THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS

Muriel Spark

Introduced by Rosemary Goring

Polygon

This edition published in Great Britain in 2018
by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978 1 84697 431 1

The publisher gratefully acknowledges investment from
Creative Scotland towards the publication of this book.

Supported by the Muriel Spark Society

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
on request from the British Library.

Typeset by Biblichor Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Malta by Gutenberg Press

I

Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions. The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wallpapers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room above room, exposed, as on a stage, with one wall missing; sometimes a lavatory chain would dangle over nothing from a fourth- or fifth-floor ceiling; most of all the staircases survived, like a new art-form, leading up and up to an unspecified destination that made unusual demands on the mind's eye. All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit.

There was absolutely no point in feeling depressed about the scene, it would have been like feeling depressed about the Grand Canyon or some event of the earth outside everybody's scope. People continued to exchange assurances of depressed feelings about the weather or the news, or the Albert Memorial which had not been hit, not even shaken, by any bomb from first to last.

The May of Teck Club stood obliquely opposite the site of the Memorial, in one of a row of tall houses which had endured, but barely; some bombs had dropped near by, and

in a few back gardens, leaving the buildings cracked on the outside and shakily hinged within, but habitable for the time being. The shattered windows had been replaced with new glass rattling in loose frames. More recently, the bituminous black-out paint had been removed from landing and bathroom windows. Windows were important in that year of final reckoning; they told at a glance whether a house was inhabited or not; and in the course of the past years they had accumulated much meaning, having been the main danger-zone between domestic life and the war going on outside: everyone had said, when the sirens sounded, 'Mind the windows. Keep away from the windows. Watch out for the glass.'

The May of Teck Club had been three times window-shattered since 1940, but never directly hit. There the windows of the upper bedrooms overlooked the dip and rise of treetops in Kensington Gardens across the street, with the Albert Memorial to be seen by means of a slight craning and twist of the neck. These upper bedrooms looked down on the opposite pavement on the park side of the street, and on the tiny people who moved along in neat-looking singles and couples, pushing little prams loaded with pin-head babies and provisions, or carrying little dots of shopping bags. Everyone carried a shopping bag in case they should be lucky enough to pass a shop that had a sudden stock of something off the rations.

From the lower-floor dormitories the people in the street looked larger, and the paths of the park were visible. All the nice people were poor, and few were nicer, as nice people come, than these girls at Kensington who glanced out of the windows in the early mornings to see what the day looked like, or gazed out on the green summer evenings, as if reflecting on the months ahead, on love and the relations of love. Their eyes gave out an eager-spirited light that

resembled near-genius, but was youth merely. The first of the Rules of Constitution, drawn up at some remote and innocent Edwardian date, still applied more or less to them:

> The May of Teck Club exists for the Pecuniary Convenience and Social Protection of Ladies of Slender Means below the age of Thirty Years, who are obliged to reside apart from their Families in order to follow an Occupation in London.

As they realised themselves in varying degrees, few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means.

'I've got something to tell you,' said Jane Wright, the woman columnist.

At the other end of the telephone, the voice of Dorothy Markham, owner of the flourishing model agency, said, 'Darling, where have you been?' She spoke, by habit since her débutante days, with the utmost enthusiasm of tone.

'I've got something to tell you. Do you remember Nicholas Farringdon? Remember he used to come to the old May of Teck just after the war, he was an anarchist and poet sort of thing. A tall man with –'

'The one that got on to the roof to sleep out with Selina?'

'Yes, Nicholas Farringdon.'

'Oh rather. Has he turned up?'

'No, he's been martyred.'

'What-ed?'

'Martyred in Haiti. Killed. Remember he became a Brother –'

'But I've just been to Tahiti, it's marvellous, everyone's marvellous. Where did you hear it?'

'Haiti. There's a news paragraph just come over Reuters. I'm sure it's the same Nicholas Farringdon because it says a missionary, former poet. I nearly died. I knew him well, you know, in those days. I expect they'll hush it all up, about those days, if they want to make a martyr story.'

'How did it happen, is it gruesome?'

'Oh, I don't know, there's only a paragraph.'

'You'll have to find out more through your grapevine. I'm shattered. I've got heaps to tell you.'

> The Committee of Management wishes to express surprise at the Members' protest regarding the wallpaper chosen for the drawing room. The Committee wishes to point out that Members' residential fees do not meet the running expenses of the Club. The Committee regrets that the spirit of the May of Teck foundation has apparently so far deteriorated that such a protest has been made. The Committee refers Members to the terms of the Club's Foundation.

Joanna Childe was a daughter of a country rector. She had a good intelligence and strong obscure emotions. She was training to be a teacher of elocution and, while attending a school of drama, already had pupils of her own. Joanna Childe had been drawn to this profession by her good voice and love of poetry which she loved rather as it might be assumed a cat loves birds; poetry, especially the declamatory sort, excited and possessed her; she would pounce on the stuff, play with it quivering in her mind, and when she had got it by heart, she spoke it forth with devouring relish. Mostly, she indulged the habit while giving elocution lessons at the club where she was highly thought of for it. The vibrations of Joanna's elocution voice from her room or

from the recreation room where she frequently rehearsed, were felt to add tone and style to the establishment when boy-friends called. Her taste in poetry became the accepted taste of the club. She had a deep feeling for certain passages in the authorised version of the Bible, besides the Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and had newly discovered Dylan Thomas. She was not moved by the poetry of Eliot and Auden, except for the latter's lyric:

> Lay your sleeping head, my love,
> Human on my faithless arm;

Joanna Childe was large, with light shiny hair, blue eyes and deep-pink cheeks. When she read the notice signed by Lady Julia Markham, chairwoman of the committee, she stood with the other young women round the green baize board and was given to murmur: 'He rageth, and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short.'

It was not known to many that this was a reference to the Devil, but it caused amusement. She had not intended it so. It was not usual for Joanna to quote anything for its aptitude, and at conversational pitch.

Joanna, who was now of age, would henceforth vote conservative in the elections, which at that time in the May of Teck Club was associated with a desirable order of life that none of the members was old enough to remember from direct experience. In principle they all approved of what the committee's notice stood for. And so Joanna was alarmed by the amused reaction to her quotation, the hearty laugh of understanding that those days were over when the members of anything whatsoever might not raise their voices against the drawing-room wallpaper. Principles regardless,

everyone knew that the notice was plain damned funny. Lady Julia must be feeling pretty desperate.

'He rageth and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short.'

Little dark Judy Redwood who was a shorthand typist in the Ministry of Labour said, 'I've got a feeling that as members we're legally entitled to a say in the administration. I must ask Geoffrey.' This was the man Judy was engaged to. He was still in the forces, but had qualified as a solicitor before being called up. His sister, Anne Baberton, who stood with the notice-board group, said, 'Geoffrey would be the last person I would consult.' Anne Baberton said this to indicate that she knew Geoffrey better than Judy knew him; she said it to indicate affectionate scorn; she said it because it was the obvious thing for a nicely brought-up sister to say, since she was proud of him; and besides all this, there was an element of irritation in her words, 'Geoffrey would be the last person I would consult', for she knew there was no point in members taking up this question of the drawing-room wallpaper.

Anne trod out her cigarette-end contemptuously on the floor of the large entrance hall with its pink and grey Victorian tiles. This was pointed to by a thin middle-aged woman, one of the few older, if not exactly the earliest members. She said, 'One is not permitted to put cigarette-ends on the floor.' The words did not appear to impress themselves on the ears of the group, more than the ticking of the grandfather clock behind them. But Anne said, 'Isn't one permitted to spit on the floor, even?' 'One certainly isn't,' said the spinster. 'Oh, I thought one was,' said Anne.

The May of Teck Club was founded by Queen Mary before her marriage to King George the Fifth, when she was Princess May of Teck. On an afternoon between the

engagement and the marriage, the Princess had been induced to come to London and declare officially open the May of Teck Club which had been endowed by various gentle forces of wealth.

None of the original Ladies remained in the club. But three subsequent members had been permitted to stay on past the stipulated age-limit of thirty, and were now in their fifties, and had resided at the May of Teck Club since before the First World War at which time, they said, all members had been obliged to dress for dinner.

Nobody knew why these three women had not been asked to leave when they had reached the age of thirty. Even the warden and committee did not know why the three remained. It was now too late to turn them out with decency. It was too late even to mention to them the subject of their continuing residence. Successive committees before 1939 had decided that the three older residents might, in any case, be expected to have a good influence on the younger ones.

During the war the matter had been left in abeyance, since the club was half empty; in any case members' fees were needed, and bombs were then obliterating so much and so many in the near vicinity that it was an open question whether indeed the three spinsters would remain upright with the house to the end. By 1945 they had seen much coming of new girls and going of old, and were generally liked by the current batch, being subject to insults when they interfered in anything, and intimate confidences when they kept aloof. The confidences seldom represented the whole truth, particularly those revealed by the young women who occupied the top floor. The three spinsters were, through the ages, known and addressed as Collie (Miss Coleman), Greggie (Miss Macgregor) and Jarvie (Miss Jarman). It was Greggie who

had said to Anne by the notice-board: 'One isn't permitted to put cigarette-ends on the floor.'

'Isn't one permitted to spit on the floor, even?'

'No, one isn't.'

'Oh, I thought one was.'

Greggie affected an indulgent sigh and pushed her way through the crowd of younger members. She went to the open door, set in a wide porch, to look out at the summer evening like a shopkeeper waiting for custom. Greggie always behaved as if she owned the club.

The gong was about to sound quite soon. Anne kicked her cigarette-stub into a dark corner.

Greggie called over her shoulder, 'Anne, here comes your boy-friend.'

'On time, for once,' said Anne, with the same pretence of scorn that she had adopted when referring to her brother Geoffrey: 'Geoffrey would be the last person I would consult.' She moved, with her casual hips, towards the door.

A square-built high-coloured young man in the uniform of an English captain came smiling in. Anne stood regarding him as if he was the last person in the world she would consult.

'Good evening,' he said to Greggie as a well-brought-up man would naturally say to a woman of Greggie's years standing in the doorway. He made a vague nasal noise of recognition to Anne, which if properly pronounced would have been 'Hallo'. She said nothing at all by way of greeting. They were nearly engaged to be married.

'Like to come in and see the drawing-room wallpaper?' Anne said then.

'No, let's get cracking.'

Anne went to get her coat off the banister where she had slung it. He was saying to Greggie, 'Lovely evening, isn't it?'

Anne returned with her coat slung over her shoulder. 'Bye, Greggie,' she said. 'Goodbye,' said the soldier. Anne took his arm.

'Have a nice time,' said Greggie.

The dinner-gong sounded and there was a scuffle of feet departing from the notice-board and a scamper of feet from the floors above.

On a summer night during the previous week the whole club, forty-odd women, with any young men who might happen to have called that evening, had gone like swift migrants into the dark cool air of the park, crossing its wide acres as the crow flies in the direction of Buckingham Palace, there to express themselves along with the rest of London on the victory in the war with Germany. They clung to each other in twos and threes, fearful of being trampled. When separated, they clung to, and were clung to by, the nearest person. They became members of a wave of the sea, they surged and sang until, at every half-hour interval, a light flooded the tiny distant balcony of the Palace and four small straight digits appeared upon it: the King, the Queen, and the two Princesses. The royal family raised their right arms, their hands fluttered as in a slight breeze, they were three candles in uniform and one in the recognisable fur-trimmed folds of the civilian queen in war-time. The huge organic murmur of the crowd, different from anything like the voice of animate matter but rather more a cataract or a geological disturbance, spread through the parks and along the Mall. Only the St John's Ambulance men, watchful beside their vans, had any identity left. The royal family waved, turned to go, lingered and waved again, and finally disappeared. Many strange arms were twined round strange bodies. Many liaisons, some permanent, were formed in the night, and numerous infants

of experimental variety, delightful in hue of skin and racial structure, were born to the world in the due cycle of nine months after. The bells pealed. Greggie observed that it was something between a wedding and a funeral on a world scale.

The next day everyone began to consider where they personally stood in the new order of things.

Many citizens felt the urge, which some began to indulge, to insult each other, in order to prove something or to test their ground.

The government reminded the public that it was still at war. Officially this was undeniable, but except to those whose relations lay in the Far-Eastern prisons of war, or were stuck in Burma, that war was generally felt to be a remote affair.

A few shorthand typists at the May of Teck Club started to apply for safer jobs – that is to say, in private concerns, not connected with the war like the temporary Ministries where many of them had been employed.

Their brothers and men friends in the forces, not yet demobilised, by a long way, were talking of vivid enterprises for the exploitation of peace, such as buying a lorry and building up from it a transport business.

'I've got something to tell you,' said Jane.

'Just a minute till I shut the door. The kids are making a row,' Anne said. And presently, when she returned to the telephone, she said, 'Yes, carry on.'

'Do you remember Nicholas Farringdon?'

'I seem to remember the name.'

'Remember I brought him to the May of Teck in nineteen forty-five, he used to come often for supper. He got mixed up with Selina.'

'Oh, Nicholas. The one who got up on the roof? What a long time ago that was. Have you seen him?'

'I've just seen a news item that's come over Reuters. He's been killed in a local rising in Haiti.'

'Really? How awful! What was he doing there?'

'Well, he became a missionary or something.'

'No!'

'Yes. It's terribly tragic. I knew him well.'

'Ghastly. It brings everything back. Have you told Selina?'

'Well, I haven't been able to get her. You know what Selina's like these days, she won't answer the phone personally, you have to go through thousands of secretaries or whatever they are.'

'You could get a good story for your paper out of it, Jane,' Anne said.

'I know that. I'm just waiting to get more details. Of course it's all those years ago since I knew him, but it would be an interesting story.'

Two men – poets by virtue of the fact that the composition of poetry was the only consistent thing they had so far done – beloved of two May of Teck girls and, at the moment, of nobody else, sat in their corduroy trousers in a café in Bayswater with their silent listening admirers and talked about the new future as they flicked the page-proofs of an absent friend's novel. A copy of *Peace News* lay on the table between them. One of the men said to the other:

> And now what will become of us without Barbarians? Those people were some sort of a solution.

And the other smiled, bored-like, but conscious that very few in all the great metropolis and its tributary provinces were as yet privy to the source of these lines. This other

who smiled was Nicholas Farringdon, not yet known or as yet at all likely to be.

'Who wrote that?' said Jane Wright, a fat girl who worked for a publisher and who was considered to be brainy but somewhat below standard, socially, at the May of Teck.

Neither man replied.

'Who wrote that?' Jane said again.

The poet nearest her said, through his thick spectacles, 'An Alexandrian poet.'

'A new poet?'

'No, but fairly new to this country.'

'What's his name?'

He did not reply. The young men had started talking again. They talked about the decline and fall of the anarchist movement on the island of their birth in terms of the personalities concerned. They were bored with educating the girls for this evening.