless, each snowy patch slid from the land on to the mirrored back of the pond. He began to shout out loud.

“Some lame, some tame, some game for anything, some like  
stand-up fight,  
Some stay abed in the morning, and some stay out all night.  
Have you seen the ducks go by, go a-rolling home?  
Feeling very glad and spry, have you seen them roam?  
There's mamma duck, papa duck, the grand old drake,  
Leading away, what a noise they make.  
Have you heard them quack, have you heard them quack, have  
you seen those ducks go by?  
Have you seen the ducks go by, go a-rolling home?...”

The way back to the farm his voice answered Lee White's, and the Vaudeville chorus sustained them. At the farm door they forsook him. He had to be coherent to the farmer. He sought inspiration. It came. He played with the latch, and then walked into the kitchen, lyrical...

“And I stopped, and I looked, and I left.”

A month later found him on his knees, vertical in black cloth, and grey trousers, and exquisite bow tie. A roll of Lyons brocade, silver, and peach, was pliant between his fingers as the teats of a cow. Inside it a girl stood frowning down upon him.

Despair was on her face, and on the faces of the attendant women.

“But if you can't get me the lace to go with it, what am I to wear?”

“I am sorry, madame.... Indeed we have done all that is possible. It seems that it is not to be had. I can assure madame that we have done our best.” He rose and appealed to the women. His conviction touched them all.

“Madame, anything that we can do...”

The lovely girl frowned on them, and kicked at her half-pinned draperies.

“When the war starts interfering with my clothes,” she said, “the war goes under...”

His eyes kindled.



## *In Bayswater*

*“Some passages in the life of an only son.”*

HE FOUND THE ROAD behind Westbourne Grove where there was the cream and laurel-green cottage where he wanted to live. He had heard that it was to let and was persuaded that it would be cheap, because of the neighbourhood, because there was no tube, because of the Portobello Road. A woman made of dirt-stiffened rag was its caretaker. She told him a fantastic rent. He had begun to live in the cottage years before. In that last resort, he liked to wound himself observing his own piteousness.

He crossed the ivory boards in his muddy shoes. There was clear yellow paint inside and a round window over the porch, set in deep wood. He put his elbows in it and listened to the wind in the poplars and thought that he was in an old, resting ship. If four shared it, it might be possible. He had not four on whom he could rely. A clean laurel grew in the back yard. He picked a yellow leaf and wrote on it and put it inside his shirt. The great window at the back was made in small panes. He wished he had a diamond in a ring to cut his longing on it. The kitchen was flagged. The larder had a marble shelf for cooling and in summer the butter would not run or the milk sour. There was a glass and white wood cupboard, and shelves for books.

“It is nice,” he said to the woman, “but there is no geyser in the bathroom.” He knew that she knew that he could not pay the rent. He thought, how, if he took it and could not pay, a life of beastly evasion would begin and corrupt the still beauty. He had no nerve to dodge bills, the technique of frightening him had been too developed. He went out, the leaf pricking him, and forgot to give the woman her tip, so that the wretchedness might be completed by a bad exit, and the shilling still be there for tea.

The round window followed him that was the house's eye, a ship's window, the shape for the eye of the wind. Small, square windows are good, and wide plate sheets; well, he could not have them and must go back to the sort that rattle and stick, that look out on mean arrangements and illuminate them.

These are the fancies of a man looking for a house. His next was the Portobello Road because of its crime. It was a fair walk, as Londoners count it, into a hollow full of bright shops, a market and a crowd, a moving, merry place. There were squat glass pillars full of sweets, called cushions, of the texture of silk. There were little pieces of meat classified and no carcasses. The poor like thick gold watch-chains, and little earrings stuck on cards. He pretended to be envious, while he had no sense of it at all. He imagined a freedom, but the rich vitality, the bestiality, the arrangement of wit, innocence and corruption had no relation to his nature.

He wanted his tea.

The leaf had made a small sore. He pulled it out. On the yellow underleaf was a red line he had scrawled: *From the house with the round window we are kept out of*, and his name, *Alec*. The letter was broken by the veins of the leaf. He put it away. He did not notice the people who had noticed him unbuttoning his shirt. He walked away to the right into a district of tall houses whose doors stood high above the streets at the top of high steps. Some had pillars. The dogs ran along lifting their legs against the high, frayed area rods. The road also ran up.

Into a city of charwomen. They climbed out of deep areas. Soon he saw they were everywhere, descending, rising, in their rhythm; young in glazed cotton furs, mature and very pregnant, old with scum in their eyes. Rooms would be cheap and include the services of one of them, and that would make a gesture.

Rain began. Wetted at dusk, the streets' patina of filth gleamed like stale fish, and out of the crests of the houses came noises of weeping that never was, that never could be comforted. A stiff old gentleman with white whiskers and a red face let himself into a boarding-house with a long bright key. Alec saw him and remembered that the family of a man he knew lived in one of these streets, and that his friend used to live with them. If he called, there might be tea, and he liked the idea of contact with the man again. He filled a coloured disc in Alec's mind, violet and blue with little gold flecks. He looked up and saw the street. At the first number there was a brown visiting card with the man's

name under a bell that did not ring. With his lips against his fingers Alec called up the tube. His breath beaded its mouth and moved a clot of grit. A woman let him in. He went up the high stairs that smelt of dust. At the top of the stairs he found their flat, the door flush with the step. He was half-enchanted, saying *these are not natural*, forgetting he had come for human contacts and tea. A little old woman opened the door, dressed in dull silk, and a small coat of black wool over it. Her wedding ring was of bright gold and very thin like her hands. For an instant she peered at him and then began to smile.

“Come in; you’re a friend of Charles, I expect. I’m afraid he’s not in, but he may be back.” He was drawn inside, and separated from his hat and stick. A tall, sullen, pretty girl left the room at once to make him tea.

“You see,” she was saying, “I am Charles’s mother, and that makes it so difficult. How can I say anything against my own son? But sometimes I must...before my daughter comes back. A girl’s innocence should be respected. Once it’s gone, it’s gone forever, as Landor says... But he drinks, my dear boy,—you’ll forgive a short acquaintance and an old woman, I know. He drinks, and stays out half the night—all night, and I don’t know what his journalism brings in, but he gives me nothing...”

It had been going on some time, and the impact of the idea, substituted for his idea of Charles, was like the pricking of the leaf. He took it out of his pocket and split it down the back. So a generous man like Charles was a cad to his mother. —What was she saying?

“He says he is fond of his sister, but he does nothing for her that a brother should do. He brings men to the house who ignore her. He says she is not smart enough. He sneers at her. There is something in him all the time that makes me afraid.”

Rubbish. What did she mean by that? This was not interesting. It was mean. As Rutherford he stood for charm, as Charles he was becoming wicked, just simply wicked like a man who starves his dogs, and also obliquely, medically wicked, responsible and irresponsible, a double treasure for the connoisseur.

“I’m so glad you came. I like to meet his friends. Charles tells them I am a spiteful old woman. But I am all alone, and I have to keep it from the girl.”

Why? Poor old thing. I don’t suppose she has to.

“We all thought him a good fellow. He is our authority on periods and décor.” That ought to please her—mothers like to swank.

He wanted to hear more, and was beginning to be ashamed. He did not attend to the shame, and was arranging a fresh cast when the girl came back into the room, staring contemptuously over the tray. He took it from her. She blushed and scowled. There was bread and margarine and with them a superb cake.

The delicate voice spoke like a gramophone, round and round, to no one.

“My daughter is a good sister, she loves her brother Charles.”

“Don’t, Mother.”

“Why not, my dear? Wasn’t it only last week that you replaced the eyeglass he is always breaking? I know it cost ten shillings, and on your salary.... I tell you about this, Alec, I knew that you were the one Charles calls Alec as soon as I saw you, because of what you said about his being an authority on dress. Oh, my dear boy, if you saw his room, the filthy state in which he keeps his things, his rubbishy novels, his ukulele that makes such a wicked noise, I think; the cigarette holes in his sheets. I know I am a nervous old woman, but some day there will be a fire, and he will burn to death and we’re very fond of him, all the same, aren’t we, dear?”

“Mother!”

“But, Mrs. Rutherford, what does he do that you don’t like?” He wanted his appetite quickly glutted.

“Charles...I can’t bear to go into it...” She paused and winked: “I must leave you and see about dinner. Charwomen can’t cook, and I’m determined that my children shall have one good meal a day. Charles...”

He was left alone with the girl. A more abstract part of him had already sketched a mask from her pale bold face, and hot ignorant eyes.

“Your brother Charles...”

“You must not take my mother too seriously. She does not quite understand about young people. Charles...”

He thought: You are ten years younger than he, you silly maid. You want smacking. And he said:

“Yes, I agree, but what does Charles really do?” He rearranged himself, raking back his beautiful gilt hair.

“Charles drinks—he leads a bad life, whatever that is.”

“We would admit nothing, but that he is sometimes drunk.”

“There was a night here once—anyhow he thinks dreadfully. He told me to read a poem once about a bad woman. Mother was frightened—I know too that he is friends with a woman who is not married and who has a child. He would not tell us that it was not his child.” Alec thought: But this is ordinary rubbish. I’m wasting my time. Good advice, and I’ll go. He said:

“You should try and be matey with him then. You should go out with him, make him show you people. He might not drink so much if you were sympathetic. Nothing is so beastly as when brother and sister aren’t friends?”

“Mother would not hear of it. You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand—” —I’m off, but I did say the only thing that’s always true when I told her to be matey.

The girl went on: “Charles does not think that one can do anything wrong. I don’t understand these things. I never go out except to work. It is lonely.”

He forgot the stiff lines of the mask he had made of her, lost himself in psychology, and psychology in pity.

“Well, now I know that Charles has a sister, perhaps your mother will trust me.” This is going it—I am off home. “Make my apologies to your mother, I have an appointment.”

“What did you come here for?”

“I’ve been looking for a flat.”

“There is one to let on the floor below. We have the keys. Mother, let us show him over the flat below.”

The mother came out of the kitchen. “Do you like apple dumplings? I hope you’ll stay to supper and only hope Charles will come in. I’ve kept my hand for pastry.” She led him affectionately downstairs.

The flat was frightful, a low room with jumping panes and sprawling flowers and yellowing paint. A hot blue bedroom. From the streets he had fallen into domestic anguish, and into rooms that were the interior version of the streets’ unrest; and though the retreat was open, he was not sure of it, because the old woman was a witch and would diddle him, the girl her apprentice, and Charles their conjuration. He saw Charles as a stone idol that walked. He was damned if he would take the place.

“Charles. Charles. Charles.”

Someone was coming upstairs. To his active ear the slow step sounded deliberate. Here was Charles coming, who did not think anything

wrong, who was cruel to his sister. Who would not take his sister out. Who had an old woman cooking for him upstairs. Whom Alec knew as another person. He was out of the door and after him.

Charles marched past him, did not look at him. He followed him, feeling kicked, up the black stairs. He saw the girl beside him suck in her mouth, and then a frail call: "Charles, my dear boy, here's a friend you'll be glad to see. Alec whom you've told me about so often. He is staying to supper," and lower, "You will be nice to him, won't you?"

They crowded on each other into the little room.

"What in hell does he want?" asked Charles. "I'm going up to my room to be sick."

"Have you no respect, Charles, for my drawing-room?"

"None."

His sister screamed. "I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

"What can't you bear?"

"We were having tea with your friend and showing him the flat, and it was nice and amusing, and you can come in and shame us."

"And what would you do if I didn't? Exploit me till there was no telling which was your son and which was your husband, eh, Ma?"

Drunk—dangerous. Might be sick.

"Rutherford, hadn't you better come up to bed at once?"

"In the absence of that woman's spouse, I am the head of this house—

*My fathers drew the righteous sword  
For Scotland and her claims,  
Among the loyal gentlemen  
And chief of ancient names, . . .  
Like a leal, old Scottish cavalier.*

In Bayswater we have other occupations."

He had taken the hearth-rug position, his arms open, grasping each end, working his olive neck. They waited. "Charles, why do you mind us knowing your friend?"

"Alec, I must apologise for these people. This is why I don't bring people home. I am as drunk as drunk, and where's some food?"

"In the kitchen. I'll bring it up to your room if you're going to be sick."

"I'm not going to be sick. Is there anything to drink?"

"You know—"

"I know there is going to be some. Go out and get it, girl, and we'll play *pass the keystone*."

"Give her some money, Charles."

"Damn her, why should I?" The girl went out. Alec rushed after her.

"Go back, my dear. I'll see to it. You must let me. I insist. It is abominable." This is not possible. He sings: *His golden locks time has to silver turned*.

In the street Alec shouldered people left and right, ran into the wine shop and out again with the sour drink.

When he got upstairs, the women were talking low in the kitchen, and up and down the tiny sitting-room Charles was pacing, talking, striking at the air. An ugly boil showed above his collar, a patch of skin on the heel above his shoe. Alec noticed that a great ring was gone from his elegant yellow hand.

He stood in the doorway, licking his mouth. Then he said: "Here's the keystone," and then: "I say, Rutherford, wouldn't you be better in bed?"

"How long have you been here?"

"About an hour."

"What's she been telling you?"

"I never knew you drank like this."

"Turn it into a nice mime, man. That's your job, isn't it? What did she say? Tell me, or I'll wring your neck."

"She minds your drinking. What mother would not?"

"Go on."

"Oh, and the way you keep your room; you've got such a flair for beauty, you know."

"Good man, you've told me, now I'll kill her." He spun Alec out, lifted him, dropped him, hitting the ground with him, and went into the kitchen. There were screams. Alec rushed in. Mrs. Rutherford was sucking her hand. Charles was leaning against the dresser, tears falling down his face. He spoke first:

"It is finished. I am going up to bed." He went out on a light swing, and as lightly up the bare attic stairs.

"This is too awful. Mrs. Rutherford, I am going to take the flat below. I may be able to help you. I could come up at a sound. You are all alone here."

"Bless you, dear boy, bless you."

He was just conscious that this was the sort of good deed to be done