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AMANDA CROSS



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THE PLAYERS COME AGAIN*

AN IMPERFECT SPY*

THE COLLECTED STORIES*

THE PUZZLED HEART*

**Published by The Ballantine Publishing Group*

THE THEBAN MYSTERIES

Amanda Cross

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The Ballantine Publishing Group

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No, though a man be wise, 'tis no shame for him to learn many things, and to bend in season.

—ANTIGONE

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

THE telephone and the front doorbell rang simultaneously in the Amhearst apartment with a call to action which, Reed happily observed, reminded him of plays like *You Can't Take It With You*.

"Those were good days in the theater," he said, rising from the couch where he and Kate were enjoying a cocktail.

"Perhaps," Kate answered, putting down her glass, "but I can't help feeling that the Greeks wrote great plays because they got the characters on and off the stage without the aid of bells."

"You get the door," Reed said. "I'll get the telephone." He walked down the passage to his study and lifted the receiver. "Hello," he said, wishing he had thought to bring his martini with him.

"This is Miss Tyringham of the Theban," a woman's cultured voice greeted him on the phone. "May I please speak to Mrs. Reed Amhearst?"

"This is Mr. Amhearst of Kaufman and Hart," Reed wanted ridiculously to answer. He could hear Kate at the door. "Oh, my God!" he heard her say in astonished tones which bode no good. "Well, come in for a time anyway, and let's talk about it."

"Can you hold on for a moment?" Reed asked. "I'll see if she's available."

"Thank you. I do apologize for disturbing you at this hour, but it is a matter of some importance. Mrs. Amhearst was Kate Fansler, was she not, when she was at the Theban?"

Was, is, and ever more will be, Reed happily thought. "Yes," he answered. "Hold on a moment."

He made his way back into the living room cautiously, as a cat might return to a place invaded by unknown, perhaps dangerous, beings.

He found Kate mixing herself another martini—in itself an ominous sign, since she always claimed that when Reed mixed them they were nectar, and when she mixed them they were intoxicating hair oil—while collapsed on the couch, its head in its hands, was a longhaired youth, revealing himself by his beard as male and by the fact that he rose, after a moment's hesitation, to his feet as having, in some dimly remembered era, been taught the manners of a lost world. On the run, Reed thought. Let us hope it is Kaufman and Hart, not Sophocles.

"Reed," Kate said, "may I introduce John Megareus Fansler, known as Jack to his friends?"

"Of whom he has many, I'm sure," Reed said, holding out a hand.

"That," Kate said, "is Philip Barry."

"A nephew?" Reed asked. "Related to that other nephew, Leo? I don't believe we've met."

"You haven't," Kate said. "Jack did not appear at that massive family reception given by the Fanslers for us newlyweds. Clever him."

Jack smiled. "Leo told me it was pretty hairy," he said, "except for the food. Ted, who is only twelve, never notices anything *but* food. My brothers."

"Will you have a drink?" Reed asked, bending over the martini pitcher. "Beer, perhaps?"

Sherry?"

Jack shook his head. "I don't drink," he said. "I don't want anything."

"I always forget that your generation doesn't drink," Reed said. "Nor," he added, rising from mixing his martini, "should my generation. I've forgotten the formidable lady on the phone, asking for Kate Fansler that was. She has probably decided you no longer are, and has gone away."

But, when Kate picked up the receiver, Miss Tyringham was still there. Kate apologized.

"It is I who should apologize for disturbing you at this hour," Miss Tyringham said. "I'm calling at the suggestion of Julia Stratemayer. Did Mr. Amhearst tell you this is Miss Tyringham, headmistress of the Theban?"

At the name the Theban there rushed through Kate's mind, instantaneously as is supposed to happen when one is drowning, a whole series of recollections: singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" at the opening assembly, the elevators in which one was not supposed to talk, profound discussions of sex in the john, the line in the cafeteria, persuading her parents not to send her away to boarding school. "I don't believe," Miss Tyringham continued, "that we have met."

"No," Kate said. "But I gather from Julia Stratemayer that you are all coping, in these difficult times."

"We try, but it isn't easy. One never knows what will turn up, all the girls in pants, or sandals, or barefoot, or wanting to close the school because of the war. We try to move with the events, which come not singly but in battalions. Julia is doing a wonderful job on the revised curriculum."

"So I hear," Kate said. She wondered where the conversation could possibly be leading. Miss Tyringham, though she had been twenty years in the school, had come after Kate's graduation. She had the reputation of being a first-rate head, but Kate, apart from an idling glance at the alumnae bulletin, a willing response to alumnae fund-raising pleas, and a few delightful conversations about the Theban with her friend and classmate Julia Stratemayer, had thought of her school as in another world.

"Has Julia perhaps anticipated my call and told you all about it?"

"No. All about what?"

"We are in a jam," Miss Tyringham said. "One of the curriculum changes already instituted is that which allows the seniors to spend their final semester in small seminars on subjects of their own choice. All their requirements have been fulfilled, and we are trying to prevent the final semester from being anticlimactic, particularly since that semester's work does not count for college admissions. Are you still there?"

"Still here," Kate said. "I remember about the last semester, though of course in my day one pretended to be working while not."

"Yes. No one pretends anything any more, which I suppose is a good thing, though I can help sometimes feeling that the constant expression of emotion in itself becomes the cause of the emotion which is expressed. But that is neither here nor there. One of the senior seminars is a study, with all possible modern ramifications, of the *Antigone* of Sophocles."

"Well," Kate said, "that sounds properly scholarly and irrelevant."

"Only at first blush. *Antigone* stands, you see, for expressions of love versus tyranny, for the actions of a woman against a male-dominated world, for the battles of youth against age. I understand that George Eliot was particularly intrigued with the *Antigone*, which is perhaps

what suggested you to Julia Stratemayer.”

“I’m delighted to be brought to mind by the thought of George Eliot,” Kate said, “but I’m afraid I don’t altogether ...”

“Of course you don’t; I’m being frightfully long-winded. Mrs. Johnson, who was to have done the seminar, has slipped a disc. She must be flat on her back and in traction for months. The new semester, of course, begins next week. Julia, knowing how *desperately* we needed someone frightfully exciting to take over the seminar, suggested ...”

“But Miss Tyringham,” Kate interrupted. “I’m on leave this year.”

“Exactly, my dear. We thought—rather we hoped—that therefore you would have the time. The girls are really *very* keen, but they do require a teacher who is not only experienced in the running of seminars but also, as they would say, ‘with it.’ Unfortunately most classicists, while terribly sound on the study of Greek, do not always appreciate the modern ramifications in quite the way we might hope. Mrs. Amhearst, we are in desperate need of help, and appeal to your charity and kindness. Of course we will pay, but I realize ...”

“May I have a little time to think about it?” Kate asked. “You see, I’m supposed to be working on a book.”

“Oh, I know you’re frightfully busy and will have to squeeze us in. I can’t express how grateful we would be. Now, don’t say anything yet. I’ll ask Mrs. Johnson to send you her reading list; perhaps you would like to talk to her. I’ll give you a day or two to decide. Shall I call you in a few days, Mrs. Amhearst?”

“All right. Miss Tyringham, I hope you don’t mind, but professionally, and you do want professional I take it, I use the name Kate Fansler. Miss Fansler, if the students still call the teachers by their last names.”

“Good for you. Of course, my dear. One wants to be correct socially, but no one knows better than the head of a girls’ school how confusing this continual change of names can be, particularly in these days of frequent divorce and remarriage. Goodbye for now, Miss Fansler, and I hope, indeed I trust, that you will come to our aid in this emergency.”

Kate’s goodbye echoed faintly over the already disconnected line. Swearing, she quickly dialed Julia Stratemayer’s number. “Julia,” Kate said, when she had got her friend on the telephone, “I have just heard from Miss Tyringham, and if I were not at the moment occupied with a troubled nephew, I would come over and wring your neck.”

“Listen, Kate,” Julia said, “I know how you feel, but I honestly think you’ll find the seniors fascinating, and anyway we’re desperate.”

“The *Antigone*, Julia, I ask you. I haven’t thought about Greek since the Theban.”

“Never mind Greek, love; read the play with the aid of Jebb. Virginia Woolf thought there hadn’t been a real woman character between Antigone and her own Mrs. Ramsay. And George Eliot ...”

“I will not discuss George Eliot without another drink. And then there’s Jack. Can we?” Kate frantically concluded, “thrash this out tomorrow?”

Back in the living room, Kate found Reed and Jack making conversation. The boy, having learned of Reed’s association with the D.A.’s office, was accusing him of being part of the oppressive police force, an arm of the Establishment, a tool of the system. Reed declined, however, to rise to the bait. He could clearly discern that the boy was troubled, and he did not wish, should his help be needed, to put the boy into the position of having to refuse it.

“Good news, I hope,” he said to Kate.

“That,” Kate said, “was the head of the Theban. Girlhood memories dance before my eyes

“Miss Tyringham,” Jack said. “She and the head of my old school keep talking about combining.”

“Why on earth?” Kate asked.

“To be coed, of course.”

“My God,” Kate said. “But then, I suppose if Haemon and Antigone had been to school together, it might have been a different story.”

“Babble on,” Reed said.

“Kate,” Jack said. He pulled on his beard in a gesture Kate found odd in so young a man. “Dad’s thrown me out. And I’ve quit Harvard. Could you lend me a little money till I get a job?”

“Jack dear, you will bear in mind, will you not, that your father is my brother? True, we have often disagreed with him; in fact, I can’t remember ever having agreed with him about anything. But I don’t feel comfortable going behind his back. Does he know you’re here?”

“He doesn’t know or care where I am.”

“Would you mind if I told him you were here?”

“If that fits in with your straight way of doing things, go ahead. He will merely mention my juice and me stewing in it.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m going to sign up with my draft board as a C.O. I guess hearing that did it. My hair, my mean, and quitting Harvard, and now this. I don’t believe in this filthy war.”

“Does your father want you to be in it?”

“He wouldn’t mind using his connections to get me into a cushy slot at the Pentagon; he don’t suppose he’d object to my pulling a high number in the lottery. What he can’t stand is what he calls my spitting on the flag—you can find his opinion expressed alliteratively by Agnew. The way I look at it, if you don’t protest against war you’re going along with it. I could even probably get out because of my asthma, but that wouldn’t let them know how I feel about Vietnam, would it? Leo wanted to come with me, but I told him to stick with school till he’s eighteen. He thinks you’re great.”

Kate looked at Reed. “Any suggestions?” she asked.

“Call your brother. I’ll broil a steak we can all have for dinner. All right with you, Jack?”

“Right on,” Jack said.

Two

THE Theban School was a hundred years old, and had been founded by Matthias Theban because he wanted a school in which properly to educate his four daughters. Other men might have thrown up their hands, hired governesses, and cursed a fate which had deprived them of a son. Such was not Matthias Theban's way. If fate had presented him with female progeny, he would accept fate's challenge and educate them as human beings and future members of the learned professions. Combining as he did an eccentric view of the possible destiny of females with a great deal of money, influence, and financial acumen, he was able in those simpler days, to carry out his plan with an ease which must seem the stuff of daydreams to those who try to found any institution today. Matthias Theban had no need to consult bureaucracies, local governments, foundations, or minority groups. He bought a piece of real estate in downtown New York in a section he was fairly certain would increase in value, persuaded influential friends onto his board of trustees, hired a forward-looking educator from Harvard (a man; but it was Matthias Theban's hope, not realized until the twentieth century, to have a woman as head of the Theban), built his school, and got his educational experiment under way.

In the years which followed, New York saw the establishment of many girls' schools, some new boys' schools, and a number of schools which were coeducational—although they tended to be more experimental and less aristocratic. Spence, Chapin, Brearley, Milford, Hewitt's, Nightingale-Bamford, and Sacred Heart joined the Theban in the group which came to be known as the "curtsyng sisters": their students curtsied when introduced to an adult, shook hands properly, wore uniforms topped by a school blazer, and were accepted, almost on application, by the college of their choice. All this, of course, was before the middle of the twentieth century. By then, no one over ten curtsied, shook hands, or wore a uniform without protest, and acceptance by a college required as extended and difficult a procedure as the acquisition of Swiss citizenship. The Theban, though one of the curtsyng sisters, was nonetheless special, as all its graduates knew with a calm certainty particularly aggravating to graduates of any other school. What made the Theban special was hard to define, though many people, Kate among them, had tried. It imbued its students, despite their inevitable destiny of cotillions and debuts, with a tomboy, bluestocking attitude which was never entirely eschewed.

The Theban boasted (a figure of speech: the Theban never boasted about anything) several gyms into which the girls, at odd though scheduled hours, would fling themselves to play basketball, volleyball, or indoor baseball, to high jump or swing wildly, like monkeys, across the ceiling on rings. The Theban was unusual in requiring four years of Latin, unusual in offering three years of Greek. It paid unusually high faculty salaries, and taught its students so thoroughly that all of them, to a woman, found college an anticlimax of almost unmanageable proportions. The average Theban girl (though no Theban girl was ever average) discovered two weeks after she had arrived at Vassar or Radcliffe that she could go

A's with no effort whatever; she settled down, therefore, to three years of bridge, love affairs, and an occasional nervous breakdown, pulling herself sufficiently together in her senior year to graduate with honors and move on, if she chose, to graduate school. Many Theban girls chose, and the school's alumnae rolls were impressive indeed, or would have been had the Theban published them. But the Theban had no interest in impressing anyone.

At its founding, the Theban had been unique in yet another way: it had accepted Jews. Only the right Jews, of course, the ones who were one day to be dubbed "our crowd" nonetheless, in this as in other actions, Matthias Theban was far ahead of his day. The school's graduating classes were sprinkled with Warburgs, Schiffs, Loebes, and Guggenheims; later, after the Second World War, when even Spence, Chapin, and Miss Hewitt's felt the need to welcome a few Jews, the Theban found itself to have been revolutionary without ever losing its reputation for conservatism: a neat trick.

But not so neat as combining educational wisdom with the finer points of real-estate speculation. The Theban's first building, by the time it had been outgrown and the neighborhood had become too commercial, was sold for many times what it had cost: the profits built the new building and swelled the endowment fund. After Matthias Theban's death, the school once again called his name blessed: their second building, standing on the spot now occupied by the Biltmore, easily paid for the third and current home of the school in the East Seventies.

Kate had been in the lower school of the Theban at the end of the Depression, the middle school during World War II, the upper school during the Cold War and the frenzied return to normal. Through all these cataclysms the Theban stood firm and steady. It made its concessions, of course: even for the Fanslers, the Guggenheims, and the Rockefellers there were concessions to be made. But nothing essential changed. Kate left the Theban before the fifties, when all over the country students, called "the silent generation," conformed; a demagogue reduced the nation to a gaggle of witch hunters; and upper-class young ladies moved to the suburbs, had several children, and talked about their feminine role.

It was Miss Tyringham who kept the Theban alive in the fifties. She took no political stand—such was not the policy of Theban heads. But she confirmed, in her downright, cheerful way, that change was possible. She knew that schools do not die; they pass from being vigorous to being fossils without ever noticing the transition. This passage Miss Tyringham prevented before anyone else had considered it. She subtly altered the school's acceptance away from the predominance of old money toward those who were nouveaux riches enough still to be vigorous. Naturally she made some mistakes, and the Theban graduated the occasional girl more vulgar than one might have wished; without risks, as she knew, there were no gains. Her faculty began to shift its average age from fifty-five to thirty-five; she encouraged the hiring of young married women, encouraged them to teach through their pregnancies, found substitutes for them during their deliveries, and cheered them upon their early return. She added contemporary literature and history to the curriculum long before that became fashionable, introduced Spanish as an alternative language to French in a class now heavily Puerto Rican, recruited for the school numbers of black girls, and bullied the trustees into providing scholarships for them—all before Martin Luther King had begun boycotting the buses in Montgomery. Honoring ideas from her faculty, she nurtured an extraordinary esprit de corps while most private schools, allowing a patina of chilly courtesies

to form, unsuccessfully disguised from students the hostilities which divided the faculty into contending factions. Miss Tyringham was, in short, a genius at her job.

Yet not even an administrative genius could have been prepared for the last half of the sixties. Everyone was unprepared, but—some were less unprepared than others. As a whole the private schools weathered the storm through the use of cautious blackmail: their waiting lists were long, the idea of public school unthinkable. A suggestion that if Johnny or Susy did not behave their parents had perhaps better look for a school more suitable to their child's needs usually sufficed to achieve some change in demeanor.

For a while. But, by 1968, some students were ready to fling out of school in spite of all threats, parental or scholastic. At the Theban, the esprit de corps held, for the most part. Miss Tyringham, firm and cheerful as ever, coped with pants in school (she ignored them), drugs (she gave the students and their parents the facts in the clearest, least moralistic way), the black revolution (she had foreseen that), and the demands for coeducation (in regular meetings with the headmaster of the boys' school Kate's nephews attended she explored the situation, emerging from time to time with enigmatic reports; whether she was considering coeducation or stalling, no one quite knew).

What she could not cope with was the Vietnam War. Whether the history of the United States would have been fundamentally different without that war is a question scarcely worth asking now. What Miss Tyringham knew was that it had driven apart the generations and the political parties of the Theban as no other crisis had ever done. Students began shouting one another down in assembly, greatly offending the older faculty, who had always assumed the practice of Jeffersonian democracy, the right of everyone to be heard. On Moratorium Day the students refused to come to school. Miss Tyringham kept the school open as a center for discussion and petition writing, for or against the war (but very few were for it). She had already begun a radical curriculum reform, with Julia Stratemayer in charge; the school was carried on. But, like everyone else in the country during the early months of 1970, Miss Tyringham was feeling the strain. This was the situation into which Kate walked on a suspiciously mild February day, the sort that promises spring as beguilingly as an incurable philanderer promises fidelity.

"Well, we *are* glad to see you," Miss Tyringham said, welcoming Kate into the head's office. The holy of holies, Kate thought. She could remember having been there only three times during her student days. Once when, as a member of the student government, she had been called to an important conference to discuss, not whether the students should be allowed to run the school and hire the faculty, which was the sort of thing that came up now, but whether the students could be sufficiently interested in their own affairs to justify an independent student government at all. Then, she had been in the office with her parents to discuss her college application; Miss Tyringham's predecessor had managed, with infinite grace, to talk Kate's parents out of Vassar (where her mother had gone) as she had three years earlier helped Kate talk them out of Milton Academy. Kate mentioned the three visits to Miss Tyringham. "And here I am now," she added, "to discuss *Antigone*. Did you know that the President of Princeton wrote a book on the imagery in the *Antigone*? In quieter, bygone days, of course."

"Did he indeed? I hope he is not the last college president this country has who is capable

of doing that. Do you know, we shall actually be sending some graduates to Princeton this year? What exciting times we live in, as I keep trying to persuade the older parents, who wonder, in all the rapid change, if they may not outlive the earth itself. Our oldest living graduate mentioned to me recently that in her youth there were no automobiles to speak of and now we have gone to the moon. I could not help rejoicing that in her youth the Long Island Railroad was somewhat speedier than it is today, and the letters were delivered in half the time. None of that's important, of course. What matters is that we are today a society that must, whether we want it or not, be willing to learn from the young. That's a bitter pill for most people my age to swallow."

"If we haven't anything to teach, why are we teaching?" Kate asked.

Miss Tyringham leaned back in her chair, looked upward, and smiled—a smile as beautiful as any Kate had ever seen. Miss Tyringham was, indeed, a beautiful woman, not the less so because her face, which had been ever free of makeup, her hair, which had always been casually brushed back, seemed trying to detract from her beauty, to deny it: the onlooker perceived the beauty more acutely because he imagined he had shown unusual perception in noticing it at all. There were, to be sure, those among the parents who objected to Miss Tyringham's way of "getting herself up," and they used occasionally to express to one another their wish that *someone* would tell her not to wear such mannish suits. The parents of girls who had *not* been accepted at the Theban made more pointed remarks about Miss Tyringham. Kate admired the courage or natural insouciance or simple shortage of time which permitted one to be so emphatically oneself.

"I wonder," Miss Tyringham said, "if our whole definition of the word 'teach' does not need to be reconsidered. Have we perhaps for too long supposed teaching to be a ritual in which I, the elder and supposedly wiser, hand on to you, the younger and more innocent, the fruits of my learning and experience? Perhaps teaching is really a mutual experience between the younger and older, perhaps all there is to be learned is what they can discover between them. I don't of course mean, as so many of the girls here clearly do, endless bull sessions where everyone talks and no one listens, let alone learns. I mean a disciplined sort of seminar in which one person, you for example, moderates, schedules, and referees, always in the expectation that you, like the students, will emerge with new insights into the *Antigone* none of you might ever have achieved alone."

"Well," Kate said, admiring the way her instructions had been so painlessly imparted—"there's certainly no danger of my posing as an authority on the life and habits of the Greeks—but you know, even were I an authority, most of the fruits of my learning would be readily available in paperback. I've become convinced that our old ideas of teaching date back to the days when there were so few books that only some priest had read them; he then passed on the information to the others, thirsting for knowledge but bookless. Which, no doubt, is why they are called lectures—now as applicable to our life as those hot academic gowns, designed for wear in drafty monasteries, in which we parade beneath a hot June sun. All the same, I hope you don't regret having asked me. I'm afraid of performing like a wallflower who, when asked to dance, can't think of a word to say to the man."

"You are hardly a wallflower in the academic world."

"In *this* academic world I am; they are so young, so certain, so self-absorbed. No doubt there must be, to survive adolescence. But I'm not sure that I understand their language, any more."

than I understand their dances.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” Miss Tyringham said, “you still have the weapons of marks and reports which go on their school records; anyway, all the old habits of diffidence have not wholly gone. But I do think there are new forms of dialogue, even within education. Hopeful speech for today.”

“I’m glad you can still make hopeful speeches. Reed and I have been afflicted with a nephew—in fact, he and you entered our lives, so to speak, if not hand in hand, ring by ring. I had the delightful task of talking to Harvard, an institution whose reasons for continuing its existence he seems to find remarkably scarce, apart, of course, from serving the military and industrial complex. Well, it turned out, as you no doubt can guess, that Harvard like every other college has had so many flights from the nest that they now have a code for unofficially leaving in their computers. Jack is to be allowed back with lots of concessions on *both* sides. Colleges may be hell to get into now, but apparently once they take you in they are admirably reluctant about pushing you out, or even letting you leave slamming the door behind you. Whether that’s nobility or guilty conscience I’m quite unable to decide.”

“*You* seem to have decided the main things, you, rather than the boy’s parents. Usual, I’m afraid. Will he stay at Harvard?”

“Temporarily. What is troubling, Miss Tyringham, is that he is rude, unwashed, inconsiderate, filled to the brim with slogans, and outrageously simplistic. Alas, he is also right.”

“About everything?”

“Hardly that. But he is right about my brother, right about this terrible war, and wonderfully courageous in a maddening way. I mean, we are all for principles in the abstract but most of us will not turn down a perfectly good cop-out if it is ready to hand.”

“That’s called compromise.”

“What the young will never do. Brave them. Well, brave me too. Do you mind if I look around? I may even sneak up to one of the gyms and swing from a rope.”

“Mrs. Copland is waiting to show you around. I’m sure you would have liked Julia as tour guide, but she’s at a meeting with some woman who comes once a week and lectures us about computers—then I *do* long for the simpler days. You’ll like Mrs. Copland, I think. She teaches literature to the elevens and is home-room teacher to the sixes. We’re grooming her for the head of the English Department when she gets through having babies, but don’t tell her because we don’t want to scare her off. I’ve so much enjoyed talking with you,” Miss Tyringham concluded, rising in her chair and vigorously shaking Kate’s hand. “Remember, we don’t have to wait for an emergency to have another chat.”

Which God knows was true, they didn’t have to wait for an emergency. Before too long they were overtaken by an emergency no one would have dreamed of waiting for.

Three

K_{ATE}, having declined the help of Miss Tyringham's secretary in finding Mrs. Copland, went in search of the room which held the sixes. The school, largely unchanged since Kate's day, was spacious enough, but dated. Nothing ages more quickly than the absolute up-to-date. All new school buildings, boasting the latest in everything, age like a woman who has had her face lifted: there is not even character to set off the ravages of time. Still, one could scarcely set out to build oneself Winchester in New York City, could one?

Not liking to knock on a classroom door—as unsuitable as the knock of a trained British servant in the days of the Empire—Kate opened the door slowly.

“Ah,” Mrs. Copland called from the front of the room. “Come in. We have just finished.” Kate pushed the door all the way open and was greeted by the raucous sound of thirty chairs being pushed back and thirty twelve-year-olds rising to their feet. Kate looked horrified. “Sit down, ladies,” Mrs. Copland said. “Let us see if you can stay in the study hall three minutes alone without tearing down the walls. The bell is about to ring.” She followed Kate from the room, firmly closing the door behind her.

“Will there be an explosion?” Kate nervously asked.

“Not in three minutes. Welcome to the Theban. It's welcome back, isn't it?”

“I too rose to my feet in just that same way. Has anyone ever considered the effect it has on the unprepared adult who enters?”

“Only these days, because it's so unexpected. Twenty years ago, I understand,” Mrs. Copland said, leading the way down the hall, “any adult not greeted by the sound of humbly youth rising to its feet would have expired on the spot and had to be revived with sal volatile or whatever it was in the nurse's office. Shall we begin the tour on the top floor? I know you must remember everything, but Miss Tyringham felt that refreshment was in order. We are to discuss the problems of teaching literature on the way. Ah,” she concluded as the elevator opened, “ten please. My name's Anne. I don't leap to the use of first names immediately as a rule, but I discovered that if one is going to discuss senior seminars and disaffected youth, one had better skip the usual steps to familiarity. Here we are.” They stepped out into the auditorium, at the moment occupied only in the farthest corner by a group involved either in dramatics or an encounter session; which was not immediately clear.

The tenth and top floor of the Theban was given over entirely to the huge auditorium, which was able to seat the entire school. There was a stage at one end which, while scarcely the miracle of theatrical devices that even small theaters have subsequently become, served very well for Theban performances, which tended, as in Greek and Shakespearean times, to emphasize the language and costumes rather than the scenery and lights. In front of the stage at the moment, stood music stands, indicating to Kate that musical activities had not abated since her day, she having played the viola in a rather frantic string ensemble which was wont to present musical offerings from time to time.

The dramatic or encounter group now in session was in one of the corners of the

auditorium farthest from the stage, no doubt to emphasize the spontaneity of the undertaking. Kate looked at them inquiringly.

“Something new,” Anne Copland said. “A combination of dramatics, playwriting, and self-expression. I believe Mrs. Banister is new since your time; she’s extremely popular with the girls, who no longer feel properly purged if they have merely acted Hedda Gabler with all the necessary passion. Those who take dramatics as an activity now write their own plays, and spontaneously allow them to erupt. Most interesting, really—sort of a combination of Samuel Beckett and group therapy. Perhaps we’ll see Mrs. Banister at lunch—she’s really more enthusiastic. With all the seats set up in here we’re rather crowded now, since the school is at least two hundred girls larger than this building was intended for. But there’s the most terrible need for schools, and Miss Tyringham and the trustees felt that we should meet our obligations.”

Kate could see the seats piled up at the sides of the stage; supposedly, there were more in some storage area beyond. She noticed two elevator doors, several doors marked STAIRS with red EXIT signs above them, and two small doors to the side of the stage.

“Were those always there?” Kate asked.

“Oh yes, I think so. One notices different things as an adult. One leads backstage to the storage rooms and the places where you work the lights—all that; the other leads to the caretaker’s apartment.”

“Surely that’s new.”

“Like so much else these tumultuous days. Twenty years ago, and all the years before for that matter, you closed the school, locked the door, and didn’t give the place another thought till morning. That was in the dear, dead days. We had a lot of people breaking in, to steal expensive equipment and so on, but the coup de grâce came when a group of unruly boys—tautology, I know, but these were especially unruly—broke in and apparently pranced about with spiked boots on the gymnasium floors. I don’t know if you’ve ever gone with any care into the economics of gym floors—well, neither have I, but I gather they did enough damage to cost ten thousand dollars in repairs. Ergo, Mr. O’Hara. He’s got a great view, an extremely fashionable address, and a great taste for solitude, which is just as well since the problems of entertaining on the roof of an empty school building would seem to me to be insurmountable. Everyone was quite impressed when we first heard about Mr. O’Hara, but we all take him for granted now. He’s a retired army man and therefore used to doing for himself.”

“ ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ ” Kate hummed to herself, “ ‘Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.’ No doubt we each have our favorite hymn. Is it still sung at every opening assembly the first day of school?”

“As long as I’ve been here. Though I believe that a year or two ago there was a suggestion freely translated as a demand, that we sing ‘We Shall Overcome’ instead.”

“What did Miss Tyringham do?”

“Sang them both. After all, Martin Luther King was a minister, so she didn’t have much trouble talking everybody into *that*.”

“Do you find her as extraordinary as I do?” Kate asked, wondering if this was an impolite question on such short acquaintance.

“Absolutely marvelous. As though she had done it all, and been it all, and somehow understood everything. People of that quality have always been rare, but these days she

seems, I sometimes think, unique. Do you want to examine the murky backstage depths, or shall we descend? And, if we descend, shall we take the elevator in a fast plunge, or do you want to take the stairs, peering your way down one floor at a time?"

"Let's walk if you don't mind," Kate said. "Not that I want to examine the place as though we were going to buy it. You know, a sort of casual once-over."

As they walked toward the doors marked STAIRS Kate eavesdropped a bit on the dramatic group, not too difficult since the young ladies had apparently reached a highly emotional point and their voices were raised either in argument or animated discussion, depending on how you cared to look at it. The stricture from Kate's day and earlier that no lady raised her voice except in song had gone, and a damn good thing too, Kate thought. My brothers and I might have something to say to each other now, if we hadn't been terrified of family arguments.

"What do you really want?" one actor declaimed. "What do you wish for yourself; if you had one wish, what would it be? Can you even say?" Her hand came forward in a questioning, demanding gesture.

"Mrs. Banister likes them to use their whole bodies," Anne Copland whispered. "And the whole voices, more's the pity. Still, no doubt it does them good."

"I wish to return to the fundamental elements of life. I wish to live in a small community where we are not dependent on technology and packaging, but can feel our closeness to the earth. I wish ..." The door closed behind Kate and Anne Copland, leaving the unexpressed wish hanging in the air where, Kate could not help feeling, it rightfully belonged.

Their descent was rapid and for Kate full of reminiscences which she did not trouble to express. What is more trying than other people's memories, unless it is other people's dreams? Little had changed. Lockers still lined the halls. The classrooms, such empty ones as they examined, bore evidence that this was the age of posters. "Make love not war" and "War is dangerous to children and other living things" were the most frequently seen. Kate was interested in one poster which showed a coffin, with a flag draped over it, and underneath the caption: The Silent Majority.

"That's righter than you might suppose," Kate said. "Homer used the phrase 'the silent majority,' referring to the dead."

"The most extraordinary change here is never talked about at all," Anne Copland said. "Since your time, or long, long before that, I'm certain this school has always been largely Republican in sentiment; not reactionary, you understand, but sound and vaguely right wing. It astounds me how little real support there is for President Nixon, his policies, and particularly his Vice President, not only among the students but among their parents. And these girls represent some of the most prominent families in the country. Of course, the staff isn't supposed to argue politics with the students, but that's easier said than done, these days."

"After all, these girls largely represent the Eastern Establishment—the people Nixon never tried to get on his side. Do politics come up regularly, if one can call them politics?"

"The politics of survival, the girls call them—I forget who first made up that phrase. Some of the posters are pretty outspoken or downright vulgar. ('Make love not babies' caused a great deal of discussion a while back) and many of the staff wanted to outlaw them altogether, but Miss Tyringham insisted they were to stay up if they didn't actually express a

obscurity. We are surrounded with Bob Dylan and the Beatles, but they make the girls feel home, I guess. This floor, as you see, has student art, which seems to me to change very little over the years.”

“Lord, yes,” Kate said, looking around her. “A portrait of someone with snowflakes falling—I remember doing the same thing myself, having dropped some white paint on the face was doing and not being able to get it off. *Some* things remain the same. And that,” she added, “is the supply closet.”

“So it is. A particularly feverish memory, I gather.”

“Sad, really, though I still can’t think of it without chuckling. I was in the middle school and we had acquired a German math teacher of overpowering qualifications. A refugee, no doubt, from Hitler. He knew a great deal and might even have been able to explain it so that a group of giggling eleven-year-olds could understand. But he was unbearably pompous and moralistic, always fulminating against American spoiled youth in general, and our own lack of manners, brains, and attention in particular. As they would say today, he didn’t relate to the group. One day he stomped out to get some paper for an exam that was to punish us for our sins, and as one being we floated out the door and locked him in the supply closet. Then we went back to the classroom and bent innocently and silently over our books. His screams eventually aroused someone in authority.”

“What happened?”

“Oddly enough, nothing. We waited for the fearful summons, but it never came. He was out sick for a week, and then it was Christmas; we all felt so bad we chipped in to buy him a fruitcake. When we returned from the vacation we had a new math teacher, frightfully up-to-date, who kept one lesson ahead of us, understanding children rather than decimals. What monsters youngsters are. Yet, you know, we weren’t really unkind, only bewildered.”

Anne Copland showed Kate the seminar rooms, newly decorated, and each holding a table surrounded by chairs, with bookcases around the walls. “To get rid of the classroom look, heaven forfend,” Anne explained. “The surroundings turned out to be half the battle. You be in here.” She opened the door of a room at the moment empty. A sign “Hurrah for Antigone” was spread across the wall, and below it was a poster with a poem:

*Miss Kate Fansler, who is she,
Expounder of Antigone?
Will she hold forth like old Tiresias
Propounding some established thesias?
Or will she know, or learn like Creon,
That we’ll discuss what we agree on?*

“Well,” Anne said, looking at Kate with some trepidation, “you are warned. I didn’t know that would be there. Hope you aren’t offended.”

“Not offended,” Kate said. “Terrified.”

They debouched, Kate feeling somewhat stricken, onto the entrance floor. She was not only slightly offended, which she had denied, and terrified, which she had admitted, but also a bit angry. It’s easy enough to talk about the delightful and honest young, she thought, until they get their fangs into you. Now, why didn’t I tell Miss Tyringham, impressive though she be,

take her seminar on *Antigone* and jolly well teach it herself if she's such a bloody genius. Is it too late, I wonder, to back out now? And, faced with her first personal encounter with the high-school generation, Kate wanted to take to her heels and fly. At least my brothers know where they stand, she told herself grimly. You phony liberal, you.

She pulled herself together to greet the lady who attended the switchboard and kept a watchful eye on the large entrance hall.

"I'd like you to meet Miss Fansler," Anne was saying. "This is Miss Strikeland, who stands between us and the great outside world."

"How do you do," Kate said, to be interrupted by the switchboard.

"The Theban School," Miss Strikeland chirped; "certainly, just a moment please." She plunged in a plug with one hand, beckoning to Anne with the other. Anne moved in closer.

"He's here again," Miss Strikeland whispered.

"Who?"

"That man. Walking around over there. It's the second or third time he's come. Cautiously, Kate and Anne followed her glance, but the man had his profile to them and could not be examined freely. He looked in his early seventies, impeccably dressed. He held his hat in his hand and gazed about him exactly as though he were in a museum he had come miles to visit. Certainly there wasn't much to gaze at—the occasional girl dashing through the lobby, the people who entered and came to Miss Strikeland's window for information, the members of the staff on their way to the staff lounge or one of the offices. Yet the elderly man seemed to study it all as though, as Ophelia said of Hamlet, he would draw it.

"How odd," Anne said. "He *looks* harmless enough. Have you asked him what he wants?"

"He says he just wants to look around. I pointed out that this was a school—after all, there isn't a sign outside and sometimes people don't know. He said he knew it was a school, the Theban School, and that's why he wanted to look around. He hoped I would be kind enough to allow him to do so. I told him he couldn't go upstairs, and he said he wouldn't. Last time he sat down on a bench and watched the girls leaving—he sat there for several hours."

"Miss Strikeland," Anne said, "do you suspect him of being a dirty old man?"

"Well, he doesn't look like it, does he? I've kept a pretty close eye on him. All the same, it's worrying."

"He's going," Kate said.

"So he is. Well," Anne said, "if he comes again, Miss Strikeland, you'd better let someone know. Miss Freund, for instance; she's good at this sort of problem."

"You're right," Miss Strikeland said. "Welcome to the Theban, Miss Fansler. Sorry to be so distracted."

"The same Miss Freund as in my day?" Kate asked. "Admissions, excuses, and frantic receiver of appeals for carfare?"

"The same. Except now she also handles bus passes, and is on very chummy terms with the local police precinct."

"Because of the boys in the gym?" Kate asked, following Anne back to the stairs.

"No. Because sometimes the girls no sooner poke their little noses outside the door than they are set on by gangs of kids—lower-class gangs, though it doesn't do to say so. But they taunt the Theban girls with being rich, so one rather gathers that's the point. After several hysterical parents' meetings, we now have a standard operating procedure. One of the girls

returns immediately to the school and Miss Freund gets in touch with her policemen buddies. The girls are asked to report if they're molested on the buses or anywhere else. It's hard, really, to expect them to be simple and innocent in a world that's so criminal and brutal. Well," she added, pushing open a door and leading the way into a lunchroom where the door was so intense it struck one with palpable force, "How about lunch? I never know whether a tour like this sharpens the appetite or kills it. Good, I see Mrs. Banister. Shall we go and chat about dramatics at the Theban? Needless to say, we haven't even mentioned the problems of literature and seminars, except for the intrusion of that unfortunate poem. You aren't brooding, are you?"

"No more than is good for me."

"Splendid. Then sit down and introduce yourself, and I'll get you some lunch. It's either tuna-fish sandwich or chicken à la king. I recommend tuna fish."

Mrs. Banister proved to be a tiny woman of enormous vivacity and emphatic views which she enunciated with vigor and abandoned with alacrity and without regret if she was successfully challenged. She had an enormous affection for youngsters and respect for them—so much was immediately clear; certainly she herself appeared to have retained many of their better qualities. The gift of being able to establish rapport with young adults is rare enough; many people are good, or they think they are, with young children. Once past early childhood, however, the children often begin to find the nurses, kindergarten teachers, and baby love generally cloying and burdensome. Mrs. Banister was a rare specimen.

"I feel particularly giddy today," she told Kate, "because Andrew and I have finally solved the problem of New York transportation. Motorcycles. Last night we went to an evening thing complete with evening dress and I sat pillion behind Andrew. Marvelous. We had no trouble parking, and unlike the taxis we didn't have to wait hours with our meters ticking away even to approach the entrance. Benefit concert, Lincoln Center," she added, setting the scene.

"But suppose it rains?" Kate asked, greeting Anne and the tuna-fish sandwiches.

"Sou'westers, oilskin head to toe, and my evening slippers in a little plastic bag. One must move with the times or one is likely to get stuck in a traffic jam and never move at all. Not to mention pollution."

"Do you ride on a motorcycle to school?" Kate asked.

"No. Andrew, who has to get about much more, takes it during the day. I bicycle. Healthier, less pollution still, same sou'wester and plastic bag in case of rain. I hear the girls are looking forward to your seminar."

"Do you?" Kate said. "I wish I could say the same. The fact is, I've got a bad case of stage fright."

"Nonsense. Julia Stratemayer tells me you're frightfully good at your university. This is a bit more personal perhaps, but the twelves have one foot out the school door already. Quite a grownup, really. I've got three of your *Antigone* bunch in one of my drama groups: Angelia Jablon, Betsy Stark, and Freemond Oliver."

"Is that actually her name?"

"Absolutely. I strongly suspect there was a Susan or something in front of the Freemond once upon a time, but it's plain Freemond Oliver as long as I've known her. She's quite

extraordinary at Greek and Latin *and* athletics. Betsy Stark's quite another kettle of fish—devoted to every form of the comedy of manners from *The Way of the World* through Dorothy Sayers. She believes the great time in the theater after Shakespeare—and she insists naturally, that *Much Ado About Nothing* is his greatest play—is the American comedy of the twenties and thirties, all sparkling confusions and wit with a wide streak of sentimentality up the middle. *The Philadelphia Story*, one gathers, is the prize of them all.”

“My husband agrees with her. I'm surprised she wants to study the *Antigone*.”

“Well, that may be just a little bit of my influence—not that you must think she's been persuaded against her inclinations, nothing of the sort. She's *very* fond of the *Odyssey* and considers the conversations between Odysseus and Athene the first witty man-woman exchanges in all literature. In fact, she says, there wasn't another such till Beatrice and Benedick, but no doubt she's exaggerating—the twelves do.”

“And the third girl?” Kate asked, wondering how in the world she was going to conduct a seminar with an athletic Greek scholar and an admirer of George Kaufman's burdened with neither Greek nor humility.

“Angelica Jablon,” Mrs. Banister said in a dreamy sort of way. “A *most* unusual girl, though less easily catalogued than the other two, at least in Theban terms. She, you see, is committed, *engagée* as the French say. What excites her about the *Antigone* is that she feels it as the story of our times.”

“Yikes. And no doubt she identifies with Antigone—I go to my death willingly for the right and all that sort of thing.”

“Does that strike you as foolish?” Mrs. Banister said. “Perhaps I've misjudged ...”

“Sorry,” Kate said. “I'm afraid I tend to come all over scholarly at the wrong moments. I've learned, you see, to be wary of the student who finds some work which alone holds the secret of life. On the other hand, such a student, if she has real devotion to scholarship, may make such a discovery the start of some real work. I'm sure that will be the case with Angelica.”

“Perhaps. No doubt you will find all the girls stimulating; I'm certain at least that you'll keep them within hailing distance of the scholarly approach, which is beyond me—that's why I do direct drama groups and don't teach anything. A matter of temperament.”

Kate wanted to ask if any of the girls was given to the writing of rhymed doggerel—Ogden Nash had a lot to answer for, Kate often thought, having invented a form of verse which no one but he seemed able to grasp the first thing about—but she felt a mysterious reluctance to mention the seminar poster. If I can't straighten it out alone with them, she thought, I better quit now.

“Hi.” Julia Stratemayer stood balancing a tray at Kate's arm. “May I join you or are you so enmeshed in Greek drama?”

“Good to see you,” Kate said.

“I've been following you and Anne around the building like a blasted bloodhound, but you always seemed to have just left wherever I was. Miss Strikeland told me you'd probably alighted here.”

“Did she mention her mysterious visitor?”

“She did. I'm afraid she's getting the wind up a bit, though from what I can gather she couldn't look more harmless or benign. Still, one can't have men, however ancient, loitering

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