

A vintage photograph of a woman in a green and white striped dress with a white lace collar, holding a young girl who is sleeping. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with yellow flowers.

VINTAGE BOWEN

Collected Stories

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About the Book

Throughout these seventy-nine stories - love stories, ghost stories, stories of childhood, of English middle-class life in the twenties and thirties of London during the Blitz - Elizabeth Bowen combines social comedy and reportage, perception and vision in her own celebrated and unique style.

About the Author

Elizabeth Bowen was born in Dublin in 1899, the only child of an Irish lawyer and landowner. She was educated at Downe House School in Kent. Her book *Bowen's Court* (1942) is the history of her family and their house in County Cork, and *Seven Winters* (1943) contains reminiscences of her Dublin childhood. In 1923 she married Alan Cameron, who held an appointment with the BBC and who died in 1952. She travelled a good deal, dividing most of her time between London and Bowen's Court, which she inherited.

Elizabeth Bowen is considered by many to be one of the most distinguished novelists of the twentieth century. Her first book, a collection of short stories, *Encounters*, appeared in 1923, followed by another, *Ann Lee's*, in 1926. *The Hotel* (1927) was her first novel, and was followed by *The Last September* (1929), *Joining Charles* (1929), another book of short stories, *Friends and Relations* (1931), *To the North* (1932), *The Cat Jumps* (short stories, 1934), *The House in Paris* (1935), *The Death of the Heart* (1938), *Look at All Those Roses* (short stories, 1941), *The Demon Lover* (short stories, 1945), *The Heat of the Day* (1949), *Collected Impressions* (essays, 1950), *The Shelbourne* (1951), *A World of Love* (1955), *A Time in Rome* (1960), *After-thought* (essays, 1962), *The Little Girls* (1964), *A Day in the Dark* (1965) and her last book, *Eva Trout* (1969).

She was awarded the CBE in 1948, and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1949 and from Oxford University in 1956. In the same year she was appointed Lacy Martin Donnelly Fellow

at Bryn Mawr College in the United States. In 1965 she was made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature. Elizabeth Bowen died in 1973.

ALSO BY ELIZABETH BOWEN

Encounters

Ann Lee's

The Hotel

The Last September

Joining Charles

Friends and Relations

To the North

The Cat Jumps

The House in Paris

The Death of the Heart

Look at All Those Roses

Bowen's Court

Seven Winters

The Demon Lover

The Heat of the Day

Collected Impressions

The Shelbourne

A World of Love

A Time in Rome

After-thought

The Little Girls

A Day in the Dark

Eva Trout

THE COLLECTED
STORIES OF
ELIZABETH BOWEN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Angus Wilson

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

When the history of English civilization is looked back upon as one of the strange and glorious manifestations of the human spirit - and may that day be rather more distant than it sometimes seems now - London in the blitz will have, I feel sure, its own very important place in the chronicle. More important than the war of which it was but a part, more important than all the passing social and political vagaries of the post-war years. It will be there with the trenches of the First World War as an extraordinary revelation of English behaviour and feeling. And there will be only two English writers who convey what life in blitzed London was like - Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green. They were both very fine writers and it is to be hoped that this chance will make their names familiar enriching household words to our descendants curious about our ancient times - more familiar than seems conceivably possible at this time when, as too often happens, writers fall into neglect in the decades immediately following their deaths.

If this does happen - and I think it will - the readers of the twenty-first and -second centuries will have a treat in store for them. They will find in Elizabeth Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* and in some of her short stories - 'In the Square', 'The Demon Lover', 'Careless Talk', and, above all, 'Mysterious Kôr' - acute perceptions of the first impact of ever present danger and death upon a great city. Perceptions which range from marvellous realistic observation of daily life to the innermost recesses of the human soul, haunted by the transience of joy or guilt as the

bombs fell. It is often as though Elizabeth Bowen's mastery of the shape and form and talk of the world around her combines with her miraculous psychological insight to give us moments of sudden vision just as the bombs themselves exploded London's surface beauty or squalor to reveal long-forgotten depths beneath. Indeed it is the way in which the form of these stories typifies the world and people they depict that is surely the clue to us, if we required one, that we are dealing with that rare phenomenon - a writer of instinctive formal vision.

I establish first Elizabeth Bowen's natural artistic power because she is so careful a craftswoman, so conscious, even at times arrogantly conscious, of the shapes, the inversions, the verbal exactitudes in which she clothes her vision, that it would be easy to ignore the instinctive literary creator that lies beneath - that must, I believe, lie beneath all good art, even that of Henry James, the influence of whose shapes sometimes seems superficially too apparent in her work. Anyone so elegant and civilized, so certain of values that to state them would seem to her inept and naïve, so concerned for lack of show - even the bravery that man needs so desperately in a precarious world must never assert itself too crudely, though bravado if worn with sophistication is an allowable foible - so absolutely resolute in acceptance of life, so uninterested in its passing political forms, so urbane even in the Irish countryside she loved and saw so clearly, so concerned that compassion should never show a sloppy side - any such person inevitably seems to fit very little with Rousseau's noble savage, yet the instinctive artist is there at the very heart of her work and gives a strength, a fierceness and a depth to her elaborations, her delight in words, her determination that life seen will only survive on the page when it has met the strictest demands of form and elegance.

This natural force, I think, is what distinguishes her from the many and very various writers to whom she has

affinities – Henry James, Aldous Huxley, Saki, Ivy Compton Burnett, even Virginia Woolf. She is with them in the various degrees by which shapes and manners control emotions, but her control comes always from intelligence (the sort of intelligence which she saw as inseparable from civilized behaviour), it never comes from intellect or abstraction. Occasionally, as in ‘Sunday Evening’ or the farcical ghost story ‘The Cat Jumps’, she is dealing with the intelligentsia or stereotyped ‘progressives’, but she always sees them from outside, never from above, with that satirical view of intellectual superiority that Aldous Huxley found in his early novels. For all her years spent in Boar’s Hill among Oxford academics she remained always an upper-class woman of hardy, firm intelligence, she was never the slave of the brilliant academic world as Virginia Woolf, a greater genius, too often was. She deals with coteries but far more with families and yet, here, unlike Ivy Compton Burnett, though her nails are ready to scratch, it is with heart that she responds to all the ecstasies and desperations, the frustrations, the deadened routines, and the sudden-awakened emotional currents of family life. She can be witty (though not, I think, very successfully funny) but not at the expense of her feeling. One has the sense that, for her, passion and love are so essentially moulded into life that she has no need for the desperate restraints of Mrs Woolf, the evasions of Ivy Compton Burnett, or the open romanticism, wonderfully civilized though it is, of Rosamund Lehmann.

She came of a tough, landowning family who had origins in Cromwell’s puritan settlers yet, as her father’s periodic mental disorders show, there was also the strain of hysteria so common in the puritan gentry. But in her it was surely taken up and satisfied not only by her creative art, but by her incorporation of love – both emotional and physical – into the essential shape of life, as part of the essence of orderly, well-bred manners. Of course, she accepted, as a

worldly woman, the vagaries and aberrations and sophistications of the 1920s and 1930s, but there is none of the frenzy or the muddle so familiar to us now from the erotic memories of Bloomsbury or of the world of Lawrence. She was tolerant but she was certain. As she said to her own lover, love was an essential part of her religion, she could not imagine a God who would not accept love as the reason for human aberrance from any strictly laid down code. This is the foundation for the many wonderful stories in this collection which illumine moments in the lives of husbands and wives, or wives and lovers, or, simply, lovers. Passion is there, but it is worn always with poise, or, if it is not, there is an aura of absurdity or a ghostly haunting of regret or shame. Yet, for all the poise, the worldly elegance, the enlacing of passion with worldly routine - dressing for dinner, the country walk in the country weekend, the arrival at the West End restaurant for luncheon - love is still deeply romantic in Elizabeth Bowen's work, central and without the *froideur* that, in Virginia Woolf's novel, is destroying Clarissa Dalloway's life. Elizabeth Bowen has, of course, one of the principal features of the great romantics - a total connection with her own childhood, and, by an imaginative force, with many other kinds of children.

Some of the most totally satisfying stories in this collection are those that concern children. They are in many moods. An early story, 'Daffodils', gives us an immediate clue - the story of a schoolmistress who invites some of her pupils, seen through her window, to entertainment at her rather lonely lodgings. But they have other things to do, their own life - she is no more than a curiosity to them. We are established in the schoolgirls' own world. And in two stories, 'Charity' and 'The Jungle', she establishes what that world is - in the first what 'home life' means to a child, when one schoolgirl visits another in the holidays, in the second what 'school' is like. And it is

not only with girls that she is at home. 'The Visitor' is a superb account of a boy being entertained and housed by friends while his mother is dying - the aloofness of a child in such circumstances, and his total lostness. It is a story to rank with the best pieces of Copperfield's boyhood.

But she does not see childhood as all pathos or polite non-involvement with the adult world. In 'Maria' and 'The Little Girl's Room', we have a marvellous picture of the devilish games either imagined or played upon the adult world by children whose aloofness is tinged with diabolic contempt. Here we are in the world of Saki, but without his self-conscious malignity that borders on whimsy. And, at the last, Elizabeth Bowen shows us how all this passing childhood, concerned or unconcerned, angelic or devilish, does not always leave the human soul free in maturity. In 'The Apple Tree' a young woman is mentally imprisoned in the vision of a suicide she came upon at school, but she is freed by an understanding and sympathetic older woman. The hero of 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', arguably her finest story, is not so lucky - even in his return to the South Coast just freed from military control after D Day, he cannot free his timid, lonely soul from the boyhood trauma he knew when he found that a beautiful, rich woman's apparent love for him was no more than a bored exercise in charm.

This sense of childhood's pervasiveness and of passion as essential parts of a life lived elegantly and bravely was perhaps made possible for Elizabeth Bowen by her apparent total acceptance of ghosts, of the occult. In part, this also ties her to the 1920s and 1930s, to the late Kipling stories. But there is a difference - Kipling speculates sceptically, or where he accepts for the sake of the story, the ghostly has Poe-like overtones of horror or revenge. In only one or two Elizabeth Bowen stories is the ghost malign, vengeful: in 'The Demon Lover', where a woman's fickleness breeds its own horror, and, perhaps, in 'Green Holly', the funny-horrible story of Intelligence workers in

the last war beset in their dreary isolation by untimely ghosts of murder. For the rest, ghosts are acceptable statements of the continuity of time and life; so much so that, in the fullest war-horror, the wife of 'The Happy Autumn Fields' may find relief from the sight of her bombed London house by living in a family of a hundred years earlier found in an old diary. Ghosts make sense of life not nonsense

Nevertheless, they have a period flavour. And much more so, I think, for the modern reader, will be the murder in the background of so much of Elizabeth Bowen's fictional life. The characters, especially women, also turn out to have been associated with murder, or to be acquitted murderesses. This for someone of my age brings back the past. In all those pre-1939 decades of my childhood and adolescence, murder and above all murderesses held the headlines of the popular newspapers. It was both sensational and macabre - and I believe it to be one of the finest virtues of the abolition of capital punishment that it brought to an end this prurient interest in women who were to be hanged. It is one of the only passing journalistic aspects of Elizabeth Bowen's stories. As the war came on it gave way to the spies of her last novels and stories. The horrors in the cupboard became those that are still with us now.

Are there failures in her stories? 'Gone Away', I think, suggests that life as lived was enough for her, and speculation about the future of her society had no place in her scheme of things. Could she move outside her social world? In emotion and sympathy, I think, she could. After all, the girls and the young man in the wonderful 'Mysterious Kôr' are very middle-class; and she could visualize the problems of others, as in her story about the loneliness of new housing estates. Only her ear lets her down a little - she is over-anxious to establish the difference of what she hears, there are too many 'we really

didn't ought to have's in the speech of those she heard from a distance. And the maid's dialogue about the bombed house, 'Oh, Madam', seems to be on the level of the H.M. Tennent matinée performance that it became.

But the failures are so very few, the triumphs so many, especially as time passes by, for, though the seeds of her mastery are in her early stories, the development in so craftful a writer is inevitably vast. Perhaps in the superb 'Sunday Afternoon' the bringing together of her two sides - the urban, the loyalist of London however horrible the blitz years, and the cultured gentry world of Ireland's countryside - shows her at her best. Here we are at once in a marvellously evoked moment of place and time and in the never changing conflict of youth's hopeful imagination and the regretful doubts of the ageing. But that is only one of many marvels these stories open to us.

June 1980

ANGUS WILSON

First Stories



Breakfast

'BEHOLD, I DIE daily,' thought Mr Rossiter, entering the breakfast-room. He saw the family in silhouette against the windows; the windows looked out into a garden closed darkly in upon by walls. There were so many of the family it seemed as though they must have multiplied during the night; their flesh gleamed pinkly in the cold northern light and they were always moving. Often, like the weary shepherd, he could have prayed them to keep still that he might count them.

They turned at his entrance profiles and three-quarter faces towards him. There was a silence of suspended munching and little bulges of food were thrust into their cheeks that they might wish him perfunctory good-mornings.

Miss Emily further inquired whether he had slept well, with a little vivacious uptilt of her chin. Her voice was muffled: he gathered that the contents of her mouth was bacon, because she was engaged in sopping up the liquid fat from her plate with little dice of bread, which she pushed around briskly with a circular movement of her fork. It was not worth sitting down till she had finished, because he would be expected to take her plate away. Why was the only empty chair always beside Miss Emily?

Last night in the lamplight he had almost begun to think he liked Miss Emily. She was the only lady present who had not beaten time with hand or foot or jerking head while they played 'Toreador Song' on the gramophone. But here, pressed in upon her by the thick fumes of coffee and bacon,

the doggy-smelling carpet, the tight, glazed noses of the family ready to split loudly from their skins ... There was contamination in the very warm edge of her plate, as he took it from her with averted head and clattered it down among the others on the sideboard.

'Bacon?' insinuated Mrs Russel. 'A *little* chilly, I'm afraid. I do hope there's plenty, but we early birds are sometimes inclined to be *rather* ravenous.'

She added: 'There's an egg,' but there was no invitation in her tone.

She could never leave a phrase unmodified. He could have answered with facetious emphasis that he was *almost* inclined to believe he would *rather* have enjoyed that egg.

Dumbly, he took two rashers of the moist and mottled bacon.

'And then,' Hilary Bevel was recounting, 'it all changed, and we were moving very quickly through a kind of pinkish mist - running, it felt like, only all my legs and arms were somewhere else. That was the time when *you* came into it, Aunt Willoughby. You were winding up your sewing machine like a motor car, kneeling down, in a sort of bunching bathing dress ...' She dared indelicacy, reaching out for the marmalade with a little agitated rustle to break up the silence with which her night's amazing experiences had been received.

Miss Emily, always kindly, tittered into her cup. She kicked the leg of Rossiter's chair and apologized; and he watched her thin, sharp shoulders shining through her blouse.

Mrs Russel's eye travelled slowly round the table; there slowed and ceased the rotatory mastication of her jaws. Above her head was a square of white light reflected across from the window to the overmantel. He wished that the sheen of the tablecloth were snow, and that he could heap it over his head as that eye came round towards him.

'Now for it,' he braced himself, clenching his hands upon his knife and fork, and squaring his elbows till one touched Miss Emily, who quivered.

'I'm afraid you couldn't hardly have heard the gong this morning, Mr Rossiter. That new girl doesn't hardly know how to make it sound yet. She seems to me just to give it a sort of *rattle*.'

Damn her impudence. She censored him for being late.

'Oh, I - I heard it, thank you!'

They had all stopped talking, and ate quite quietly to hear him speak. Only Jervis Bevel drained his coffee-cup with a gulp and gurgle.

'The fact is, I was - er - looking for my collar-stud.'

'Ah, yes. I'm afraid you've sometimes been a little reckless about buying new ones before you were quite sure you'd lost the others, haven't you, Mr Rossiter? Only fancy,' - she looked round to collect the attention of the breakfasters; there was a sensation to follow - 'Annie found *three* good ones, really good ones, under the wardrobe, when she was turning out your room.'

'I can't think how they get there,' he protested, conscious of inanity.

'Perhaps they took little legs unto themselves and walked,' suggested Hilary Bevel.

'Perhaps the wardrobe got up in the night and sat on top of them,' bettered Miss Emily.

There was a rustle of laughter, and she cast down her eyes with a deprecatory titter.

The remark was a success. It was really funny. It was received by Mrs Russel with a warm benignity: 'Really, Emily, you do say silly things.' She laughed her gentle breathy laugh, gazing at Mr Rossiter, who wriggled.

'I say - er - Bevel, when you've finished with that newspaper -'

Jervis Bevel looked insolently at him over the top of the paper. 'Sorry, I've only just begun. I left it lying on your

plate some time, then I didn't think you'd have much time to read it, being rather rushed.'

Rossiter hated Bevel, with his sleek head. He was not aware that he was rushed. What business had Bevel got to tell him so?

'Well, when you *have* finished —'

Hilary Bevel was staring at him across the table as though she had never seen him before. She had eyebrows like her brother's, owl's eyebrows, and long-lidded, slanting eyes; and affected a childish directness and ingenuousness of speech which she considered attractive. Her scarlet, loose-lipped mouth curled itself round her utterances, making them doubly distinct.

'Mr Rossiter's got another tie on, a *crimson* tie!' said Hilary Bevel.

Rossiter was instantly aware, not only of his tie but of his whole body visible above the table-edge. He felt his ears protruding fan-wise from his head, felt them redden, and the blush burn slowly across his cheekbones, down his pricking skin to the tip of his nose.

Mrs Russel's attention was temporarily directed from himself by a skirmish with Aunt Willoughby. The click of swords was audible to all.

'Oh, but you wouldn't, Aunt Willoughby. Not when they've got five or six rooms to settle up every day, you wouldn't. You see, with you, when poor uncle was alive, it was a different thing altogether. What I mean to say is, in proportion to the size of the family you had more of them, in a kind of way. It was a larger staff.'

'Ah then, Rosie, but what I always used to say, "You do what I expect of you and we won't expect any more than that. I'm reasonable," I used to say, "I won't expect any more than that." *Annie* could tell you that was what I used to say to her. As my dear husband used to say,' Aunt Willoughby raised her voice, anticipating an interruption, 'there are those that can get good work out of their

servants and those that can't. We mustn't be set up about it; it's just a gift, like other gifts, that many haven't got. I've had such a happy, *happy* home,' she sighed towards the attentive Miss Emily. 'Always so comfortable, it was.'

'Annie *is* a funny girl,' reflected Mrs Russel; 'she said to me - of course I never take the things those girls say seriously - "I wouldn't go back to Mrs Willoughby not for anything you might give me, I wouldn't." I said, "But she spoke so well of you, Annie," and she just wagged her head at me, sort of. She *is* a funny girl! Of course, I didn't ought to tell you, but it made me laugh at the time, it did really.'

'I came down on her rather *hard*,' admitted Aunt Willoughby swiftly. 'I was so particular, you see, and she *had* some dirty ways. Now I shouldn't wonder - when was it you lost those collar-studs, Mr Rossiter?'

'I don't exactly remember,' said Rossiter, basely. He felt Mrs Russel's approval warm upon him, but was sorry to have failed Aunt Willoughby, who, disconcerted, relapsed into irrelevancy.

Miss Emily harked back.

'Oh, Hilary, you are awful - why shouldn't he?'

'Well, I didn't say he shouldn't, I simply said it *was* one. They'll be jealous of you at the office, won't they, Mr Rossiter?'

Mr Rossiter, eyeing her contemplatively, supposed that Miss Bevel was a 'merry' girl.

'It may mean an *occasion* for Mr Rossiter,' said Mrs Russel from her Olympia behind the urn. 'You shouldn't draw attention to it, girls.'

The light glanced on Hilary's waved and burnished hair as she turned her head towards Aunt Willoughby.

'*Nobody* takes *any* notice of little me, when *I* go gadding, do they, Auntie! Why, it's all round the table in a minute if I come down with half an inch of new coloured cammie-ribbon sticking out above my jumper!'

'You wouldn't put it in at all if you didn't think it was going to notice,' remarked her brother, without raising his eyes from the *Daily Express*.

'I wouldn't put on anything at all if I was quite invisible, if that's what you mean!'

Miss Emily glanced apprehensively at the unshaken barricade of newspaper.

'Oh, Hilary, you are *awf*—'

Jervis had apparently not heard.

'Hilary!' said Mrs Russel, 'I'm afraid you're shocking Mr Rossiter!' She lingered on the name as though he were something delicious to eat.

'I believe,' thought Rossiter, 'they all want to marry me! Is this insight or delirium? P'raps not Aunt Willoughby, but —'

He appraised Jervis round the edge of the newspaper. Surely he was showier, more attractive? Why couldn't he divert some of their attentions; take on, say, Miss Emily and Mrs Russel? Mrs Russel was old enough to be the mother of either of them.

A hand shot out suddenly from behind the urn. Rossiter jumped.

'— had your second cup of coffee yet,' Mrs Russel was saying. 'You look quite poetic, Mr Rossiter' - she was referring to his abstracted glare - 'Aren't you going to pass along your cup?'

'Thank you - *half* a cup, if you please.'

'There's no *hurry*.' She glanced over her shoulder at the round relentless clock-face on the mantel. 'You see, you eat rather faster than the others, Mr Rossiter, though they have had a bit of a start this morning!'

Did he really bolt his food and make, perhaps, disgusting noises with his mouth?

'That's why I always say we'd rather breakfast early - all of us, even the ones who haven't necessarily got to rush. It's so much homier, one feels, than rough-and-tumble

modern breakfast nowadays. Everybody sort of rushing in and scrambling and snatching and making *grabs* at things off a table at the side. There's nothing so homely,' said Mrs Russel with conscious brilliance, 'as a comfortable sit-down family to breakfast.'

'My God!' said Jervis irritably, 'there's going to be another strike on that damned railway - they're cutting down the trains again. Why *pretend* railways are a convenience - that's what I should like to know?'

No one could tell him.

He pushed his chair back from the table, impatiently, and crossed his legs.

'Pore old thing, then,' trilled Hilary. 'Diddums wazzums cwoss.'

'They're *not* taking off the eight-forty-seven, are they?'

'Not the eight-*forty-seven*?'

'They are. That means either the eight-twenty-seven or the eight-fifty-three. The *eight-fifty-three*!'

'The eight-twenty-seven,' they decided unanimously.

'Then that'll just have to mean breakfast earlier,' said Mrs Russel brightly; 'you won't mind, will you, girls?' Her appeal included Aunt Willoughby, who made no response. 'You see, we couldn't hardly rush them over their breakfasts, could we?'

This was 'home comforts.' This was one of the privileges for which Rossiter paid her twenty-four shillings a week. Being sat round and watched while you were eating. Not being *rushed*. He had a vision of a 'rushed breakfast,' of whirling endlessly through space while one snapped at a sausage with little furtive bites; of munching bread and marmalade with the wind of one's velocity whistling through one's teeth.

Would it be better? Could it be worse?

Not worse than his chair-edge creaking against Miss Emily's; the unceasing consciousness of her unceasing consciousness of him. Not worse than Hilary Bevel, *vis-à-*

vis; with her complacent prettiness, her tinkling, laboured witticisms. Not worse than Aunt Willoughby's baffled, bearded morosity; than Jervis Bevel's sleek disdain.

He would escape from Mrs Russel, her advances, her criticisms, her fumbling arguments that crushed you down beneath their heavy gentleness until you felt you were being trampled to death by a cow. By a blind cow, that fumbled its way backwards and forwards across you ...

The 'girls' delivered their ultimatum in chorus.

'England expects,' declaimed Hilary, turning her eyes towards the ceiling, 'effery woman to - er - do - er herr dew-ty.'

'It's *nice* to be down early,' said Miss Emily earnestly, 'with a nice long day stretching out in front of me.'

'Breakfast will be at quarter to eight sharp,' said Mrs Russel. 'Mr Rossiter, we really must *try* not to lose our collar-studs.'

All his days and nights were loops, curving out from breakfast time, curving back to it again. Inexorably the loops grew smaller, the breakfasts longer; looming more and more over his nights, eating more and more out of his days.

Jervis Bevel's eyes swerved over to the mantelpiece. He pushed his chair back farther over the bristling carpet pile.

'Well,' he said, 'I think it's almost time —'

The room broke up, the table grew smaller again as they all rose from their chairs. Mrs Russel and Aunt Willoughby gathered themselves together; Hilary seized Miss Emily by the back of the waist and punted her laughingly towards the door.

The coffee and the bacon and the hostility and the christian forbearance blew out before them into the chilly hall.

Daffodils

MISS MURCHESON STOPPED AT the corner of the High Street to buy a bunch of daffodils from the flower-man. She counted out her money very carefully, pouring a little stream of coppers from her purse into the palm of her hand.

'— ninepence - ten - eleven - pence halfpenny - a *shilling!* Thank you very much. Good afternoon.'

A gust of wind rushed up the street, whirling her skirts up round her like a ballet-dancer's, and rustling the Reckitts-blue paper round the daffodils. The slender gold trumpets tapped and quivered against her face as she held them up with one hand and pressed her skirts down hastily with the other. She felt as though she had been enticed into a harlequinade by a company of Columbines who were quivering with laughter at her discomfiture; and looked round to see if anyone had witnessed her display of chequered moirette petticoat and the inches of black stocking above her boots. But the world remained unembarrassed.

Today the houses seemed taller and farther apart; the street wider and full of a bright, clear light that cast no shadows and was never sunshine. Under archways and between the houses the distances had a curious transparency, as though they had been painted upon glass. Against the luminous and indeterminate sky the Abbey tower rose distinct and delicate.

Miss Murcheson, forgetting all confusion, was conscious of her wings. She paused again to hitch up the bundle of exercise books slithering down beneath her elbow, then

took the dipping road as a bird swings down into the air. Her mouth was faintly acrid with spring dust and the scent of daffodils was in her nostrils. As she left the High Street farther behind her, the traffic sounded as a faint and murmurous hum, striking here and there a tinkling note like wind-bells.

Under her detachment she was conscious of the houses, the houses and the houses. They were square, flat-faced and plaster-fronted, painted creams and greys and buffs; one, a purplish-rose colour. Venetian shutters flat against the wall broadened the line of the windows, there were coloured fanlights over all the doors. Spiked railings before them shut off their little squares of grass or gravel from the road, and between the railings branches swung out to brush against her dress and recall her to the wonder of their budding loveliness.

Miss Murcheson remembered that her mother would be out for tea, and quickened her steps in anticipation of that delightful solitude. The silver birch tree that distinguished their front garden slanted beckoning her across the pavement. She hesitated, as her gate swung open, and stood looking up and down the road. She was sorry to go in, but could not resist the invitation of the empty house. She wondered if tomorrow would fill her with so strange a stirring as today. Soon, in a few months, it would be summer and there would be nothing more to come. Summer would be beautiful, but this spring made promise of a greater beauty than summer could fulfil; hinted at a mystery which other summers had evaded rather than explained. She went slowly up the steps, fumbling for her latch-key.

The day's dinner still hung dank and heavy in the air of the little hall. She stood in the doorway, with that square of light and sound behind her, craving the protection and the comfort with which that dark entrance had so often

received her. There was a sudden desolation in the emptiness of the house.

Quickly she entered the sitting-room and flung open the window, which set the muslin curtains swaying in the breeze and clanked the little pictures on the walls. The window embrasure was so deep that there was little light in the corners of the room; armchairs and cabinets were lurking in the dusk. The square of daylight by the window was blocked by a bamboo table groaning under an array of photographs. In her sweeping mood she deposed the photographs, thrust the table to one side, and pulled her chair up into the window. 'I can't correct my essays in the dark,' she asserted, though she had done so every evening of the year.

'How tight-laced you are, poor Columbines,' she said, throwing away the paper and seeing how the bass cut deep into the fleshy stems. 'You were brave above it all, but - there now!' She cut the bass and shook the flowers out into a vase. 'I can't correct,' she sighed, 'with you all watching me. You are so terribly flippant!'

But what a curious coincidence: she had set her class to write an essay upon Daffodils! 'You shall judge; I'll read them all out loud. They *will* amuse you.' She dipped her pen in the red-ink pot with an anticipatory titter.

With a creak of wheels a young woman went by slowly, wheeling a perambulator. She leant heavily on the handle-bar, tilting the perambulator on its two back wheels, and staring up, wide-mouthed, at the windows.

'How nice to be so much interested,' thought Miss Murcheson, pressing open the first exercise-book. 'But I'm sure it can't be a good thing for the baby.'

The essays lacked originality. Each paragraph sidled up self-consciously to openings for a suitable quotation, to rush each one through with a gasp of triumph.

And then my heart with pleasure fills

And dances with the daffodils.

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You fade away so soon

She wondered if any of her class could weep for the departure of a daffodil. Mostly they had disclaimed responsibility for such weakness by the stern prefix, 'As the poet says -'. Flora Hopwood had, she remembered, introduced a 'Quotation Dictionary', which must have been round her circle.

'I must forbid it. Why can't they see things for themselves, think them out? I don't believe they ever really see anything, just accept things on the authority of other people. I could make them believe anything. What a responsibility teaching is — But is it? They'd believe me, but they wouldn't care. It wouldn't matter, really.

'They're so horribly used to things. Nothing ever comes new to them that they haven't grown up with. They get their very feelings out of books. Nothing ever surprises or impresses them. When spring comes they get preoccupied, stare dreamily out of the windows. They're thinking out their new hats. Oh, if only I didn't know them quite so well, or knew them a little better!

'If I had a school of my own,' she meditated, running her eyes down the pages and mechanically underlining spelling-mistakes, 'I would make them think. I'd horrify them, if nothing better. But here - how ever can one, teaching at a High School? Miss Peterson would —

'They *do* like me. At least, one set does, I know. I'm rather a cult, they appreciate my Titian hair. They'd like me more, though, if I knew how to do it better, and knew better how to use my eyes. Their sentimentality embarrasses me. In a way they're so horribly mature, I feel at a disadvantage with them. If only they'd be a little more spontaneous. But