Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Master Georgie

Written by Beryl Bainbridge

Published by Abacus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

MASTER GEORGIE

Beryl Bainbridge

ABACUS

An *Abacus* Book

First published in Great Britain by
Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd 1998
Published by Abacus 1999

Copyright © Beryl Bainbridge 1998

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters in this publication other than those clearly in the public domain are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 349 11169 3

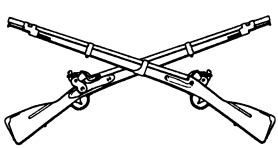
Typeset in Palatino by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

Little, Brown and Company (UK)
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

For Mike and Parvin Laurence

Plate 1. 1846

GIRL IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH



I was twelve years old the first time Master Georgie ordered me to stand stock still and not blink. My head was on a level with the pillow and he had me rest my hand on Mr Hardy's shoulder; a finger-tip chill struck through the cloth of his white cotton shirt. It was a Saturday, the feast of the Assumption, and to stop my eyelids from fluttering I pretended God would strike me blind if I let them, which is why I ended up looking so startled. Mr Hardy didn't have to be told to keep still because he was dead.

I say I was twelve years old, but I can't be sure. I don't recollect a mother and never had a birthday until the Hardy family took me in. According to Master Georgie, I'd been found some nine years before, in a cellar in Seel Street, sat beside the body of a woman whose throat had been nibbled by rats.

I didn't have a name, so they called me Myrtle, after the street where the orphanage stands. It was intended I should be placed there, and I would have been if the smallpox hadn't broken out. Instead, a business gentleman on the board of the Liverpool

Health Committee and known to Mr Hardy pressed him to house me until the epidemic was over. When this happened and it came time for my departure, Miss Beatrice set up howling; she'd taken a fancy to me. She lost interest the following year when Mr Hardy brought home the dog, but by then Mrs O'Gorman had taken me in hand, so they let me be.

I was fortunate, for I was taught to read by Mrs Hardy, and Mr Hardy sometimes chucked me under the chin and asked how I did. Often, I was allowed to play with Master Freddie, before he went away to school. It was only Mrs O'Gorman who ever beat me, and that for my own good. I was not loved and counted it a blessing; it meant my affections raged undiluted and I could lavish all on Master Georgie.

I don't remember anything about being found. Master Georgie once told me that if I concentrated hard enough the memories might come back, like the images that reared up on his photogenic plates. That scared me, for he performed such magic in the dark, and sometimes, after he'd put the idea into my head, waking at night to the shuffle of leaves along the guttering, I fancied there was a ghastly picture about to imprint itself upon the windowpane. Noticing the shadows under my eyes and ferreting out the cause, Mrs O'Gorman declared he was a wicked boy for spooning me such nonsense.

Twice I went back to that house in Seel Street and

stood at the railings. The basement area was flooded and the window glass too grimy to peer through.

That particular afternoon in damp August – the one that ended so curiously – began with Mrs Hardy plummeting into one of her states. I'd been summoned to see to the tiger-skin rug. The dog had got in again and Mrs O'Gorman had shooed me upstairs to stiff-brush its grey hairs from those blazing stripes. Master Georgie and Mrs Hardy were seated at opposite ends of the dining-room table.

I didn't like the tiger; its jaws gaped open and unlike Mr Hardy it didn't have any lids to its eyes, which meant they glared. Mrs Hardy detested the rug as much as I did, though for different reasons. Mr Hardy swore he'd bagged the beast himself, in the Madras Province, in the days when he'd been employed as an overseer of Irrigation Works. It was a boast Mrs Hardy had shaken to fragments on more than one agitated occasion; she spat he'd bought it cheap at Riley's auction rooms in Water Street and carried it home over his shoulder.

The rug was positioned in front of the french windows overlooking the garden and the orchard beyond, so I had my back to the table when Mrs Hardy said, 'Georgie, dear, you won't be going to the Institute today, will you?'

He agreed he wouldn't.

'Though I expect you'll be going out on business.'

Young as I was I sensed this was more in the nature of an accusation than a supposition. The brush turned to stone in my hand. Mrs Hardy frightened me, for she stared so. Often, when her mouth smiled it didn't signify she was pleased. All the same, she had rescued me, taught me my letters, and I didn't want her upset. I fixed my gaze on the plum trees in the orchard. Miss Beatrice was out there, pirouetting under branches laden with round, rotten fruit. Fat Dr Potter stalked her, face raised to the cloudy heavens.

I heard Georgie say, 'Not business, Mother. I'm meeting William Rimmer.'

'Of course you are,' she replied. 'You men always have friends to see . . . either that or business to see to.'

There was a silence for a long minute, broken by tapping. I swivelled on my haunches, making believe I was attending to the bony head of the tiger. Mrs Hardy was stabbing at the food on her plate and giving one of her stares, eyes lachrymose with bulging misery; gravy splattered the cloth. Master Georgie had explained to me that the stare was peculiar to a malfunction of the thyroid, a gland common to us all, only in Mrs Hardy's case it had started growing. As for her misery, why, that was all due to her husband; she was a neglected wife. Mr Hardy had promised to come home at midday and already it was five after three by the clock on the mantelshelf.

Master Georgie rose then and stooped to kiss his mother on the cheek. She jerked her head away and he made a small mew of annoyance.

'For pity's sake,' she whined, 'help me, for I can't help myself.'

'I don't know how to, Mother,' he said, and the defeated slump of his shoulders pierced me to the quick.

Usually he offered to stay with her when she was out of sorts, and almost always she told him not to be foolish. This time he didn't utter a word. He just stood there, looking down at her tear-stained face. She was harder on him than on either Master Freddie or Miss Beatrice. It was because he was her first born and she'd been torn to pieces before he plopped out. Mrs O'Gorman told me that. I didn't doubt he loved her still, but those childhood days when he could show clinging proof of it had gone for ever.

She said bitterly, 'Don't look so worried, Georgie. You mustn't let my little misfortunes spoil your day,' to which he retorted with equal bitterness, 'To hear is to obey.' I ran out of the room because I couldn't bear it any longer.

The hall kept changing from dark to light as clouds ran over the sun. When I dragged the plug of dog hairs from the brush a current of air from the leaded window whirled it, dandelion fashion, up the well of the stairs to circle the antlers of the stag's head on the landing.

The evening before, Mrs O'Gorman had trapped me in the scullery to acquaint me with the Assumption. She said someone had to school me, seeing I was being raised in such a Godless house. That was a dig at Dr Potter, for being under the sway of the new sciences. Dr Potter held that the world wasn't created in six days; it was more like thousands of years. Why, even mountains hadn't always stayed in the same place. St James' Mount, which overlooks the sunken cemetery, may once have been a flat stretch of earth, grassless under a sheet of ice.

It didn't worry me like it did Mrs O'Gorman, who moaned that it wasn't for the likes of her to doubt the permanency of rocks. But then, her rock was the Kingdom of Heaven and she didn't want it shifted.

She'd pinned me to the chair at the scullery table and trumpeted that tomorrow was a special day, one on which the body of Our Lord's mother had been wafted up to heaven to be united with her soul. The worms hadn't got to her like they will with me, on account of Our Lord loving her so. I only half believed her.

Above me, the web of hair began to drift apart. I mouthed *He loves me, he loves me not*, though I wasn't thinking of Our Lord.

Presently Master Georgie emerged and began to button himself into his outdoor coat. His fur-lined cloak, the one I tugged out later, hung abandoned in the hall closet. He'd left off wearing it because Mr

Hardy, returning merry with drink from mornings at the Corn Exchange, had cried out once too often, '*O Vanitas vanitatem*.'

A noise of busted china came from the dining room. Master Georgie flinched; Mrs Hardy's heart was in pieces for the umpteenth time and she was taking it out on the dinner plates. A sunbeam pierced the fanlight above the front door, painting his hair with silver.

Just then, Mrs O'Gorman came up the basement stairs and said calmly enough, 'You be on your way, Master Georgie. No sense both of us being put upon.'

He dithered for a moment, during which time Mrs Hardy, wailing like a banshee, rushed from the dining room and clambered clumsily up the stairs. Mrs O'Gorman stood her ground, her face giving nothing away. The sun went in again and Master Georgie faded. Looking across the hall he crooked his finger for me to follow.

I did as he bid, running behind him as he marched down the drive and strode the blackberry-hedged lane leading to Prince's Boulevard. I threw Mrs O'Gorman's sweeping brush into the nettles. He didn't look back, but then, why should he? I was his shadow. He swung his arms like a soldier and his boots splashed mud.

Master Georgie needed me with him so that he could enjoy himself without becoming jittery over conditions at home. If the afternoon proved convivial and he wanted to stay out for supper, I'd be required to run off

to see how the land lay with his mother. If Dr Potter had given her one of his powders or Mr Hardy had come home, I had no cause to return. If she was still under her black clouds I'd have to hare back to fetch him.

Along the Boulevard, under the summer trees, nursemaids wheeled their infants out. Earlier there had been a downpour and small girls screamed as sudden gusts of wind scattered raindrops on their heads. The Punch and Judy man was setting up his box alongside the carriage stop. Already the Jew-boy employed to gather a crowd was squeezing on his accordion. The horse that pulled the purple van stood tossing its nose in its feed-bag.

No one I knew had ever set eyes on the man who jiggled Mr Punch into life. Some said he was a dwarf and others that he was nine foot high. He fixed up his stall against the doors of the van and crept in from behind, so as to keep up the illusion. Besides, when it came time for the Jew-boy to pass round the hat, we children generally melted away. The dog Toby was real; he nipped at your ankles if you tried to crawl under the front cloth.

I loitered, waiting for the striped curtains to open. The best bit was always when Judy went off to collect the washing and Mr Punch started thwacking the baby to make it leave off bawling – then the young folk broke out shrieking and sniggering, particularly those that got whipped regularly.

I didn't fret over Master Georgie going on ahead. I knew I'd find him at the Washington Hotel where he was meeting his friend, William Rimmer, a fellow student at the Medical Institute.

The curtains had just been pushed sideways to reveal Mr Punch leant over the cradle, swinging the bellowing baby back and forth, when the accident happened. There was a sudden hiss from the crowd, a surge backwards and a shower of droplets from above as the stall tipped through the lower branches of the trees and toppled to the ground. Mr Punch fell out altogether and lay in a lump in the puddles. Dog Toby jumped and snarled, jumped and yapped.

It was all over in a blink of an eye. Then, wonder of wonders, the Punch and Judy man reared up before us, scrambling to his feet and waving his arms to fight off the flapping fold of the candy-striped front cloth. From his mouth flew a stream of oaths, which came out comical, not fearsome, for he still used that parrot voice. Beneath his sodden top hat his nose curved down to meet his chin.

The van with its golden letters on the side hadn't suffered so much as a scratch, though it had been shoved a foot or more towards the crowd, thus rocking the stall from its support. In the uproar, a lad ran off with the Jew-boy's accordion but a woman hit him over the head with her gamp, at which he howled and let it drop. She was comical too, for as she whacked at

him she squawked out, *'Who's a naughty boy, then?'*, imitating Mr Punch when chastising the baby. We children fairly burst with laughter, skipping about in the wet with the dog Toby snapping at our legs.

The incident was explained and settled satisfactorily enough, the gentleman responsible for the hoo-ha fishing out money to cover the damage. At cock-crow, so it was said, a vegetable cart had spilled cabbages on to the road, all of which, save one, had been recovered or run off with. The gentleman's horse, who had seen service with a cavalry regiment, mistaking it for a puff-adder, had reared up and crashed down sideways, striking the van with its flank.

The animal had recently returned from Africa, where puff-adders were quite common. They hadn't any teeth but if they bit you their tongues imparted a poison that could turn your blood to treacle.

Presently, the gentleman climbed back on to his horse and trotted away, after which the Punch and Judy man bundled his dismembered box into the van and shut up shop for the day. He was still swearing, though not so loudly as before.

*

It began to rain before I reached the Washington Hotel. I hadn't my shawl, but a spot of damp was nothing to me. In winter, when the wind howled up from the river,

I huddled in the doorway of the Star Theatre. Once, an actor came by and said I was pretty and why didn't I come inside to get warm by the Green Room fire. I didn't go because the rouge on his cheeks made him look more angry than kindly. Besides, I knew he was buttering me, the line of my mouth being too determined for prettiness and my eyes too deeply set, which lends me a melancholy look. Another time, in December, my feet turned quite blue and Mrs O'Gorman had to rub them with goose-fat to restore the circulation. What did I care! I'd freeze stiff for Master Georgie.

In summer, my favourite place was on the granite steps of the entrance to the railway station in Lime Street. From there I could see down the slope to where the hotel stood within its square of garden, the red roses bobbing tall in the wind. On clear days, beneath high blue heavens, the humps of the Welsh hills rode the horizon. Now, the grey river met the grey sky, and a low white sun, sliced by the masts of ships, sailed through a splash of scarlet petals.

Mr Hardy had an oil painting of the same view hung on his study wall. The masts were there, and the row of cottages sloping down towards the tobacco warehouse, but the Washington was missing because it hadn't been built. It was a very old painting and had belonged to Mr Hardy's father, yet the colours were as fresh as new, unlike Master Georgie's photographic pictures which turned black after a week.

I had been sitting for an hour or more, watching the people bustling back and forth, the smoke from the steam engines spurting into the lowering skies, when I witnessed a Christian act. A woman who had been standing at the bottom of the steps, a child in her arms and a wicker basket at her feet, was approached by another woman, better dressed than she and holding her skirts up from the wet. A live duck sat squashed in the basket, its neck tied to the handle, its beak bound with string. The woman pulled back her shawl so as to show off the baby nestling at her breast. Just then a boy sneaked through the crowd and snatching up the basket ran off with it. Unaware, the woman went on cooing. Seconds later, another boy appeared at her elbow and deposited the basket back at her feet. He didn't utter a word. Straightening up, he caught me watching him. He was three or four years older than myself, dark of complexion, either from dirt or nature, and his mouth was disfigured by what I took to be an epithelioma of the upper lip. I noticed such things because Master Georgie let me read his medical books, though, as yet, I didn't understand them perfectly.

At that instant William Rimmer came out of the hotel. I waited until I saw Master Georgie emerge, then sped down the steps, across the square and into the doorway of the Union Warehouse. Master Georgie got irritated if I hung about too closely. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but from the agitated manner

in which William Rimmer walked off a few paces, then returned, I gathered they were arguing rather than talking. Mostly, they discussed cadavers and blood vessels and the like, so I reckoned it was a medical rift. All the same, Master Georgie looked hang-dog, which was out of character, and I felt a sudden flutter of distress. Gauging they were too locked to notice, I stole nearer and hid behind the roses. It was still raining and water sprayed from Master Georgie's hat.

William Rimmer said, 'I won't listen to your excuses.'

Master Georgie said, 'I have nothing to excuse.' He spoke calmly, which was his way. He held that if a man wanted his judgement to be accepted, it should be expressed coolly and without passion.

'You can't deny it was underhand,' said William Rimmer. 'Damn it, George, you knew my feelings.'

'In the circumstances, I don't see I was at fault. You heard what Mrs Prescott said . . . What was I to do? . . . Was I supposed to refuse so that you could step in?'

'In your place I would have done—'

'Would you indeed? And risk appearing boorish?'

'It wasn't the action of a friend,' William Rimmer stormed, and with that he walked off again, only this time he kept straight on and didn't look back.

Master Georgie hesitated and then made as if to follow. After no more than a few yards he changed his mind and almost ran across the square. He didn't turn to see if I was at his heels.