Elizabeth Taylor

Elizabeth Taylor:
A Centenary Celebration

Edited by

N. H. Reeve

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Not so long ago the novels and short stories of Elizabeth Taylor - who was born Elizabeth Coles, in Reading, on July 3rd, 1912 - would scarcely have been mentioned at all in the established narratives of twentieth-century English literature. Her many admirers, including several prominent writers both of her own and subsequent generations, have always regarded her as one of the leading novelists of her time; but this esteem struggled to make any consistent mark on the academic world, or wherever else literary opinions are formed. There have however been some encouraging signs recently of a more serious and systematic engagement with her work, as criticism gradually begins to revalue her period, and the previously unchallenged accounts of it become period pieces themselves. In addition, the biography by Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, drew renewed attention to her in 2009, while Virago Press continue to serve her cause with enthusiasm, keeping her books before the public with regular reissues. Now, for her centenary year – always a convenient moment for stock-taking – the present volume aims to make a double contribution to the ongoing reassessments. It includes several new critical essays on her work and its contexts, and it also includes a substantial number of Taylor's own writings – stories, essays and letters - which her readers are unlikely to have encountered before: writings either never reprinted in her lifetime, or not previously published.

The short stories printed here are mostly early pieces which appeared in various journals, magazines and anthologies in the 1940s, and were not included in Taylor's own subsequent collections. They open intriguing perspectives on her early development as a writer, and some involve experiments in style and tone which she would not revisit. The first of her stories ever to be published, for example, 'For Thine Is The Power', makes use of a hectic semi-modernist staccato quite unlike anything she would go on to write, and its subject matter, a frustrated schoolmistress falsely accusing a doctor of molesting her, ventures some way beyond what would become her normal range. By Taylor's own account, the story had been written some time before the war; it was accepted by George Orwell, the new literary editor of *Tribune*, and published on March 31st, 1944, having been rejected the previous year by Reginald Moore, the editor of *Modern Reading*, apparently for being excessively 'strong meat'.[1]

Another story, ‘Better Not’, was actually the first to have been accepted for publication: it was written in October 1943, and appeared a year later in *The Adelphi*, October-December 1944. John Middleton Murry, who had founded *The Adelphi* in 1922, had become its controlling editor again in 1941 after a hiatus of eleven years, and throughout the war used the journal to promote his strongly pacifist and Communist views, some of which would have chimed with Taylor’s own political beliefs at the time. *The Adelphi* paid 10/6 for ‘Better Not’ – 52p in today’s money (she would receive four times as much, two guineas, from the rather better-funded *Tribune* for ‘For Thine Is The Power’). Eager to capitalise on this first-ever success – she was 31, and had been writing continually since her teens - Taylor quickly sent Murry a second item, an essay on E.M. Forster, like ‘Better Not’ carefully composed to an exact 1,000 word-limit, but this was turned down (see below). There are references to Forster in ‘Better Not’, who was clearly much on Taylor’s mind at the time, although there are few such signs in her later writings. The story itself is one of her earliest to address a specifically wartime situation, the threat posed to a marriage by the husband’s enforced absence: a threat delicately side-stepped here, and treated more directly in her first published novel *At Mrs Lippincote’s*, on which Taylor was then working. Early the following year she had another success with *The Adelphi*, which accepted a second wartime story, ‘It Makes a Change’, written in February 1944 and published in the October-December 1945 issue. This is an altogether gloomier piece, notable for its main character’s vision of ‘the beauty of bomb-wreckage’ and the images of liberty born from destruction, ‘half-painful, half-pleasurable’. The story was squeezed down to another precise word-limit, 1,500 this time, and its fragmented interior monologue is another rare nod on Taylor’s part in the direction of modernism.

Prior to this, in the summer of 1943, she had written three other stories in which one can sense her trying out various kinds and levels of engagement with her imaginative material. The earliest, dating from the end of June, was ‘Ever So Banal’, a comic study of brittle domesticity which seems almost to anticipate the world of Alan Ayckbourn. It failed to find a publisher until the spring of 1946, when it appeared in a short-lived magazine called *The Kite*, again netting her a less than princely 10/6. ‘Mothers’, much more emotionally direct, was written later that summer, and also had to wait, until the end of 1944, to find a home in the almost equally obscure journal *Here Today*.[2] Taylor remembered this years later, when writing for the *Kenyon Review* on the state of the short story in England: ‘I have been glancing through some collections of stories by

different writers during the last three decades, and the names of English magazines to which they acknowledge first publication read like a casualty list. The little reviews were notoriously ephemeral. (There was even one called *Here Today*, which was also gone tomorrow.)'[3] Then in September 1943 she wrote 'A Nice Little Actress', quite different again in manner, sardonic and even faintly vicious; it would be published in a collection called *Modern Short Stories* late in 1944.

Another experiment of a kind, this time occurring after she had become a well-established novelist, was the 1949 story 'After Hours of Suffering'. Apart from being a rare excursion on her part into the first person, it offers an unusually intimate comic glimpse of her own domestic life, as she makes the best of enforced imprisonment in a tone both exasperated and self-satirising. It was published in *Vogue* in July 1949.[4]

The one complete but unpublished story included here is 'The Little Girl', written in 1959. It was sent, as were all her stories of that period, to the *New Yorker*, but was turned down because the plot was thought to be too close to those of several other pieces – few of which are likely to be much remembered today. 'The Little Girl', however, is sufficiently filled with classic Taylorisms to be crying out for rescue from oblivion; for example, the sentence following Mrs Daubeny's ordering bronze kid dancing slippers for her daughter: 'This kind she had worn herself as a child and she could imagine nothing better'.

The last story Taylor completed – too late to be included in her final collection, *The Devastating Boys* – was 'Madame Olga', written while recovering from a mastectomy in the summer of 1972; it addresses with characteristic subtlety the problems of adjusting to an unexpected change of fortune. The dilapidated Kent seaside town was almost certainly based on her reminiscences of recent visits to Hythe to stay with Elizabeth Bowen. 'Madame Olga' was published in America in *McCall's Magazine* in August 1973.

Also included here are two unfinished fragments. The handwritten piece entitled 'The Ghost Story' is undated, but would appear to have been started around the same time (1969-70) as the novel *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, and to have been abandoned in favour of it. References to 'Mrs P' are sprinkled among the notes and jottings in the manuscript. The main character, the struggling young writer Ludovic Myers, occurs in both (in 'The Ghost Story' fragment as Ludovic Dymott-Myers); there is the same South Kensington bed-sit background, and the sentence describing Ludo watching his suit turning over and over in a dry-cleaning machine is reproduced almost word for word at the end of Chapter 3 of *Mrs Palfrey*. The surviving fragment certainly suggests that had 'The Ghost Story' been

continued, it would have explored, as *Mrs Palfrey* does, both the comic and the melancholy aspects of a relationship between a young man and an old lady, in which the man acts out a role for the lady's benefit. In addition, the butler, Silvery, seems like a dry run for Ernie Pounce in Taylor's final, posthumously published novel, *Blaming*.

The other fragment has no title. It is a hand-corrected three-page typescript from the latter part of Taylor's career. The collision between different forms of self-absorption is almost a hallmark of her late writing; the two unnamed characters were clearly destined for a relationship, but all we have are its edgy and tantalising beginnings.

Taylor wrote very few literary or critical essays, and usually only when specifically asked to: a handful of pieces on the art of fiction for various publications, a preface to an anthology entitled *The World of Children*, published by Paul Hamlyn in 1966, and a solitary review (of Elizabeth Bowen's last novel, *Eva Trout*). Of her other surviving essays, the earliest is the piece mentioned above as having been rejected by Middleton Murry at *The Adelphi*, and unpublished until now: 'E. M. Forster as a Poor Liar', signed and dated November 25th, 1943. It is interesting as an early expression of Taylor's hostility towards the intrusively symbolic in fiction, upsetting the reader's trust in the reality of the scene – the trust she praised Bowen above all for so carefully nurturing.

'Setting a Scene' appeared in the *Cornhill* magazine (no. 1045, Autumn 1965). It is one of Taylor's few discussions of her own writing practices, and it warns her readers against the search to which many have been tempted, for exact models for her characters or locations. One notable revelation is that the landscapes of her childhood held little enchantment for her; it seems instead to have been their banal familiarity that so drew and disturbed her imagination.

Her rather wary friendship with Ivy Compton-Burnett has been thoroughly documented in Robert Liddell's *Elizabeth and Ivy*, which includes many of the letters Taylor wrote to Liddell about her visits to Compton-Burnett's flat in Braemar Mansions, South Kensington.[5] Taylor had admired the older woman's novels since before the war, and on writing to Compton-Burnett in praise of *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), was issued the first of many invitations to tea: the nearest equivalent to a London literary salon that Taylor would experience, although she always remained on its fringes rather than at the centre. In 1951 she wrote a short account of Compton-Burnett's work for the July number of *Vogue*, and recast the piece slightly the following year as a lecture at a summer school in Oxford, calling it 'A Novelist and her

Novels'. Compton-Burnett died in August 1969, and while Taylor did not attend her cremation in Putney, she did go to the 'Memorial meeting' some time later, and wrote the memoir included here soon afterwards, re-using some of the material from her earlier essay.

Her much more intimate friendship with Elizabeth Bowen also began in the late 1940s, as a result of her writing in warm appreciation of Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* (the letter appears on p.105 below). Bowen herself had already written extremely positive reviews in the *Tatler* of Taylor's first three novels, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, *Palladian*, and *A View of the Harbour*, concluding that Taylor's 'is a name which stands for something distinctive in novel-writing, and which guarantees pleasure'. As Taylor recounts in this previously unpublished memoir, written shortly after Bowen's death in February 1973, they met as often as Bowen's exhausting writing and travelling schedule allowed, in Ireland,[6] in London, Oxford, and later Hythe, as well as at Taylor's own house in Penn, Buckinghamshire. The letters included below give further insight into this friendship, 'the most precious thing my writing brought me', as Taylor described it.

The two other essays included here both date from 1974, the penultimate year of Taylor's life. The tone of 'The Etiquette of Modern Society' is quite different from that of her other surviving non-fiction writings, in its tartly sardonic dissection of the Victorian gentry's mania for regulating all forms of social intercourse, especially where women were concerned. It is hard not to sense, seeping through the writing, a previously suppressed radical antagonism towards aspects of the world with which Taylor was profoundly familiar and which had certainly not disappeared quite so completely as her essay would like to suggest. The second piece, gentler and even faintly valedictory, was published in 1975 in an anthology called *Bookmarks*, edited by Frederic Raphael. The anthology was produced on behalf of the Writers' Action Group, then campaigning in support of Public Lending Right – the agreement to pay authors whenever their books are borrowed from public libraries – which would eventually become law in 1979. The 28 prominent authors in the anthology, ranging from Raymond Williams to Bamber Gascoigne, were asked to produce accounts of their favourite or formative reading: some, including Melvyn Bragg, David Holbrook and Olivia Manning, wrote at considerable length, while other pieces, including those by Harold Pinter and Iris Murdoch, were perfunctory at best. It seems fitting that Taylor's own brief essay, one of her last completed pieces of writing, should particularly commend books which make their readers laugh uncontrollably – as is the case with so much of her own work.

Readers of Robert Liddell's *Elizabeth and Ivy* will need no reminding what a marvellous letter-writer Elizabeth Taylor could be, and how greatly she valued her correspondence for the imaginative companionship it afforded. Some of the letters here, especially the early ones to Elizabeth Bowen, not only open little windows on Taylor's view of her work and that of others she admired, but strongly suggest a yearning for intellectual stimulation and support, at a time when her children were still young and her domestic preoccupations most intense: a yearning perhaps the more marked, rather as in 'After Hours of Suffering', by being inextricably tangled with self-deprecating humour. One quickly becomes aware of the elusive character of feeling or attitude, of the continual sideways tugs of subtlety and irony that give her narrating voice its utter distinctness wherever it is found. At the same time, as the articles by William May and Stevie Davies both explore, relationships conducted primarily or even entirely by correspondence involve extraordinary complexities of self-revelation and disguise, of self and other being fashioned, or projected, or policed; there can be few modern letter-writers who offer so much food for thought in respect of personality's address to the world, or indeed of the whole project of biography. A properly edited Selected Letters – could one ever be produced – would be an indispensable resource not only for devotees of Taylor but for any serious student of the literature of the middle of the last century.

The critical articles included in this volume range widely over Taylor's work and offer numerous fresh perspectives on it. William May is a lecturer at Southampton University; he has written *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and *Postwar Literature 1950-90* (Longman, 2010). Elizabeth Maslen, author of *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction 1928-68* (Palgrave, 2001), is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London. She is writing a critical biography of Storm Jameson. Mary Joannou is Professor of Literary History and Women's Writing at Anglia Ruskin University; her books include *Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Manchester University Press, 2000), and, as editor, the forthcoming *Palgrave History of Women's Writing 1920-45*. The most recent novels by Stevie Davies, Professor of Creative Writing at Swansea University, are *Into Suez* (2010) and *The Eyrie* (2007); she has also written critical studies of Emily Bronte, Milton, Donne, and the women of the English Revolution.

Notes

[1] See Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (Persephone Books, 2009), pp.117-8, 138-42.

[2] 'Mothers' was reprinted in *The Persephone Quarterly*, no. 11, Autumn 2001.

[3] 'The International Symposium on the Short Story', *Kenyon Review*, XXXI, 126:4, 1969, pp.469-70. *Here Today* had also, in 1945, published Taylor's story 'Husbands and Wives'; this was reprinted in Lynne Knight's *Dangerous Calm: The Selected Stories of Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Virago, 1995).

[4] By contrast with the sums most of her earliest stories had earned, *Vogue* paid £75 for 'After Hours of Suffering', on a par with the rates she was by now regularly receiving from the *New Yorker*.

[5] Robert Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy* (London: Peter Owen, 1986).

[6] Bowen invited Taylor – or rather, responded enthusiastically to being asked for an invitation - to Bowen's Court, County Cork, in June 1955, as Taylor wished to escape from the news-story currently dominating the English press, the trial of Ruth Ellis for the murder of David Blakely, who had been a neighbour and close family friend of the Taylors in Penn. Ruth Ellis was found guilty and hanged the following month, the last woman in the United Kingdom to be so.

FOR THINE IS THE POWER

Coming down the hill in the bus. The tyres lick the hot road. Four o'clock is dazzling. Down the new roads of the estate, the houses ranked shoulder to shoulder; thin trees let down into the asphalt; double daisies, dirty pink, dirty white, with dirt scraped up round them, in new gardens descending the hill.

Eva mooned, fringing her mauve ticket, her case lying squarely on her lap. When you opened it, out flew the smell of cardboard and egg sandwiches and rubber soles.

"—noon, miss. G'-bye, miss." Some of her own class shuffling by her down the gangway, getting off the bus. Once by, sniggering behind hands. In the front panel her reflection, striped silk dress, felt hat, glasses. Eva. What others saw. The children. Shooting up their arms in class. "Miss! Miss!" She hated them really, thinking she loved them. And they hated her, drawing her with bits of chalk on bridges and blank walls amongst obscenities, plaguing her subtly with their sycophancy. "Miss! Miss!" It rang in her ears at night. At night, lying in bed, dividing up the day into what she had approved and what she had not. Condemning what she was denied and sentimentalising what she dared not condemn. Closing her mind firmly, snapping it up, on little shafts of truth which threatened it. (That it was odd her headache kept her away from week-night service when the old Vicar was taking them. But was clear as a bell on young Mr. Beaver's nights.)

"Craigie Avenue." The bus still but shuddering while she pushed her way out, case held in front.

Up in the Avenue laburnums were out. She didn't see them, going on with her head bent, the pain beginning again as soon as she stood up, the pain descending again through her body, like tiredness drawn down to one point, crystallised, her body a shaft for the pain to drop down. She dragged up the hill in the heat, between rowan trees and the board fences of gardens. At Abercrombie she trailed up the path and opened the door. Empty house, you could tell at once, by the smell and the sound of it and the tick of the clock. Her tea laid on a corner of the plush cloth. Slices of bread-and-butter, curling up at the edges; the stub-end of a cucumber; the waxen-looking cake dotted with sultanas. She made tea, reading her

horoscope in the paper. Step out today; sign letters; grasp opportunities. That's what she ought to do.

She dropped sugar in—three. "I'm sweet enough already," Ada would say, shaking her head. Ada. I thought you *knew*. That was another of the things she was always saying, having shattered your world. The one before Mr. Beaver, who left and got married, took another living, away. "She's *sweet*. I thought you *knew*."

And this morning, drinking tea at eleven, elbows on the *Daily Sketch*, while the children raced and shrieked across the asphalt and the whistle blew. In a corner, whispering together.

"Well," said Eva, blushes engulfing her. "He said something about ovaries …" Her voice swerved.

"Who is it?"

"Dr. Petrie."

The eyes lengthening, surveying her above the cup of tea.

"I'm surprised you went to him."

"Oh, why? He … he's oldish, and *nice*—as nice as he could be, I suppose."

"Oh, I expect he's *nice*. That's hardly the point when one's reputation's involved."

"I don't see …" After all, Ada had made her go, worrying her about cancer. And one day, seeing it on the surgery door—Gerald Petrie, M.R.C.S.—she had swung suddenly in, not knowing how she would ever say it, but had, with his help.

"In Manchester, I think," said Ada. "Pretty serious for him. Interfering with one of his patients. A young girl. Wonder he wasn't struck off. But I quite thought you *knew*."

And now she had to go again. This evening. Her hands went damp over the bread-and-butter. That sort of man. And he seemed so kind. Too kind, perhaps. Visions of the forbidden made her inside plunge wildly. She drank her tea and fetched her Chain Library book. The sweet, tasteless tea and the sweet, tasteless story.

At half-past five she went and washed and got ready. Mrs. Profitt came back.

"Just off to the doctor's about my indigestion," said Eva.

"I'm surprised he never gave you no peppermint," Mrs. Profitt said, unrolling a haddock on the draining board. "Always gives me a bottle. That shifts it like nothing else I know."

"Perhaps he will, then," said Eva, setting off, scarlet at her own duplicity.

The shadows, longer, deeper now, lying down the avenue. There it was, as soon as she put her feet to the ground, the pain gathering itself together, like an animal that has lain in wait. That pounced on her as she stood on hot afternoons, the whistle round her neck, on the teeming playground.

So she took the quick cut over the fields to the town, the grass short and slippery and full of thistles. The unemployed walked here, with dogs and prams, listless and oppressed. Plumes of smoke rose stiffly off the town in the valley.

In the waiting-room she sat with cold hands and feet, her nostrils sickened by the rich smell of the *Sketch*, the *Tatler*, her bowels turned to water, it seemed, by nervousness and dread.

"Any improvement?" he asked, the man going grey, in the white room with the brown linoleum, signalling her to the chair.

"No." Her eyes rivetted on him, fascinated.

"Oh, come now. Not even a little?"

She shook her head.

"Well, then, I'll examine you today. Unloosen your clothes and lie down, will you?"

He turned away. He began to wash his hands. Behind the screen, shaking, fearful, enraged, she unclasped her pink corsets and lay down. The noise her heart. The walls covered with grained paper, imitating wood.

He came and laid his hand on her side, pressing intolerably. As if he were a snake she watched him, horrified. How dare he, she thought. In Manchester. I thought you knew. A young girl. But she wasn't young, and his eyes fixed on the wallpaper were vague, impersonal. Interfering with one of his patients. The way thoughts leapt up quite uncontrolled. What he had done. And how did she know? Out of what steaming stew of her mind emerged the cool and certain picture of what he had done, might do to her, lying here, defenceless and exposed.

"O.K.," he said, moving away, leaving her.

"O.K." he said. Stupidly, she fastened her corsets. Back at the desk, couldn't listen. Greying hair and tired voice. I love him, I loathe him, she thought hysterically.

She waited for her medicine and, clutching the white, red-sealed parcel, set off home, something destroyed in her. Back across the scented fields. The men on allotments. Children shouting. Tomorrow, school and the children shouting. At the top of the hill a decaying haystack, dark and hacked away. The pain dragged at her. She went and sat down, leaning against the wall of the haystack, facing the valley, which began to blossom

faintly with lights. She sat there for a long time, until it grew nearly dark, and voices on the other side of the haystack disturbed her. She got up, clasping her bottle of medicine, and walked round the stack to the footpath.

"Silly!" giggled the girl, lying on her back in the darkness of the wall of dark hay. She rolled her head from side to side teasingly to avoid his kisses, the man pressing her down into the grass with the weight of his body.

Eva reached the footpath. Stumbled back home. How dare they! She felt filthy, just seeing them.

"Did he give you anything?" Mrs. Profitt asked, coming in from the kitchen. There was a damp steam of haddock everywhere. "Well, what's wrong?"

For Eva slumped forward over the table, dropping her parcel, retching up dreadful sobs. "The filthy, filthy, filthy, filthy …" she babbled.

"Filthy what?" asked Mrs. Profitt.

And then Eva sat up as if she saw visions before her.

"The doctor," she said quietly. "He—he—insulted me."

"Insulted? How?"

"I can't tell you." She dropped her head and began to sob again on her silk sleeves.

At last Mrs. Profitt gasped: "You don't mean interfered with you?"

"Tried," said Eva, drumming her fists on the table, blotting out those two under the haystack.

It took no time for Mrs. Profitt to turn the gas low and put on her hat.

"See to that haddock. I'm going straight to the police. Dirty monkey! Upsetting a decent girl like you." Off she went. Eva, tormented, the picture of those two writhing on the hay, went and stuck a fork in the fish, moving like a sleepwalker.

"You can't be sorry for a man like that," said Ada vehemently, drinking her sugarless tea. "With a wife and children, too. He ought to think of them. And decent girls. Why doesn't he go after his own kind? But they never do."

"No," said Eva.

"Well, it's stopped his tricks. Serve him right. He shouldn't abuse his position."

What will he do? Eva asked herself. Wife and children. Going grey a bit at the sides. Kind, but impersonal. What have I done? What's left to him?

Ada's eyes followed her everywhere with a new kind of filthy respect. She put down her cup and picked up a pile of books. What's left to him? she wondered. And then a surge of anger rose up in her, drove colour up her neck into her face. But he shouldn't have done it, she thought, clenching her fingers up, going downstairs to the classroom. Dirty monkey. Serves him right. He shouldn't have done it.

EVER SO BANAL

"But not Mozart," he cried. "Mozart tinkles and irritates. Darling," he added.

"Haydn, then."

"No, not Haydn. Look, pet, if you could clasp both your hands round the pipe like this, and I held mine *over* yours … That's better. How long is Grace going to be? No, not Haydn. Bach is precise, don't you feel? And geometrical."

"How could you!" cried Grace, stepping towards them across floods of water. "Here is the house slowly filling, and you stand there talking about Bach. I can't get a plumber. It's too late. Oh, dear. You're hopeless. Any other man would *do* something. You're not a man. You're …" her voice rose and broke … "a sissy."

"But, dear, if I let go of this pipe, the water will be all over the ceiling. *You* have a go. But truly my hands are stronger than yours, sissy though I may be. The pressure's terrific …"

"It *is* all over the ceiling, anyhow," she wailed, and stooped and began to bail out with baby's pot. "Oh, my darling house. And you don't even mind being called a sissy. Any other man would be furious. Oh, I know, I'll try the waterworks. Why on earth didn't I think of it before?" She was gone again.

"Poor Grace. Oh, your darling fingers are icy cold. I'm so sorry. Things like this are always happening in this house. How dark it's getting."

"Look, Bernard. If you put the lid of the W.C. down, we could sit on that. We might as well be comfortable."

He kicked it down with his foot and they edged onto it. Downstairs they could hear Grace's irritated voice rising and rising.

"Well, when you've turned the supply tap off what *else* can you do?" they heard her shriek. "It's coming through the kitchen ceiling now. No, I tried the main, but it's just a dark hole about two yards deep and no sign of a tap. You'll have to come. No, I've never seen or heard of any key … I don't know in the least what you mean …"

Veronica giggled. "This is fun," she said. "But I'm glad it's not my house. Oh, how frightful of me to say that."

"Your honesty, darling, is one of the things about you I most love."

"I'm sopping wet, aren't you? Oh, look at your flannels." She bent down, so that he could see her breasts hanging like little pears inside her summer frock. "How funny sitting here like this … most improper really."

"I've no vice, Veronica, but your proximity is definitely disturbing. I've no right to say such a thing. I know that. I wouldn't hurt Grace for worlds."

"Oh, but you embarrass me," she cried. "You mustn't." She glanced down at her damp thighs. "It *is* getting dark. We'd better call to Grace to put on the lights."

"Oh no," he was going to say when Grace appeared again. "Lights," she exclaimed. "Have you no sense. The ceilings are soaked. It creates an earth or something."

"Creates an earth," Veronica murmured incredulously. She and Bernard began to titter.

"They're coming immediately," Grace said. "I must pot Baby."

"If she's wet the bed, it will be the last straw," Bernard called after her. He suddenly removed a hand to push back a lock of hair. The water shot all over the walls and Veronica. "Oh sod." He clasped the torn pipe again hastily.

"It's like that little boy in Holland," Veronica began, with her flair for the inevitable.

"Indeed yes."

They heard Grace going downstairs. She found the kitchen floor littered with pieces of floating apple-green plaster. Tears came hotly up into her eyes. "I've always borne all the responsibility," she thought, as she began to drop towels into the flood and wring them out into a pail. "Heavy with their drink," she said aloud. "There ought to be some word like 'despision'." It was getting very dark now, yet her eyes accustomed to the gradual decline of light, could make out all the familiar objects looking unfamiliar in the wreckage. Laths became visible where once the ceiling had been.

"As if there's any need for them both to be sitting up there. Do they think I was born yesterday. But they can scarcely make love," she thought. "Not that he would. He wants nothing more than to hear the sound of his own voice."

She left her mopping up and went down the path to wait for the man from the waterworks. A greenish darkness hung over the landscape and there was the scent of fading elder-blossom, of clover and drying hay. She could hear the car coming up the hill and soon the pale light of its headlamps moved towards her along the road.

A young man jumped out. He collected bags of tools and wore appropriately enough, long sea-boots.

"Here's the main," she said, leading him through a little tunnel behind the hedge. He said nothing, but kicked a toad aside contemptuously. Bernard would have been angry. They pulled up the cover and leant down.

"Torch? Thanks. O.K. No good. Got a key for it?"

"No."

"Can't do it without."

He began to curse some other man's work. They went into the house. She showed him the kitchen first, ashamed rather of her husband and Veronica discussing Mozart in the lavatory. The sound of trickling water unnerved her. Fire would be better to deal with, she thought.

He tried all the taps. He opened the larder and peered inside. She resented this. She had a middle-class attitude to the privacy of meals and food; Bernard had often told her. He opened the broom cupboard.

"Hey, what's this?" He seized upon a tap she had often dusted, scrubbed round, but never noticed. He wrenched at it.

Upstairs the flow faltered, dropped, dribbled, failed. Bernard and Veronica laughed at one another. "Darling," he whispered, as they unlocked their frozen hands. "Angel." Forgetting what they were sitting on, they relaxed damply against one another.

"I feel ashamed," Grace was saying. "I didn't remember that being there."

"Stupid plumbing," the young man said graciously. He had taken off his sea-boots and paddled on the wet kitchen tiles. His feet in the near-darkness, looked pallid and beautiful. "I expect in the daytime, they look horrid," Grace thought. "Most men's do. Covered with barnacles and things."

She went into the dining-room and fished in the sideboard cupboard for the whisky bottle.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked him, coming back into the kitchen.

"I don't mind if I do," he said inevitably and expectantly.

Standing at the sink, she flopped whisky out into a tumbler.

"Water?"

"A little," he said reluctantly.

But when she held it to the tap, she found that in the darkness she had filled the glass higher than was necessary. There was very little room for any water. She moved towards him across the dark kitchen, the glass extended carefully before her.

"I can't thank you enough," she cried fervently. She thought she'd have a good neat one herself but the bottle gave out the merest dribble and stopped. He could not have noticed this in the dark.

"I do feel ashamed of myself, not knowing my own house."

"Oh, you couldn't be expected to think of that. Never saw the like of such plumbing," he said in a satisfied way. He stood up and pulled on his boots. "Thank you," he said.

"Finished already," she thought in dismay.

He grabbed up his tool bag. She followed him to the front door.

"Many thanks."

"Many thanks to *you*," she cried with some asperity.

"Not at all. Good night, miss."

"Miss" pleased her, even though it was so dark.

Off he went.

She turned back to her house, which seemed a wet and echoing shell now, rather than a home.

Bernard and Veronica had come downstairs.

"Ah, darling, having a little booze-up with the waterworks?" he cried, in guilty gaiety. "Veronica will have to stay the night now, I'm afraid. The least we can do. I'm hell of a sorry, my sweet. It's been heavenly of you to stay and help. Well, we are so sopping wet, we do deserve a sip ourselves. This will lace thee with warmth," he cried, taking up the bottle from the kitchen table. "Here's to the waterworks."

"There's none left," Grace said happily. "We finished it while you and Veronica were up in the lavatory." Said like that it sounded frightful. "Now, we must clear up."

She stuck a candle in the top of the whisky bottle and lit it. The flame, climbing higher, flickered on their pale and exhausted faces. As she wrung out towels into the bucket, Grace's face in the candlelight seemed to the other two impervious and stern, and there came from her the faintest smell of whisky, which only those who had none and desired some could have noticed.

MOTHERS

Outside the hospital entrance the gravel was bright and unrelenting. She stood with the other mothers and waited for the doors to open. Each had a basket; the clean clothes and picture books, barley-sugar, the bunch of pansies from the garden.

"What will he do?" she wondered. She was prepared for tears and pleading and an appalling scene at the end. Some of the mothers chatted as they waited. These had been before, knew the ropes, knew the way in and the nurses by sight. She stood a little apart, with her back against the warm roughness of the brick wall, feeling immature—she could never overcome the sense that she was too young to have a child and she was uncertain of her voice and her eyes, always too readily filled with tears.

In the hot sunlight the weather-vane over the clock-tower flashed brightly; the smell of the hot gravel mingled with the other dry mid-summer scents, of crumbling grey earth and geraniums, tar and the brick wall; but little wafts of coolness came occasionally from the hospital windows, little cool dreadful smells which froze her bowels, hollowed her inside.

The rounded, solid notes of the clock struck two. The women sauntered closer and then the doors were opened. As they passed into the vestibule, she was conscious of another smell, the damp sharp sweat of the other mothers in their summer frocks. Then the cold neutral air of the hospital engulfed them as they went forward. She felt like Alice going down the rabbit-hole. They kept passing rooms with half-open doors, but there was never time to look into the rooms; just a glimpse of a nurse writing at a desk, a place filled with strange shining apparatus, flowers in the centre of a large ward, a white kitchen.

She followed the others into the children's ward.

"Hallo, Mummy."

She came straight to him, was at once confronted by the brightness of his little face, made strange by the bandage over his brow. He was facing the door—in a draught, she thought immediately.

Their greeting was casual in contrast to the embraces of all the others. Again, she felt her immaturity. She felt that she would never look motherly. In her sandals and blue cotton frock she seemed too young for the part. She did not even have the womanly smell of the others.

"How are you, darling?"

"All right. Better."

"And what's it like, being here?"

"All right. They think you're very babyish. They give you a plate with Bo-Peep on it."

"How amusing."

"And cut up your meat."

"Perhaps they are afraid you'll spill gravy."

"One girl has her legs burnt. They paint them blue and she screams like mad. Her mother upset a saucepan over her."

"How frightful for her mother."

"Frightful for her, you mean." He laughed excitedly.

She looked round quickly and turned over his temperature-chart. It jagged half-way across the paper.

"They don't tell you what your temperature is."

"No. They never do. It *is* nice to see you." She sat on the bed and took one of his rough warm little paws on her hand. His wrists were impossibly thin, had always been. He kept shoving up the bandage which had slipped over one eye. Cotton-wool and bits of lint stuck out in all directions. Tufts of hair stood up from the top of his head like feathers. His bed was like a battlefield. She tried to straighten the sheets, looking round at the neat children sitting up in tidy cots and beds, while their mothers displayed one thing after another from their baskets.

"I brought you a present," she said, suddenly remembering, and conscious that he waited. "But I want you to keep it till I go."

"Why?"

"It will be something to think about after I've gone."

"Oh."

"What did you have for dinner?"

"Mince and rice."

"Are you good?"

"Yes. One of the nurses said I'd wet my bed. 'Oh, you dirty little boy,' she said to me. And I hadn't done any such thing."

"Oh, darling. So what did you say?"

"I said 'Go on! You! Liar! Rat!' To myself."

She bit her lip. "What are the others like? The other nurses."

"Sister's very nice. She's not a bit cruel. She lets me mind that little baby in the corner. If it falls on its back, I ring the bell. Now can I read to you?"

She sat and watched the clock and listened to him reading, stumbling and monotonous. He sat bolt upright in his untidy bed, with the book held

high before him. One or two of the other women looked across and smiled at him, then at her. A boy at the end seemed very ill. He stared before him, his face grey and small; his eyes and the way of holding his head, like an old man. His mother sat beside him and watched him. They did not speak.

"The fox then hid behind the door …" he read on.

"Children's stories are always full of foxes, and they are forever wicked," she mused. "How odd, coming to hospital to be read to."

And then the clock outside in the sunlight struck the hour. Three o'clock. A young nurse came in and stood there smiling in the doorway, waiting for them to go.

"Darling, I have to go now."

"Oh, I haven't finished the book."

"Practise it and read the rest next time."

"I've been practising it since half-past five this morning."

"I'm sorry, pet." She bent and kissed him and cords twisted up tightly in her throat as she felt his warm, dry lips on her face. He was sitting up straight on the high, narrow bed, his eyes steady and bright beneath the bandage.

"Goodbye, my darling. The minute I am gone you shall open your parcel." He looked excited at that. Other children were setting up a wild howling. The look he exchanged with her showed contempt for this. He waved his thin hand as she turned away. The other was on the string of his parcel.

"Goodbye."

She walked proudly down the corridor with the other mothers. All their eyes were over-brilliant with anxiety; hers with pride and anxiety.

"He's not spoilt," she thought. "When it comes to it, he isn't. He's independent and he adapts himself."

She stepped out onto the bright gravel.

He laid the parcel unopened on his pillow and lay down and closed his eyes. Tears were red-hot and hard like bullets beneath his lids. "My darling Mummy," he said to himself. "My darling Mummy. My darling …"

"Tea, Harry," said the nurse. "Tired already?"

He sat up and smiled.

"You haven't opened your parcel."

"I couldn't—undo it."

"Oh, it's only a bow, you lazybones. And look at your bed. Let me tidy you up again. Now Sheila, that's quite enough of that. You try to be sensible like Harry."

Harry looked neither to left nor right, neither at Sheila nor the nurse. He picked up the piece of bread and butter from his plate and took a bite. It hurt his throat going down, but he went on eating. He sat there with his eyelids lowered, looking rather prim and self-satisfied as he ate.