

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

William Golding
Darkness
Visible

With an introduction by Philip Hensher

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WILLIAM GOLDING

Darkness Visible

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Introduction by Philip Hensher

Darkness Visible was the novel that gave Golding most trouble in the writing. Although it was published in 1979, Golding's first thoughts about it are in his notebooks from 1955, as John Carey's admirable biography records. It has two strands, which hardly touch each other in the finished work: the mystic progress of Matty from fire to fire, and the monstrous descent of the twins Toni and Sophy. Although they form a compelling unity in the final work, it perhaps took the experiences of disaster and destruction in the 1970s finally to bring these two disparate ideas together. It was the one book that Golding would never speak about; it is, in my view, his most powerful achievement.

The late 1970s and early 1980s was an exceptional period in the English novel. The advent of high fantasy, the breakdown and spread of wild genre fiction, and the rise of burning questions about the state of what might have seemed a society in terminal collapse created an extraordinary series of novels in England. A. S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* and Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Power* were, in very different ways, trying to make sense of the experience of the century, and of the nation. *Darkness Visible*, published in 1979 at the end of a long period of murder and terrorism – the Alcala case, the IRA's shift of its campaign to the mainland, the Red Army Faction in Germany and many other national and transnational groups – tries to make sense of the terrifying breakdown of society, and settles, with unforgettable power, for a rendering of that breakdown.

Matty emerges from a fire through which no child should be able to walk. What is he? But the powers that have created Sophy and Toni are still more atrocious, and only hinted at – there is an appalling scene when their father is asked 'what he does' and tells his daughter, with a breakdown of all decorum, 'You want to know? You do? I masturbate.' The fires that have created Pedigree and his dreadful passions, reaching, unknowingly, for some kind of redemption, remain mysterious. The two strands of the novel barely touch. Towards the end of the novel, Matty finds Sophy's ring, but to his horror he is only 'the odd-job man . . . his awful face'. Fido, who works in the same school, 'appeared never to have seen or heard of him'. Like Zadie Smith's recent, magnificent *NW*, the formal separation of the narrative episodes render, in novelistic terms, the breakdown, in connection and sense, of society.

The immediate question for the reader is 'What is Matty?' But at the end, we find ourselves asking what Sophy is, and what Toni. Matty's surface is repulsive and shocking, but he, too, wants to find out what he is – is he an angel? Who does he speak to? Sophy and Toni's surfaces are anything but shocking; they are beautiful, and their monstrosity goes unchecked and unexamined because of it. Society regards their beauty as alluring, and forgives it anything, until it is too late for forgiveness. 'Beautiful young ladies', Goodchild says, 'are not generally considered to stand in need of a deep understanding of transcendental philosophy on the grounds that they exemplify in themselves all the

pure, the beautiful and the good.’ Society gazes at their beauty like Pedigree looking at the beauty of the small boys, not interested in what lies beneath – and the author of *Lord of the Flies* knew very well what could lie within even quite small boys. Society stands in the novel, happy to have its arms ‘full of the plastic roses on which it had not been thought necessary to imitate the thorns’. The twins, however, know what they are, and what is in their own minds: when one of them looks deep into the blackness, even just an ink stain of no particular shape, she destroys a party – ‘that dreadful screaming and screaming!’

In a suggestive passage, Sophy ridicules the shop manager who remarks ‘It’s quite a coincidence, isn’t it?’ when the date comes to 7/7/77. Those four numbers – ‘you could see them coming, and wave goodbye to them! It was the system.’ Similarly, the goodness and wickedness, the encounters between the utterly unlike – Sophy and Fido, Matty and Harry Bummer, Pedigree and the children – look like the product of chance, but are in reality unavoidable. You can see them coming, and it is the system. Where does the fate that determines the outcome descend from? That is a question Matty asks himself, as the fire organizes itself around him into a shape of flame.

Darkness Visible, as John Carey rightly remarks, sounds preposterous in summary, but, experienced in full, is astoundingly compelling. The most extreme and bizarre of its events become plausible through the solidity of Golding’s imagining. It may not be very likely that a Sophy would experience a spontaneous orgasm through knifing her sexual partner, but the physical sensations of the flesh under the knife, and her bodily shudderings, are so powerfully conveyed that the novel has its way with us. It has an extraordinary rhythm; huge events like Toni departing for Afghanistan and being imprisoned for drug offences are despatched in a sentence or two. The writing has a hallucinatory, incantatory force which can approach Gertrude Stein: ‘Not understood, only one thing understood, the great slaughter he had made between the two of them, through what had not existed, oh no, could never have existed and where there was severance, goodbye and good riddance, cruel and contemptuous act of will.’ At the centre, there is the most fragile of human encounters: a man who has come through fire meets for a second two girls whose beauty wants only to destroy, and afterwards they veer away again, to death and exile. It is the most powerful, and strangest, of all William Golding’s novels, and one of the great masterpieces of the twentieth-century English novel.

Part One

Matty

Chapter One

There was an area east of the Isle of Dogs in London which was an unusual mixture even for the surroundings. Among the walled-off rectangles of water, the warehouses, railway lines and travelling cranes, were two streets of mean houses with two pubs and two shops among them. The bulks of tram steamers hung over the houses where there had been as many languages spoken as families that lived there. But just now not much was being said, for the whole area had been evacuated officially and even a ship that was hit and set on fire had few spectators near it. There was a kind of tent in the sky over London, which was composed of the faint white beams of searchlights, with barrage balloons dotted here and there. The barrage balloons were all that the searchlights discovered in the sky, and the bombs came down, it seemed, mysteriously out of emptiness. They fell in or round the great fire.

The men at the edge of the fire could only watch it burn, out of control. The water mains were broken and the only hindrance in the way of the fire was the occurrence of firebreaks here and there where fires had consumed everything on other nights.

Somewhere on the northern edge of the great fire a group of men stood by their wrecked machine and stared into what, even to men of their experience, was a new sight. Under the tent of searchlights a structure had built itself up in the air. It was less sharply defined than the beams of light but it was far brighter. It was a glare, a burning bush through or beyond which the thin beams were sketched more faintly. The limits of this bush were clouds of tenuous smoke that were lit from below until they too seemed made of fire. The heart of the bush, where the little streets had been, was of a more lamby colour. It shivered constantly but with an occasional diminution or augmentation of its brightness as walls collapsed or roofs caved in. Through it all—the roar of the fire, the drone of the departing bombers, the crash of collapse—there was now and then the punctuating explosion of a delayed-action bomb going off among the rubble, sometimes casting a kind of blink over the mess and sometimes muffled by debris as to make nothing but noise.

The men who stood by their wrecked machine at the root of one northern road that ran south into the blaze had about them the anonymity of uniform silence and motionlessness. Some twenty yards behind them and to their left was the crater of the bomb that had cut the local water supply and smashed their machine into the bargain. A fountain still played in the crater but diminishingly and the long fragment of bomb-casing that had divided a rear wheel lay by their machine, nearly cool enough to touch. But the men ignored it as they were ignoring many small occurrences—the casing, the fountain, some fantasies of wreckage—that would have gathered a crowd in peace time. They were staring straight down the road into the bush, the furnace. They had positioned themselves clear

walls and where nothing but a bomb could fall on them. That, oddly enough, was the least of the dangers of their job and one almost to be discounted among the falling buildings, trapping cellars, the secondary explosions of gas and fuel, the poisonous stinks from a dozen sources. Though this was early in the war they were experienced. One of them knew what it was like to be trapped by one bomb and freed by another. He viewed them now with a kind of neutrality as if they were forces of nature like meteors it might be, that happened to strike thickly hereabouts at certain seasons. Some of the crew were wartime amateurs. One was a musician and now his ear was finely educated in the perception and interpretation of bomb noises. The one that had burst the mains and wrecked the machine had found him narrowly but sufficiently sheltered and he had not even ducked. Like the rest of the crew he had been more interested in the next one of the stick, which had struck further down the road, between them and the fire, and lay there now at the bottom of its hole, either a dud or a delayed action. He stood on the undamaged side of the machine, staring like the others down the road. He was muttering "I'm not happy. No. Honestly chaps, I'm not happy."

Indeed, none of the chaps was happy, not even their leader whose lips were set so firmly together. For by some kind of transference of effort from them, or by a localized muscular effort, the front of his chin trembled. His crew were not unsympathetic. The other amateur, a bookseller who stood at the musician's side and who could never put on his wartime uniform without a feeling of incredulity, could assess the mathematical chances of his present survival. He had watched a wall six storeys high fall on him all in one piece and had stood, unable to move and wondering why he was still alive. He found the brick surround of a window on the fourth storey had fitted round him neatly. Like the others he had got beyond saying how scared he was. They were all in a state of settled dread, in which tomorrow's weather, tonight's Enemy's Intention, the next hour's qualified safety or hideous danger were what ruled life. Their leader carried out within limits the orders that were sent him but was relieved even to tears and shudderings when the telephoned weather forecast indicated that a raid was impossible.

So there they were, listening to the drone of the departing bombers, estimable men who were beginning to feel that though everything was indescribably awful they would live for another day. They stared together down the shuddering street and the bookseller, who suffered from a romantic view of the classical world, was thinking that the dock area would look like Pompeii; but where Pompeii had been blinded by dust here there was if anything too much clarity, too much shameful, inhuman light where the street ended. Tomorrow all might be dark, dreary, dirty, broken walls, blind windows; but just now there was so much light that the very stones seemed semi-precious, a version of the infernal city. Beyond the semi-precious stones, there, where the heart of the fire was shivering rather than beating, all material objects, walls, cranes, masts, even the road itself merged into the devastating light as if in that direction the very substance of the world with all the least combustibles of its materials was melting and burning. The bookseller found himself thinking that after the war there ever was an after the war they would have to reduce the admission fee to the ruins of Pompeii since so many countries would have their own brand-new exhibitions of the broken business of living

There was an episode of roaring, audible through the other noises. A red curtain of flame fluttered near the white heart of the fire and was consumed by it. Somewhere a tank of something had exploded or a coal cellar had just distilled out its own coal gas, invaded a closed room, mixed with air, reached flashpoint—That was it, thought the bookseller knowledgeably, and now safe enough to be proud of his knowledge. How strange that is, he thought, after the war I shall have time—

He looked round quickly for wood; and there it was, a bit of lath from a roof and lying close by his foot so he bent, picked it up and threw it away. As he straightened up he saw how intently the musician was attending to the fire with eyes now rather than ears and beginning to mutter again.

“I’m not happy. No, I’m not happy—”

“What is it old chap?”

The rest of the crew were also staring more earnestly into the fire. All eyes were aimed, mouths drawn in. The bookseller swung round to look where the others were looking.

The white fire, becoming pale pink, then blood-coloured then pink again where it caught smoke clouds seemed the same as if it were the permanent nature of this place. The men continued to stare.

At the end of the street or where now, humanly speaking, the street was no longer part of the habitable world—at that point where the world had become an open stove—at a point where odd bits of brightness condensed to form a lamp-post still standing, a pillar box, some eccentrically shaped rubble—right there, where the flinty street was turned into light, something moved. The bookseller looked away, rubbed his eyes, then looked again. He knew most of the counterfeits, the objects that seem endowed with life in a fire: the boxes or papers stirred into movement by localized gusts of wind, the heat-induced contractions and expansions of material that can mimic muscular movement, the sack moved by rats or cats or dogs or half-burnt birds. At once and violently, he hoped for rats but would have settled for a dog. He turned round again to get his back between himself and what he was sure he had not seen.

It was a remarkable circumstance that their captain was the last to look. He had turned from the fire and was contemplating his wrecked machine with the kind of feeling that kept his chin still. The other men drew his eyes to them by not meaning to. They turned away from the fire far too casually. Where there had been a whole set of eyes, a battery of them staring into the melted end of the world, the battery now contemplated the uninteresting ruins from a previous fire in the other direction and the failing jet of water in the crater. It was a sheer piece of heightened awareness, a sense sharpened by dread that made the captain look at once not where they were looking but where they were not.

Two-thirds of the way down the street, part of a wall collapsed and spilt rubbish across the pavement so that some pieces went bowling across the road. One piece struck, of all things, a dustbin left standing on the other side and a metallic clang came from it.

“Good God!”

Then the others turned back with him.

The drone of the bombers was dying away. The five-mile-high tent of chalky lights had disappeared, been struck all at once, but the light of the great fire was bright as ever, brighter perhaps

Now the pink aura of it had spread. Saffron and ochre turned to blood-colour. The shivering of the white heart of the fire had quickened beyond the capacity of the eye to analyse it into an outrageous glare. High above the glare and visible now for the first time between two pillars of lighted smoke was the steely and untouched round of the full moon—the lover’s, hunter’s, poet’s moon; and now—an ancient and severe goddess credited with a new function and a new title—the bomber’s moon. She was Artemis of the bombers, more pitiless than ever before.

The bookseller contributed rashly.

“There’s the moon—”

The captain rebuked him savagely.

“Where did you think it would be? Up north? Haven’t any of you got eyes? Do I have to notice everything for everybody? Look there!”

What had seemed impossible and therefore unreal was now a fact and clear to them all. A figure had condensed out of the shuddering backdrop of the glare. It moved in the geometrical centre of the road which now appeared longer and wider than before. Because if it was the same size as before, then the figure was impossibly small—impossibly tiny, since children had been the first to be evacuated from that whole area; and in the mean and smashed streets there had been so much fire there was nowhere for a family to live. Nor do small children walk out of a fire that is melting lead and distorting iron.

“Well! What are you waiting for?”

No one said anything.

“You two! Get him!”

The bookseller and the musician started forward. Half-way down the street the delayed-action bomb went off under a warehouse on the right-hand side. Its savage punctuation heaved the pavement across the road and the wall above it jerked, then collapsed into a new crater. Its instantaneity was dreadful and the two men came staggering back. Behind them the whole length of the street was hidden by dust and smoke.

The captain snarled.

“Oh—Christ!”

He ran forward himself, the others at his shoulder, and did not stop until he was where the air cleared and the heat from the fire became a sudden violent attack on the skin.

The figure was a child, drawing nearer. As they picked their way past the new crater they saw him plain. He was naked and the miles of light lit him variously. A child’s stride is quick; but this child walked down the very middle of the street with a kind of ritual gait that in an adult would have been called solemn. The captain could see—and now, with a positive explosion of human feeling—why that particular child walked as it did. The brightness on his left side was not an effect of light. The burn was even more visible on the left side of his head. All his hair was gone on that side, and on the other shrivelled to peppercorn dots. His face was so swollen he could only glimpse where he was going through the merest of slits. It was perhaps something animal that was directing him away from the

place where the world was being consumed. Perhaps it was luck, good or bad, that kept him pacing the one direction where he might survive.

Now they were so near that the child was not an impossibility but a scrap of their own human flesh they became desperate to save and serve him. Their captain, indifferent now to the slight dangers that might ambush them in the street, was the first to reach the child and handle him with trained and devoted care. One of the men raced in the other direction without being told, to the phone a hundred yards away. The other men formed a tight and unprofessional knot round the child as he was carried as if to be close was to give him something. The captain was a bit breathless but full of compassion and happiness. He busied himself with the kind of first aid for burns which is reversed by the medicine profession every year or so. In a very few minutes an ambulance came, the team was told all the nothing that was known about the child and he was driven away, the ambulance bell ringing, perhaps unnecessarily.

It was the dimmest of the firemen who expressed the general feeling.

“Poor little bugger.”

All at once they were talking to each other enthusiastically about how incredible it was, a kid walking out of the fire like that, stark naked, burnt but going on, steadily making his way towards a glimpse of safety—

“Plucky little bugger! Didn’t lose his head.”

“They do wonders now. Look at them pilots. Getting faces as good as new they say.”

“He might be a bit shrivelled like, down the left side.”

“Thank Christ my kids are out of it. And the missus.”

The bookseller was saying nothing and seemed to be staring at nothing. There was a memory flickering on the edge of his mind and he could not get it further in where it could be examined; and he was also remembering the moment when the child had appeared, seeming to his weak sight to be perhaps not entirely there—to be in a state of, as it were, indecision as to whether he was a human shape or merely a bit of flickering brightness. Was it the Apocalypse? Nothing could be more apocalyptic than a world so ferociously consumed. But he could not quite remember. Then he was deflected by the sounds of the musician being sick.

The captain had turned back to the fire. He looked down a street that in the event had proved neither as hot as they supposed nor as dangerous. He jerked his attention away from it and back to the machine.

“Well. What are we waiting for? They’ll want to tow us if we can be towed. Mason, try the steering and see if you can free it. Wells, come out of that trance! Start tracing the brake lines—quickly now and cheerfully!”

Under the machine, Wells swore horribly and profoundly.

“Now then Wells, you’re paid to get your hands dirty.”

“The oil went straight into me fucking mouth!”

A burst of sniggering—

“Teach you to keep your mouth shut!”

“What’s it taste like, Wellsy?”

“Can’t be worse’n the canteen!”

“All right lads, turn it up. We don’t want the breakdowns to do our work for us do we?”

The captain turned back to the fire. He looked at the new crater half-way down the road. He saw quite clearly in a kind of interior geometry of this and this and that and that how things had been and how they might have been and where he would have been running if he had set off at the very first moment he had realized the child was there and needed help. He would have run straight into the space where now there was nothing but a hole. He would have run into the explosion and he would have disappeared.

There was the clatter of a part falling under the machine and another burst of cursing from Wellsy. The captain hardly heard it. The skin had seemed to freeze on his body. He shut his eyes and for some sort of time saw that he was dead or felt that he was dead; and then that he was alive, only the screen that conceals the workings of things had shuddered and moved. Then his eyes were open again and the night was as normal as that kind of night could ever be, and he knew what the frost was on his skin and he thought to himself with the cunning immediacy that was part of his nature that it just didn’t do to examine such things too closely and anyway the little chap would have suffered just as much anyway—

He turned back to his own smashed machine and saw that the tow was coming. He came, silent and filled in an extraordinary way with grief, not for the maimed child but for himself, a maimed creature whose mind had touched for once on the nature of things. His chin was quivering again.

The child was called number seven. After the kind of holding operations that had to be performed while he recovered from shock, number seven was the first present he got from the world outside him. There was some small doubt as to whether his silence was organic or not. He could hear, even with the ghastly fragment of ear on his left side, and the swelling round his eyes soon subsided so that he could see well enough. He was contrived a position in which he did not have to be doped very much and spent days and weeks and months in it. But, though the burnt area reckoned as a percentage of the whole made it improbable, he did in fact survive, to begin a long progress through hospitals of one sort of expertise or another. By the time he had come to speak his occasional word of English it was impossible to discover whether it was his native tongue or whether he had picked up the word in hospital. He had no background but the fire. He was known in successive wards as baby, darling, poppet, sweetie and boo-boo. He was at last given a name because a matron put her foot down, a thing of power. She spoke roundly.

“We can’t go on calling the child number seven behind his back. It’s most improper and injurious.”

She was an old-fashioned matron who used that kind of word. She was effective.

The appropriate office was working through the alphabet in rotation, since the boy was only one among the wreckage of that childhood. The office had just presented a baby girl with the name

“Venables”. The young wit who was given the job of using “w” suggested “Windup”, her chief having displayed less than perfect courage in an air raid. She had found she could get married and still keep her job and she was feeling secure and superior. Her chief winced at the name and drew his pen through it, foreseeing a coven of children all shouting “Windup! Windup!” He made his own substitution, though when he looked at what he had written it seemed not quite right and he altered it. There was no obvious reason for doing so. The name had first jumped into his mind with the curious effect of having come out of empty air and of being temporary, a thing to be noticed because you were lucky to be in the place where it had landed. It was as if you had sat silently in the bushes and—My!—there settled in front of you the rarest of butterflies or birds which had stayed long enough to be seen and had then gone off with an air of going for ever, sideways, it might be.

The boy’s current hospital accepted “Septimus” as a middle name but made no use of it. Perhaps it had overtones of “Septic”. His first name, Matthew, became “Matty”; and as “Seven” was still written on all the relevant papers, no one used his surname. But then, for years of his childhood, all visitors had to peer among sheets and bandages and mechanisms to see any part of him but the right side of his face.

As the various aids to recovery were removed from him and he began to speak more, it was observed that his relationship to language was unusual. He mouthed. Not only did he clench his fists with the effort of speaking, he squinted. It seemed that a word was an object, a material object, round and smooth sometimes, a golf ball of a thing that he could just about manage to get through his mouth though it deformed his face in the passage. Some words were jagged and these became awful passages of pain and struggle that made the other children laugh. After his turban came off in the period between the primary work and what cosmetic work was possible, the ruin of his half-raw skull and his blasted ear was most unappealing. Patience and silence seemed the greater part of his nature. Bit by bit he learnt to control the anguish of speaking until the golfballs and jagged stones, the toads and jewels passed through his mouth with not much more than the normal effort.

In the illimitable spaces of childhood, time was his only dimension. Adults who tried to establish contact with him were never successful with words. He accepted words and seemed to think long about them and sometimes he answered them. But it was a dissociated traffic out there. He was, at that time, to be approached by a method beyond conceptual artifice. Thus the nurse who squeezed him with her arms, knowing just where his body could bear the contact, found the relatively good, relatively undamaged side of his head burrowing against her breast in wordless communication. Being, it seemed, touched being. It was natural that this girl should discount what further thing she had noticed since it was too delicate, even too private a perception to be called awareness of a symptom. She knew herself not to be particularly intelligent or clever. So she allowed the awareness to float in the back of her mind and paid no particular attention to it, only accepting that she, more than the other nurses, now knew the Matty-ness of Matty. She found herself saying things to herself that would mean one thing to others but something quite different inside her.

“There’s Matty thinking I can be in two places at once!”

Then she would find what she had noticed was blown away or rendered massively inaccurate by the words her mind had accidentally wrapped round it. But it happened too often and it settled into a pattern of belief that she accepted as a kind of definition of his nature.

Matty believes I'm two people.

Then later and even more privately—*Matty believes I bring someone with me.*

There was a delicacy in her mind that knew this belief to be unique to Matty and not to be discussed. Perhaps she felt a certain delicacy about the nature of her own mind in its surely unusual working. But she felt nearer this child than the others and she showed it in a way that the other children resented because she was pretty. She called him, "My Matty". When she did that it was the first time since his emergence from the furnace that he was observed to employ the complete musculature of his face in a communicative way. The rearrangement was slow and painful as if the little mechanism was in need of oil, but there was no doubt about the end-product. Matty was smiling. But his mouth remained lopsided and closed all the time, which made the smile unchildlike and seemed to concede that though smiling was possible, it was not a common practice and a wicked one if indulged in often.

Matty moved on. He suffered this in animal patience, seeing this was what was going to happen and there was no escaping it. The pretty nurse hardened her heart and told him how happy he would be. She was accustomed to partings. She was young enough to consider him lucky to be alive. Besides, she fell in love and that deflected her attention. Matty went one way and she went the other. Presently the delicate perceptions ceased, for she did not or could not use them on her own children. She was happy and forgot Matty for years until middle age overwhelmed her.

Matty was now fixed in a different position so that skin could be transferred from one part of his body to the other. It was a condition of some absurdity and the other children in the burns hospital, none of whom had much to laugh at, enjoyed his plight. Grown-ups came to entertain and console him but no woman held his undamaged side to her breast. She would have had to contort herself to do so. His smile went unused. There was rather more of him visible now to the casual visitor; and these, hurrying to their own unfortunates, were repelled by the sordid misery in which Matty passed his days and they flashed sideways at him an uneasy smile which he interpreted with absolute precision. When at last he was cut loose, and having been as much as possible repaired was set on his feet, his smile seemed to have gone for good. The blasting of his left side had given him some contraction of the sinews that growth had not yet redressed, so he limped. He had hair on the right side of his skull but the left side was a ghastly white, which seemed so unchildlike it was an invitation by its appearance to baldness to discount his childishness and treat him as an adult who was being stubborn or just silly. Organizations ground on round him for his benefit but there was little more that could be done with him. His background was probed and probed without result. For all that the most painstaking inquiries could find, he might have been born from the sheer agony of a burning city.

Chapter Two

Matty limped from hospital into his first school; and from that into a school maintained by two of the biggest trade unions in Britain. Here, in the Foundlings School at Greenfield, he met Mr Pedigree. They could be said to have converged on each other, though Matty was going up and Mr Pedigree was going down.

Mr Pedigree had declined from teaching at an ancient choir school through two less historic foundations and a considerable period which he accounted for by foreign travel. He was a slight and springy man with hair of faded gold and a face that was thin and lined and anxious when it was not vexed or arch. He joined the staff at Foundlings two years before Matty got there. The Second World War had, so to speak, disinfected Mr Pedigree's past. He lived therefore, unwisely, in a top room at the school. He was no longer "Sebastian", even to himself. "Mr Pedigree", a figure of the unimportant schoolmaster, was what he had become, and grey was beginning to appear streakily in his faded hair. He was a snob about boys and found the orphans generally repellent with some notable exceptions. There was no use found here for his Classics. He taught elementary geography mixed with elementary history and elementary English Grammar thrown in. For two years he had found it easy to resist his *times* and he lived in a fantasy. He pretended to himself that he was always the owner of two boys, one, an example of pure beauty, the other, an earthy little man! His personal charge was a large class into which boys who had given some evidence of having reached their educational ceiling were thrust there to mark time until they could leave. The headmaster considered that with this lot he could do little harm. This was probably true except in the case of the boy with whom Mr Pedigree had had a "spiritual relationship". For there appeared, as Mr Pedigree grew older, an extraordinary kink in the relationship beyond what a heterosexual person might think extraordinary. Mr Pedigree would lift the child on to a pedestal and he would make himself all in all to him, oh yes, all in all; and the little boy would find life wonderful and all things would be made easy for him. Then, as suddenly, Mr Pedigree would turn cold and indifferent. If he spoke to the child it would be sharply; and since it was a spiritual relationship, with not even the touch of a finger on a vellum cheek, what had the child, or anyone else, to complain of?

All this was subject to rhythm. Mr Pedigree had begun to understand that rhythm. It was when the beauty of the child began to consume him, obsess him, madden him—bit by bit, madden him! During that period, if he were not very careful he would find himself taking risks beyond what was common sense. He would find himself driven—the words bubbling over his lips before some other person, the master perhaps—driven to say what an extraordinarily attractive child young Jameson was, one real

had to consider him a beauty!

Matty did not immediately go into Mr Pedigree's group. He was given a chance to exhibit his intellectual potential. But hospitals had taken too much of his time as the fire had taken any glory there might have been about him. His limp, his two-toned face and ghastly ear hardly concealed his black hair swept over the baldness of his skull made him a natural butt. This may have contributed to his development of a faculty—to give it a name—which was to increase throughout his life. He could disappear. He could become unnoticeable like an animal. He had other qualities too. He drew badly but with passion. Leaning over the page, encircling it with an arm as his black hair swung free, he would sink into what he drew as if about to dive into a sea. His outlines were always without a break and he filled each space with colour of absolute evenness and neatness. It was a deed. Also he would listen devotedly to anything told him. He knew large portions of the Old Testament and small portions of the New Testament by heart. His hands and feet were too big for his thin arms and legs. His sexuality—and this was brilliantly perceived by his fellows—was in direct proportion to his unattractiveness. He was high-minded; and his fellows considered this to be his darkest sin.

The Convent School of Saint Cecilia was a hundred yards down the road and the grounds of the two establishments were separated by a narrow lane. On the girls' side was a high wall with spikes on top. Mr Pedigree could see the wall and the spikes from his top room and it brought back memories from which he flinched. The boys could see it too. From the landing and the great window three storeys up outside Mr Pedigree's room you could look over the wall and see the blue dresses and white, summer socks of the girls. There was a place where the girls could get up and peer through the spikes if they were naughty enough or sexy enough, which of course was the same thing. There was a tree on the boys' side that could be climbed and the young creatures could see each other face to face with only the lane between them.

Two of the boys who had taken particularly against Matty's high-mindedness, mostly because they were of exceptional low-mindedness, set out with the directness and simplicity of genius to play on all his weaknesses at once.

"We been talking to the girls, see?"

And later—"They've been talking about you."

And later—"Angy's sweet on you, Matty, she keeps asking about you."

Then—"Angy said she wouldn't mind a walk in the woods with you!"

Matty limped away from them.

Next day they gave him a note, which in a confusion of ideas from the adult world they had printed and then signed. Matty inspected the note, torn from a rough workbook like the one he had in his own hand. The golf balls emerged from his mouth.

"Why didn't she write it? I don't believe it. You're having me on!"

"But look, it's got her name there, 'Angy'. I expect she thought you wouldn't believe her unless she signed it."

Shrieks of laughter.

If Matty had known anything at all about girls of school age he would have seen that they would never send a note on such paper. It was an early example of sexual differentiation. A boy, unless deflected, would apply for a job on the back of an old envelope. But if girls got hold of stationery the results were liable to be frightful, purple, scented and strewn with flowers. Nevertheless, Matty believed in the note torn from the corner of a rough workbook.

“She’s there now Matty! She wants you to show her something—”

Matty stared from one to the other under lowered eyebrows.

The undamaged side of his face flushed red. He said nothing.

“Honestly Matty!”

They crowded in on him. He was taller than they were but stooped by his condition. He laboured words and got them out.

“What does she want?”

The three heads came as close now as they could get. Almost at once, the redness sank away in his face so that the spots of his adolescence seemed even more definite against their white background. He breathed his answer.

“She didn’t!”

“Honestly!”

He looked at each face in turn, his mouth left open. It was a strange look. So a man swimming the deep ocean might lift his head and stare before him in search of land. There was a trace of light in the look, hope struggling with a natural pessimism.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly!”

“Cross your heart?”

Once more shrieks of laughter.

“Cross my heart!”

Again that aimed, imploring look, movement of a hand that tried to brush aside banter.

“Here—”

He thrust his books into their hands and limped quickly away. They held on to each other, laughing like apes. They broke apart, clamorously collected their fellows. The whole troupe clattered up the stone stairs, up, up, one, two, three storeys to the landing by the great window. They pushed and shoved against the great bar that ran from one end to the other at boy-height, and held the verticals that were less than a boy’s width apart. Fifty yards away and fifty feet down a boy limped quickly towards the forbidden tree. Two little patches of blue did indeed show above the wall opposite it on the girls’ side. The boys along the window were so entranced they never heard the door open behind them.

“What on earth is all this? What are you men doing up here?”

Mr Pedigree stood in the doorway, nervously holding the doorknob and looking from one end of the row of laughing boys to the other. But none of them minded old Pedders.

“I said what’s all this? Are there any of my men here? You, the lad with the lovely locks—
Shenstone!”

“It’s Windy, sir. He’s climbing the tree!”

“Windy? Who’s Windy?”

“There he is, sir, you can see him, he’s just getting up!”

“Oh you are a feeble, nasty, inky lot. I’m surprised at you, Shenstone, a fine upstanding lad like yo—
—”

Scandalized, gleeful laughter—

“Sir, sir, he’s doing it now—”

There was a kind of confusion among the leaves of a lower bough. The blue, sexy patch disappeared from the wall as if they had been knocked off by shot. Mr Pedigree clapped his hands and shouted but none of the boys paid any attention. They went cascading down the stairs, and left him there, flushed and more agitated by what was behind him than in front. He looked after them down the well of the stairs. He spoke sideways into the room and held the door open.

“Very well my dear. You can run along now.”

The boy came out, smiling confidently up at Mr Pedigree. He went away down the stairs, assured of his own worth.

When he had gone Mr Pedigree stared irritably at the distant boy who was coming unhandily down the tree. Mr Pedigree had no intention of interfering—none whatever.

The headmaster heard from the Mother Superior. He sent for the boy who came limping and spotted and anxious. The headmaster was sorry for him and tried to make things easy. The episode had been described by the Mother Superior in such words as hid it behind a veil which the headmaster knew he must lift; and yet he viewed the lifting of a veil with some apprehension. He knew that lifting any veil was liable to uncover more than the investigator bargained for.

“Sit down there, will you? Now. You see we’ve had this complaint about you. About what you did when you climbed that tree. Young men—boys—will climb trees, that’s not what I’m asking you about—but there may be considerable consequences coming from your action, you know. Now. What did you do?”

The unmended side of the boy’s face became one deep, red flush. He looked down past his knees.

“You see, my dear boy, there’s nothing to be— frightened of. People sometimes can’t help themselves. If they are sick then we help them or find people who can help them. Only we must know!”

The boy neither spoke nor moved.

“Show me, then, if that’s easier for you.”

Matty glanced up under his eyebrows then down again. He was breathing quickly as if he had been running. He took his right hand across and took hold of the long lock dangling by his left ear. With a gesture of absolute abandon he ripped the hair across and exposed the white obscenity of his scalp.

It was perhaps fortunate that Matty did not see how the headmaster shut his eyes involuntarily, the

forced them open and kept them open without any change of expression in his face. They both said nothing for a while until the headmaster nodded understandingly and Matty, relaxing, brought the hair back across his head.

“I see,” said the headmaster. “Yes. I see.”

Then for a while he said nothing but thought of phrases that might go in his letter to the Mother Superior.

“Well,” he said at last, “don’t do it again. Go along now. And please remember you are only allowed to climb the big beech and even then, up to the second bough. Right?”

“Sir.”

After that, the headmaster sent round the various masters concerned to find out more about Matty and it was obvious that someone had been too kind—or perhaps unkind—and he was in a stream that was too much for him. The boy would never pass an examination and it was silly to make him try.

It was for this reason, therefore, that one morning when Mr Pedigree was dozing in front of his class as they drew a map, that Matty came clumping in, books under his arm, and stopped in front of the master’s desk.

“Good God boy. Where have you come from?”

It seemed the question was too quick or too profound for Matty. He said nothing.

“What d’you want, boy? Say quickly!”

“I was told, sir. C.3, sir. The room at the end of the corridor.”

Mr Pedigree gave a determined grin and wrenched his gaze away from the boy’s ear.

“Ah. Our simian friend swinging from branch to branch. Don’t laugh, you men. Well. Are you house-trained? Reliable? Brilliant intellect?”

Quivering with distaste, Mr Pedigree looked round the room. It was his custom and entertainment to arrange the boys in order of beauty so that the most beautiful occupied the front row. There was no doubt at all in his mind as to where the new boy should go. At the back of the room on his right, a tall cupboard left enough space for a desk that would be partly concealed by it. The cupboard could not be shifted flush against the wall without blocking a window.

“Brown, you exquisite creature, I shall want you out of there. You can sit in Barlow’s place. Yes, I know he’ll be back; and then we shall have to do some more arranging, shan’t we? Anyway Brown, you’re an imp, aren’t you? I know what you get up to at the back there when you think I can’t see you. Stop laughing, you men. I won’t have you laughing. Now then, what’s your name, Wandgrave. Can you keep order, mm? Go and sit in that corner and just keep quiet and tell me if they don’t behave, mm? Go along!”

He waited, grinning with determined cheerfulness until the boy was seated and partly out of sight. Mr Pedigree found that he could divide the boy by the line of the cupboard so that only the more-or-less undamaged side of his face was visible. He sighed with relief. Such things were important.

“All right everybody. Just get on. Show him what we’re doing, Jones.”

He relaxed, dallying now with his agreeable game, for Matty’s unexpected arrival gave him a

excuse for another round of it.

“Pascoe.”

“Sir?”

There was no denying that Pascoe was losing what had never been a very high degree of attractiveness. Mr Pedigree wondered in passing what he had ever seen in the boy. It was fortunate that the affair had gone very little way.

“Pascoe, dear friend, I wonder if you would mind changing places now with Jameson so that when Barlow comes back—you don’t mind being just a *little* further from the seat of judgement? Now, what about you, Henderson. Eh?”

Henderson was in the middle of the front row. He was a child of bland and lyric beauty.

“You don’t mind being close to the seat of judgement, do you, Henderson?”

Henderson looked up, smiling, proudly and adoringly. His star was in Mr Pedigree’s ascendant. Moved inexpressibly, Mr Pedigree came out of his desk and stood by Henderson, his fingers in the boy’s hair.

“Ghastly, dear friend, when did you last wash all this yellow stuff, eh?”

Henderson looked up, still smiling and secure, understanding that the question was not a question of communication, brightness, glory. Mr Pedigree dropped his hand and squeezed the boy’s shoulder, then went back to his desk. To his surprise the boy behind the cupboard had his hand up.

“What is it? What is it?”

“Sir. That boy there. He passed a note to him, sir. That’s not allowed is it sir?”

For a while Mr Pedigree was too astonished to answer. Even the rest of the class were silent until the enormity of what they had heard penetrated to them. Then a faint, increasing boing sound began to rise.

“Stop it you men. Now I said stop it. You, what’s your name. You must have come straight out of the howling wilderness. We have found a cop!”

“Sir you said—”

“Never mind what I said, you *literal* creature! My goodness what a treasure we’ve come across!”

Matty’s mouth had opened and stayed open.

It was odd indeed after that, that Matty should adopt Mr Pedigree. It was a sign of the poverty of his acquaintance that he should begin to dog the man and irritate him, since attention from Matty was the last thing he wanted. In fact, Mr Pedigree was on the slope of his rising curve and had begun to recognize where he was in a way that had not been apparent to him in the long distant days of the classroom. He knew now that points on the curve signalled themselves precisely. As long as he admired beauty in the classroom, no matter how overt his gestures of affection, everything was safe and in order. But there came a point where he began—*had* to begin—to help boys with their prep in his own room, forbidden as it was, dangerous and delirious; and there again the gestures would be innocent for a time—

Just now, in the last month of this term, Henderson had been elevated by nature herself to that pr

eminent beauty. Mr Pedigree himself found it strange that there was such a constant supply of the beauty available, and coming up year after year. The month was strange both for Mr Pedigree and Matty, who dogged him with absolute simplicity. His world was so small and the man was so large. He could not conceive of a whole relationship being based on a joke. He was Mr Pedigree's treasure. Mr Pedigree had said so. Just as some boys spent years in hospital and some did not, so he saw that some boys did their bounden duty and reported on their fellows and some did not, even though the result was desperate unpopularity.

Matty's fellows might have forgiven or forgotten his appearance. But his literal-mindedness, his high-mindedness and ignorance of the code ensured that he became an outcast. But baldy Windup yearned for friendship, for he did not only dog Mr Pedigree. He dogged the boy Henderson too. The boy would jeer and Mr Pedigree would—

“Not now, Wheelwright, not now!”

Quite suddenly Henderson's visits to Mr Pedigree's room became more frequent and unconcealed and the language in which Mr Pedigree addressed the class became more extravagant. It was the top of the curve. He spent most of one lesson in a digression, a lecture on bad habits. There were very, very many of them and they were difficult to avoid. In fact—and they would find this out as they grew older—some of them were impossible to avoid. It was important however to distinguish between those habits which were thought to be bad and those which were actually bad. Why, in ancient Greece women were thought to be inferior creatures, now don't laugh you men, I know what you're thinking you nasty lot, and love reached its highest expression between men and between men and boys. Sometimes a man would find himself thinking more and more about some handsome little fellow. Suppose for example, the man was a great athlete, as it might be nowadays, a cricketer, a test player—

The handsome little fellows waited to find out what the moral of this discourse was and how it related to bad habits but they never did. Mr Pedigree's voice trailed off and the whole thing did not so much end as die, with Mr Pedigree looking lost and puzzled.

People find it remarkable when they discover how little one man knows about another. Equally, at the very moment when people are most certain that their actions and thoughts are most hidden in darkness, they often find out to their astonishment and grief how they have been performing in the bright light of day and before an audience. Sometimes the discovery is a blinding and destroying shock. Sometimes it is gentle.

The headmaster asked to see the report books of some boys in Mr Pedigree's class. They sat at a table in the headmaster's study with the green filing-cabinets at their back. Mr Pedigree talked volubly about Blake and Barlow, Crosby and Green and Halliday. The headmaster nodded and turned the reports over.

“I see you haven't brought Henderson's along.”

Mr Pedigree lapsed into frozen silence.

“You know, Pedigree, it's most unwise.”

“What's unwise? What's unwise?”

“Some of us have peculiar difficulties.”

“Difficulties?”

“So don’t give these private lessons in your room. If you want to have boys in your room—”

“Oh but the boy’s welfare!”

“There’s a rule against it, you know. There have been—rumours.”

“Other boys—”

“I don’t know how you intend me to take that. But try not to be so—exclusive.”

Pedigree went quickly, with heat round his ears. He could see clearly how deep the plot was; for as the graph of his cyclic life rose towards its peak he would suspect all men of all things. The headmaster, thought Pedigree—and was half-aware of his own folly—is after Henderson himself! So he set about devising a scheme by which he could circumvent any attempt on the part of the headmaster to get rid of him. He saw clearly that the best thing was a cover story or camouflage. As he wondered and wondered what to do, he first rejected a step as impossible, then as improbable, then as quite dreadful—and at last saw it was a step he would have to take, though the graph was not falling.

He braced himself. When his class was settled he went round them boy by boy; but this time beginning with awful distaste at the back. Deliberately he went to the corner where Matty was half hidden by the cupboard. Matty smiled up at him lopsidedly; and with a positive writhe of anguish Pedigree gave a grin into the space above the boy’s head.

“Oh my goodness me! That’s not a map of the Roman Empire my young friend! That’s a picture of a black cat in a coal cellar in the dark. Here, Jameson, let me have your map. Now do you see Matty Windrap? Oh God. Look I can’t spend time loitering here. I’m not taking prep this evening, so instead of going there you just bring your book and your atlas and the rest of it to my room. You know where that is don’t you? Don’t laugh you men! And if you do particularly well there might be a sticky bun or a slice of cake—oh God—”

Matty’s good side shone upwards like the sun. Pedigree glanced down into his face. He clenched his fist and struck the boy lightly on the shoulder. Then he hurried to the front of the classroom as if he were looking for fresh air.

“Henderson, fair one. I shan’t be able to take you for a lesson this evening. But it’s not necessary is it?”

“Sir?”

“Come here and show me your book.”

“Sir.”

“Now there! You see?”

“Sir—aren’t there going to be any more lessons upstairs, sir?”

Anxiously Mr Pedigree looked into the boy’s face, where now the underlip stuck out.

“Oh God. Look, Ghastly. Listen—”

He put his fingers in the boy’s hair and drew his head nearer.

“Ghastly, my dear. The best of friends must part.”

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