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To Bed with Grand Music

Written by Marghanita Laski

Published by Persephone Books Ltd

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Persephone Book N° 86
Published by Persephone Books Ltd 2009

First published in 1946 by
Pilot Press Ltd by 'Sarah Russell'

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Preface © Juliet Gardiner 2009

Endpapers taken from a Jacquar scarf
'Good Night Everybody' c. 1940,
in a private collection

Typeset in ITC Baskerville by
Keystroke, Tettenhall, Wolverhampton

Printed and bound in Germany by
GGP Media GmbH, Poesneck

9781903155769

Persephone Books Ltd
59 Lamb's Conduit Street
London WC1N 3NB
020 7242 9292

www.persephonebooks.co.uk

TO BED WITH GRAND MUSIC

by

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(MARGHANITA LASKI)



with a new preface by

JULIET GARDINER

PERSEPHONE BOOKS

LONDON



TO BED WITH GRAND MUSIC

CHAPTER ONE



Graham and Deborah Robertson lay in bed together and tried to say goodbye to each other.

Deborah whimpered, 'I can't let you go, I can't,' and then lay shivering with the uselessness of her protest.

Graham moved away from her a little, and sighed. 'Darling,' he said, 'darling, don't make it harder for me. God alone knows the last thing on earth I want is to go away from you, but there's just damn all I can do about it. Darling, don't you think I shan't be missing you every hour of every day, thinking how bloody attractive you are and that I'm not here to be with you?'

Deborah flung herself upon him, digging her nails into his neck. She sobbed, 'You're a swine to say such things, you know I love you and I'll always love you. Darling, my darling, you don't have to worry about me, promise you'll never worry about me in that way, because I swear you don't have to.' She paused and stopped crying. With an ugly edge to her voice, she said, 'Anyway, what about you?'

There was a moment's silence, then Graham pushed his arm under her shoulders and held her close to him.



'Listen darling,' he said, 'I'm not going to promise you I'll be physically faithful to you, because I don't want to make you any promise I may not be able to keep. God alone knows how long I may be stuck in Mid-East, and it's no good saying I can do without a woman for three or four years, because I can't. But I'll promise you this, I'll never let myself fall in love with anyone else, and I'll never sleep with anyone who could possibly fill your place in any part of my life.' He was himself a little overawed with the magnanimity of his proposal. That means I'll have to be pretty damn careful, he said to himself, but aloud he said, 'Darling, will you promise me the same?'

Deborah, who had lain quietly in the familiar reassurance of her husband's arm, now sat up in bed, taut with emotion, and said stiffly, 'I promise you I will always be faithful to you, however long you're away. I love you, and even if I wanted another man, my love for you would prevent me doing anything about it.' She stopped and wondered frantically, isn't that enough to make him say the same, if I can do it, he can. But he remained silent, and she drooped a little, then added, 'Besides, I've got Timmy.'

Both fell with relief on this theme which seemed to offer a momentary relief from tension and the possibility of complete agreement. Graham said, 'You'll see he doesn't forget me, won't you, darling?'

'He can't possibly forget you,' said Deborah firmly, 'I'll be talking about you most of the time to him – after all you're the main thing we've got in common. It seems to me the danger is much more that he'll come to idealise you too



much, and have such a splendid picture of you in his mind, that you won't be able to live up to it when you *do* come back to us.'

'He's a nice baby,' Graham said, thinking wholly of his two-year-old son, of his soft fair hair, his smooth skin, his sudden chuckles, the pleased recognition in his eyes. 'Deborah, you're glad we had him, aren't you?'

The atmosphere of the imminent parting settled down on them again. Deborah said, 'I think I'd go mad if I hadn't got him. But with Timmy and our home, I've got something solid to stick to. I mean, whatever I do for Timmy or for the cottage, I'm doing, in a way, for you, and for our life together afterwards. It's all a part of you and me.'

They lay clasped together in the darkness, then Deborah said with a spurt of bitterness, 'But if I hadn't got him, I'd move heaven and earth to get a job in Cairo and be with you. Some people leave their babies and do that anyway, and then they have their second one out there. Probably Timmy will be much too old before we can have another now.'

Graham felt a deep weariness at this farewell. Each emotional peak surmounted revealed only a higher one beyond. But he said patiently, 'Darling, the last thing on earth I'd let you do would be to come to Cairo now. It looks as if Rommel will be there before I am, anyway, and David's last airgraph said that practically all the women and children were being sent out.'

'Well,' said Deborah angrily, 'I don't want you to leave me in order to languish in a German prison camp for the rest of the war.'



'Look here,' Graham said, in equal anger, 'don't you think it would be better if we both forgot for a moment about all the bloody things that might happen and look on what you could call the bright side? Parting from you is unutterable hell, but really we're damn lucky. I'm going out to a staff job that's as safe as anything reasonably can be. You're staying here in our own home with our own baby to look after. I love and adore you and always shall, I shall never be unfaithful to you in any way that even you could possibly mind, and we know that as soon as the war is over we're going to be together again and have everything we had before, only better.' He paused. Beside him, Deborah was sobbing quietly, but now there was no anger in her sobs. He picked up one of her hands and kissed it. 'Darling,' he said, 'oh, darling. God, how I adore you.'

Now they were wholly together, now it was certain that their unity would persist and endure.

II

Next morning they walked together round the garden in the early light. Graham looked at everything with the intensity of conscious effort, the determination to have his memory accurate and sure. I shall always remember, he thought, the stonecrop on the walls, the colour of the roof, the distant Hampshire downs grey over the tops of the beeches, the odd shabby blue of the waterbutt by the scullery window. The morning sky was faint and cloudless, the air was cool. 'It's going to be a hot day,' said Deborah. They stood still and looked



at the cottage, both fixing this moment to hold against the future.

Faintly, so that at first they could believe it an illusion, they heard the engine of the village taxi that was to take Graham in to Winchester.

‘He’s dead on time,’ he said, looking at his watch. ‘My stuff is all down, isn’t it?’

He put his arms round her, buried his mouth in her neck. ‘Darling,’ he half sobbed, ‘darling, it’s going to be all right, isn’t it? Darling, we won’t let anything spoil it, will we?’

Deborah whispered wildly, ‘I promise you it will be all right. I love you, I love you, I don’t want anyone else ever. Darling, I promise you, you’ve not got to worry about me at all. I’ll wait for you, and I’ll be happy waiting, I promise you, darling, it’s worth it.’

For a moment they stood silent. Then he said, ‘I’m not going to say goodbye to Timmy. He liked yesterday, and I don’t want him to remember saying goodbye to me. God bless you both, darling. Maybe it won’t be for long.’

He moved away from her, saluted her with an awkward rigid smile and went.

III

When the noise of Graham’s taxi had died away, Deborah’s first sensation was of relief. The strain of his embarkation leave had been almost intolerable, and now that he had inevitably gone, the release from emotional tension was



immediate. She had plenty to do. Mrs Chalmers, her mother's help, dealt with all the cooking and housework of the cottage, but in caring for Timmy, making his clothes, working in the garden, Deborah found her days sufficiently filled. Now that Graham had gone and her week's isolation with him was ended, there were again the normal social occupations of the village: the evening's bridge at the doctor's, the morning a week at the hospital canteen, the swopping over of children so that one or the other mother could get to see that new film in Winchester. Graham had gone, and the known monotony of her daily life was more than a comfort to Deborah. There was no opportunity for her to stop and bewail this separation for there was no one in the village from whom she could have expected sympathy; both the doctor's sons were away in the Navy; Betty Marsden had already lost her husband in France in 1940; Mrs Wendover's husband was safely in the North of Scotland, but she was held in the village by her house and her four children, and he hadn't been able to get south for the past six months. If Graham *had* to go off and leave me, Deborah said to herself, I think this is far and away the best place to be left in.

It was not until the end of August that Deborah's content began to break up. Each autumn in wartime, everyone is slightly more depressed than they were each spring, for they look forward to cold and black-out and bombing, and another Christmas of war. They have forgotten the fantastic hopes they entertained as the last winter faded away, or, if they remember them, it is only to contrast their past expectations with present reality.



So by the end of August Deborah was restless and bored. Her temper was ragged, and Timmy's reiterated and monotonous questions began to make her snap angrily at him, to cry, 'Shut up!' or in a fretful voice, 'Please stop talking, Timmy, Mummy just can't stand it,' and then to feel for herself all the pity she irrationally expected of the two-year-old Timmy. It was even a relief when one evening she had a trunk-call from her mother to say that she had just finished fitting her new clothes in London, and would like to come and spend a weekend with Deborah before going back to Leeds.

There had not been, for the last ten years, so much a state of enmity as of irritation between Mrs Ernest Betts and her daughter. Each looked on the other's standards with convinced contempt, and each, unfortunately, was possessed of a certain proselytising zeal that made nothing more difficult than to leave inviolate another person's point of view. During their struggle for supremacy Ernest Betts had died almost unnoticed, save as a counter in argument for whichever protagonist could drag his name in first. Ernest Betts had been a schoolboy in Leeds, a merchant in Leeds, and latterly a town councillor. His wife, who had met him in the first stage and buried him in the last, found such a life orderly and admirable. She had wanted nothing different for Deborah and was thoroughly annoyed when her daughter, on leaving school, had declared that she had an aptitude for art that only a course at the Slade could fulfil.

Mrs Betts was not altogether unperceptive. Had Deborah wanted the Slade as an ultimate enrichment of a life similar to her own, Mrs Betts would have raised no protest. She had



always had her communal work to fall back on and Deborah might just as well have had art. Equally, had Mrs Betts been assured that Deborah wanted the Slade because she must paint and couldn't live without paint, Mrs Betts would have been wholly sympathetic, for the reverence of most provincial citizens towards genuine art is altogether admirable. But Mrs Betts was no fool and she knew that Deborah wanted to go to the Slade for one reason only, and that was to marry out of the provinces into a better social position.

And she pulled it off all right, reflected her mother, jolting towards Deborah in the bus. Took her two years' fees at the Slade, but she pulled it off. Not that young Graham's got anything like as much money as she could have picked up at home, though I suppose an architect seems more high-falutin' to her ladyship than a successful business man. Doesn't to me, I must say, and mentally she priced the admirable and styleless garments she had just bought in London, and decided once again that life as the widow of a Leeds councillor was just about as good a life as could be lived.

Deborah was waiting for her at the Leather Bottle when the Winchester bus pulled in. She kissed her mother with unusual fervour, and said, 'Darling, I'm so glad you've come. I've been so lonely.'

'You look a bit off colour,' stated her mother, looking with surprise and some disfavour at Deborah's tired and pallid face, grubby sweater, and baggy tweed skirt. She decided not to enlarge on the subject yet, but asked, 'Where's Timmy?'

'He's out to tea with Betty Marsden's brats,' Deborah



replied wearily, 'I thought we'd fetch him on our way home.' She picked up her mother's zipped travelling bag. 'Is this all you've got?'

'Yes, I left the rest in the cloakroom at Winchester station,' said Mrs Betts. 'Well, let's be getting along. I haven't seen my grandson for over a year. Not much chance of him recognising me, I'm afraid.'

The two women walked up the village street in silence. They had never developed the art of meaningless small-talk with each other; virtually all their talks together had been fraught with deep personal significance and both, secretly delighting in and openly deprecating their emotional orgies, instinctively left these to a time when they could be pursued at leisure with no possibility of their being cut short by outside interference.

They picked up Timothy and continued their way to the cottage. Mrs Betts critically appraised her grandson. A year ago she had seen a rosy robust baby sitting triumphantly on the floor, crowing with uncontrollable delight at everything; now Timothy was thin and pale and uncertain of himself. He chattered constantly, but with no real gaiety, always glancing sideways towards his mother and then determinedly talking again.

Mrs Chalmers was waiting for them in the hall of the cottage. 'How nice to see you again, Mrs Betts,' she said pleasantly, and there was something in the way she said it that made Mrs Betts look sharply at her and decide that a few minutes' chat in the kitchen might not be time wasted. Mrs Chalmers added, 'Shall I put Timmy to bed for you



tonight, Mrs Robertson? I'm sure you're longing to have a real nice talk with your mother.'

Deborah wearily assented, and her mother, following her into the sitting-room, heard Timmy going upstairs, saying in a voice entirely different from the one he had used on the walk home, 'Do you know, Mo, Pam gave me two chocolates after tea,' and Mrs Chalmers replying with apparently sincere interest, 'And did they have toffee middles or were they chocolate all the way through?' Deborah shut the door and said, 'I'm sorry I haven't anything to offer you, but it's practically impossible to get any drinks with Graham away.'

'I've brought you a bottle of sherry, it's in my bag,' said Mrs Betts. Deborah, with the first animation her mother had seen, said, 'Oh, good show,' and went for glasses and a corkscrew, while Mrs Betts produced the bottle.

Deborah began to look a little less tired. She questioned her mother eagerly about London, the shops, the restaurants. Mrs Betts said in surprise, 'But haven't you been up to town lately?'

'How can I?' said Deborah impatiently, 'I've got Timmy to see to, haven't I?'

'Mrs Chalmers looks very capable,' Mrs Betts mentioned tentatively, 'and Timmy seems very fond of her.'

'Oh, she's all right.' Deborah was sulky. 'She drives me absolutely mad most of the time. She's always yattering in that awful cheerful voice. It's all right for you to come on a visit and see how nice and helpful she is, but you'd go mad too if you had to sit with her every evening of your life and listen to the most godawful programmes on the radio or hear



her flat voice droning on about the late lamented husband in the Merchant Navy.'

Mrs Betts thought drily that those evenings must also be extremely trying for Mrs Chalmers, but she politely changed the subject and asked, 'And what do you hear from Graham?'

An uncontrollable spasm of vicious jealousy passed over Deborah's face. 'He seems to be having a marvellous time,' she said bitterly, 'moonlight picnics in the desert and sherry-parties and dances and what-not.' She looked across at her mother and burst out, 'I tell you it's almost unendurable, thinking of him away in the sun, seeing new places and people and going to parties and things, while I'm stuck here. And I know I ought to write him nice long cheerful letters about the happy home he's left behind and what-not, and I simply can't. I'm too miserable. Most of the time I just wish I were dead.'

There was a knock at the door and Mrs Chalmers' voice saying brightly, 'Timmy wants to say good night to Mummy and Grannie.' The women obediently filed upstairs, heard the baby's prayers, kissed him, and then came down again to supper.

Over the cold meat and salad, Mrs Betts and Mrs Chalmers kept up a bright flow of trivial small-talk, while Deborah glowered in her chair at their self-conscious, self-righteous acceptance of the situation's social demands. When the meal was over, Mrs Chalmers said, 'Well, seeing as you're both going to be in, you won't mind if I run across to Miss Langham? She's having a sewing-party and she's promised to show me



how to make those nice felt bedroom slippers. I'll wash up before I go.'

Settled in their armchairs drinking coffee, both women tacitly decided not to have a serious talk that evening. So Deborah politely asked after her old schoolfellows in Leeds and learnt without emotion or interest that Moira had married that nice young doctor, and Jean had had twins, while Mrs Betts tucked away the information that Graham's parents, who had gone to New York in 1940, had now moved on to friends in California and were proposing to stay there till the war was over; 'clears the decks,' was her mental comment, and at ten o'clock, feeling no further progress could be made till after the kitchen talk with Mrs Chalmers, she went up to bed.

Deborah and her mother had an instinctive understanding of each other's needs. Deborah, knowing perfectly that her mother was prepared to help her yet required as a preliminary the confidential talk behind her daughter's back, said next morning at breakfast, 'Mummy, I hope you don't mind, but I'd made an appointment to get my hair done in Winchester this morning; I'll be back for lunch.' The statement was so expected that the three women looked down at the tablecloth, fearing the embarrassment of understanding in each other's eyes.