

Portrait of a Lady

After the death of his parents, Lionel Tremlett sold the family antiques business and purchased an apartment in a converted Tudor mansion high on a hill in Toorak. In warm weather he would sit reading and watching the Yarra River drift westwards below. In winter he read for long hours by the fire.

He took pleasure in pronouncing himself a “confirmed bachelor”. He admired beautiful women, whom he saw as aesthetic objects, as portraits awaiting their painters, but had never been romantically drawn to one. Nor indeed to a man. His small group of friends liked to quote his genial self-characterization as a being “exempt from hormonal perturbation”.

The cause of this exemption was unclear to him. His wintry and punitive Catholic childhood? But he didn’t particularly care. Though often solitary, he was seldom lonely. Citing his beloved Henry James, he’d say that his life on the hill met “the requirements of my imagination”.

At fifty he cut a casually refined figure: slim, upright, of medium height, his clean-shaven face unlined. He had straight dark hair, now threaded with grey, meticulously parted on the left side, and gentle chalk-blue

eyes. In his customary grey slacks and tweed jacket, he would wander down to the faux Tudor shopping centre nearby, read the papers over coffee and pastry and attend to his emails. Then he would browse in a large, well-appointed bookshop.

The shop had been retitled “Mary’s” when purchased some months earlier by a brother and sister. He had occasionally seen the brother, Martin, at the front counter, but never his sister, the eponymous Mary, who seemed to hover elsewhere like the Spirit of the Place.

This morning as he stepped into the shop’s burnished interior – cream walls adorned by charcoal sketches of famous writers above polished wood shelves – he noticed a woman of middle age assisting an elderly customer. Something about her caught his eye and when she turned and looked in his direction, she was at once radiantly and sedately beautiful. She had shoulder-length dark, straight hair. Her white shirt was buttoned at the collar and beneath it a large turquoise and green pendant – the green repeated in her earrings – lay over the vee of a dove-grey chemise jumper. Her skirt and leggings were black, her low-heeled shoes a greyish green. Her red watchband echoed her lipstick. He was imagining her portrait when she walked over to him and asked in a mellifluous, slightly husky contralto whether she could be of assistance.

He stammered that he was looking for a recent biography of Edith Wharton.

“You’re in luck,” she said, drawing a hefty tome

down from a nearby shelf and handing it to him. “Are you a fan of hers?”

“I’m a particular fan of her friend Henry James and want to read more about their friendship,” he stammered.

He turned the book over in his hands as a scholar might, opened it and ran his eye down the Table of Contents, thumbed through the glossy photographs in the middle, then checked the back cover’s bio for the bona fides of the biographer. When he’d indicated his satisfaction with a sagacious nod, she gestured towards the counter and presently began to process the sale.

Unusually for him, he found himself watching her deft, slender hands for a glimpse of her ring finger. It remained hidden for a while behind a stack of books, then behind the cash register, then under the counter. At last it came into view. It bore a simple, thin, yellow-gold band. He watched intently as she slid the book and his receipt into a brown Mary’s paper bag and taped it at the top. Smilingly, she held the parcel out to him and said, “Do come again.”

“You can be sure I will,” he replied. “I have long been a regular here.”

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The ring’s effect on him had been strange. He had hoped not to see evidence of her being attached, yet he was pleased to see that in all probability she was. Unavailable, this epiphanic being could remain a creature of the imagination. She had told him that they were short-staffed. She would work in the shop for the

next six or so months. He began making daily visits. She always greeted him with a warm smile and gesture for him to wait while she served customers. Often, though, she was not there. When he inquired, staff said that she was “off-colour today”, or that she was away visiting distributors.

One day, after a week’s absence, she suggested morning tea at a cafe across the road. “So,” she said when they had taken their seats at a table by the window, “I’m interested to hear what you made of the Wharton biography.”

“I thought it was good,” he replied, “and it helped to explain why the very private James was so taken with a woman who was so much out in the world.”

“And what is your favourite James novel?” she asked. “*The Ambassadors*.”

“I’ve never read it. Why that one?”

“Its main character, Strether,” he replied, “is an enormously sophisticated man torn between engagement, being in amongst it, and living in his imagination. For me, he’s the greatest character in literature. And your favourite novel?”

“I have two, *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*.”

“And why them?”

She paused, looked distractedly away, then said, “What the feminists call the shape of a woman’s life, I suppose.”

“I’m afraid I’m not au fait with feminism,” he said.

“Probably just as well,” she replied, getting up to return to the shop.

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Over a few months, that epiphanic image of her began to colonize his thoughts.

At night he started doing something that he had not done since boyhood when his mother found him on his bed doing it, rushed out slamming the door, and told his father. “Don’t you *ever* do that again!” the father had seethed.

Tremlett was feeling physically different. His hitherto languid body now felt taut, assertive, charged, sexual.

He did something else now for the first time. He imagined a woman naked. Mary would appear unexpectedly at his front door. While he was in the kitchen making coffee, she would disrobe in his living room and he would find her standing there, clothes diaphanous about her ankles like Aphrodite risen from the waves; her hair lapping delicate white shoulders, perfectly proportioned breasts, lips smiling gentle allure. He would follow her statuesque curves down to her flat stomach and to the perfectly manicured dark triangle, a faint hint of her womanhood curving between her thighs. Relishing his gaze, she would turn around for him to see her superb arched back and perfectly rounded buttocks. He would move towards her tense with desire ... but the scene would stop there.

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Her absences from work became more frequent. Sometimes when she returned she would look drained and

distracted, but he was gratified that she still seemed pleased to see him.

They arranged lunch to “catch up” in a glass-walled deli across the road. They had been chatting for some time when her phone rang. She looked at it, dismissed the call and put it down again on the table. It immediately rang again, and again.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” she said and took the phone outside. Through the glass he could see her pacing about, gesticulating with her right hand, sometimes running it through her hair, speaking with some agitation. When she returned, he asked whether everything was alright.

“It’s Walter, my husband. His sight is going. He’s fallen at home and gashed a knee, poor darling.”

“You go home and I’ll take care of the bill,” said Tremlett.

“No, I can stay. A neighbour is a retired nurse. I sent her a text. She’ll dress the wound and calm him down. I don’t want him to become too dependent on me.”

“No, I suppose you have to keep an eye on the future.”

“Well,” she said, biting her lower lip and looking briefly away, “I don’t imagine a future.”

“You mean you can’t imagine what it will be like?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, “I don’t imagine having one.”

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Tremlett pondered that conversation. “The shape of a

woman's life" could refer to the way these particular women's lives ended, or to the many and varied shapes women's lives could take. In any case, lots of readers would cite *Madam Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* as their favourite novels.

That odd comment about the future could be taken in various ways too. It might have been made in momentary despair after that upsetting call from her husband. Recently, in fact, she had been seeming quite jolly, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

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One evening the phone rang at 10:30. He did not recognize the number but sat up in bed to take the call.

"Hello, is that Mr Lionel Tremlett?"

"Yes, it is. Who's calling please?"

"This is Walter Fitzgerald. I think my wife Mary is a friend of yours?"

"Yes, indeed she is."

"Well," said Fitzgerald, "I am afraid there is very bad news."

He could hardly bear to hear what came next.

"I'm sorry to tell you that ... Mary has had a complete nervous breakdown. She is in the psychiatric ward of St Peter's Hospital in a very bad state."

"I am most terribly sorry. I had no idea ..."

"I have to tell you that she has been talking a lot about you. The staff have asked me whether the things she's been saying are true. Of course, I cannot say. She

is severely, horribly confused. Would you mind my asking?”

“Of course not.”

“She says that the two of you are lovers ...”

“*My God!* No, this is absolutely untrue. There has never been even a hint of such a thing. We are friends. Not even particularly close friends.”

“Thank you,” said the husband. “I thought as much. She also insists that you were going to elope to Paris together. I now know this is absolute fantasy.”

“Yes, completely and utterly. Has she been like this before?”

“Not this bad, but pretty bad. She has never got over her childhood. Her father was a monster. A pervert.”

Fitzgerald now explained that Mary was refusing to cooperate unless she could see Tremlett and that the staff felt that a visit from him might be beneficial. The visit would have to be carefully supervised. He was to try, in neutral but kindly tones, to disabuse her of her delusions about him.

Next morning Tremlett took a lift to the floor of the psychiatric ward, followed signs through a maze of corridors, announced his arrival through an intercom and reported at the nurses’ station. A nurse led him down the main corridor. People in pyjamas wandered distractedly along the grey carpeted aisle, some leaning against walls or talking animatedly to themselves. An elderly woman in a dressing-gown explained to the nurse that she had been a film star and cried, “Look how I’ve kept my looks!” In one of the rooms

a man was shouting incoherently. In another a man was crying loudly, nurses trying to calm him. Life was “ferocious and sinister” – yes, James had said that too. Tremlett felt that the hubbub and the misery were raining down upon him. He walked with bowed head, attempting not to hear or see.

They reached the door of Mary’s room. She was in bed, her back towards the door, knees pulled up. The nurse said quietly, “Mary, Mr Tremlett is here to see you,” and backed out of the room to listen from the corridor.

Mary rolled over, looked at him and slid out of bed crying, “You’re here. You’re *here!*”

“Yes, Mary. It’s good to see you. How are you?”

“Oh!” she cried, “*thank goodness!* No one would believe me. Can we go now?”

“Well ...” stammered Tremlett.

“Yes, *of course* we can!” she said triumphantly, “and remember what is yours!”

She slipped her thick pink and yellow nighty down over her shoulders. It crumpled about her ankles. She stood naked before him.

It would be utterly wrong to look at her thus! Tremlett averted his gaze, but not before he had seen the unwashed dark hair hanging limply, wrinkles creeping down her graceful neck, her slanted shoulders drawing one breast higher than the other, a surgical scar under the left breast and another, lower down, disappearing into her thick bushy triangle from which isolated hairs straggled towards her slightly rounded

abdomen. She spun gaily around, revealing dimpled buttocks and a large raised mole under her left shoulder blade. Somehow he had seen this too. Desperately he looked up into her face, searching for her above the excruciating humiliation of her nakedness. But this was not Mary. It was someone else altogether. Her lips were horribly contorted. Unseeing eyes stared at him through enormous pupils.

As he tried to unsee what he had seen, she rushed towards him and threw her arms around his neck sobbing, "Thank God you're here, thank God!" He stood rigid, but her aching misery went through him like a sword. He lifted his arms and rested each hand gently on her curved flanks.

The nurse rushed in. "What on earth is going on?! This will have to be reported!"

"She threw herself at me and I could not ignore her misery," he explained close to tears.

"Well, you'll have to go *immediately*," she said, dragging the now screaming woman from his arms.

As he made his way back down the hubbub of the corridor he could hear her wailing, "But he's my lover, my lover!"

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He stepped into a small fluorescent-lit café on the ground level of the hospital. A bored-looking young woman chewing gum stood behind the cash register. A man in a dressing-gown sat in a corner doing a crossword puzzle. A couple in gloomy conversation sat near

the door, one dabbing back tears. Tremlett ordered a coffee and sat down at a white plastic table looking out onto the street.

Two schoolboys walked laughingly by. An elderly woman, her husband beside her, made her laborious way with a walking frame towards the hospital door. A workman from a building site hurried in, ordered a Coke, sculled it, dumping the bottle in a trash can as he left. A truck juddered up to traffic lights opposite, spewing fumes as it lurched to a halt.

Lionel Tremlett saw it all with blinding clarity. The world outside was silent. He could hear nothing save the cries of that wretched creature upstairs, her face twisted in crazed misery, calling his name. He could not now imagine how, but he knew that when her mind was right again, the real Lionel Tremlett, whoever that was, would need to be there for her.

