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**Opening Extract from...**

# Mrs Engels

Written by Gavin McCrea

Published by Scribe

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# Mrs Engels

A Novel

GAVIN McCREA



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To Iñaki

CONTENTS

PHASE THE NOW 3

PHASE THE NEXT 149

PHASE THE LAST 255

*In Paradisum* 337

# PHASE THE NOW

1870

# I

# Fair Warning

## September

No one understands men better than the women they don't marry, and my own opinion — beknown only to God — is that the difference between one man and another doesn't amount to much. It's no matter what line he's in or which ideas he follows, whether he is sweet-tempered or ready-witted, a dab at one business or the next, for there isn't so much in any of that, and you won't find a man that hasn't something against him. What matters over and above the contents of his character — what makes the difference between sad and happy straits for she who must put her life into his keeping — is the mint that jingles in his pockets. In the final reckoning, the good and the bad come to an even naught, and the only thing left to recommend him is his money.

Young lasses yet afflicted with strong feeling and seeking a likely subject for a tender passion will say that money has no place in their thoughts. They make exceptions of themselves and pass on good matches, for they believe that you must feel a thing, and that this thing can be pure only if it's a poor figure it's felt for. To such lasses I says: take warning. This is a changing world, we don't know today what'll happen tomorrow, and the man you go with will decide where you're put, whether it's on the top or on the bottom or where. The fine feelings love will bring won't match the volume of problems a pauper will create. Odds are, the handsome fella you go spooney on will turn out to be a bad bargain, white-livered and empty of morals;

the gospel-grinder is sure to have his own blameworthy past and will drag you to the dogs; the flash charmer will come to act the tightwad, insisting you live on naught a year; the clever wit will loiter away his hours believing others must provide his income, and the happiness you anticipated will never turn into happiness enjoyed; there'll always be something wanting.

Better — the only honest way — is to put away your hopes of private feeling and search out the company of a man with means, a man who knows the value of brass and is easy enough with it. Make your worth felt to him, woo his protection as he woos your affections, in the good way of business, and the reward will be comfort and ease, and there's naught low or small in that. Is it of any consequence that he isn't a looker, or a rare mind, or a fancy poet, as long as he's his own man and is improving you?

This must be calculated on.

Love is a bygone idea; centuries worn. There's things we can go without, and love is among them, bread and a warm hearth are not. Is it any wonder there's heaps of ladies, real ladies, biding to marry the first decent man who offers them five hundred a year? Aye, young flowers, don't be being left behind on the used-up shelf. If you must yearn for things, let those things be feelings, and let your yearning be done in a first-class carriage like this one rather than in one of those reeking compartments down back, where you'll be on your feet all day and exposed to winds and forever stunned by the difficulty of your life. Establish yourself in a decent situation and put away what you can, that, please God, one day you may need no man's help. Take it and be content, then you'll journey well.

II

# On the Threshold

And there's no doubting this carriage is high class. The wood and the brass and the velvet and the trimmings: I see it in bright perspective, and though we've been sat here since early morning, my mind has been so far away, up in the clouds gathering wool, it's like I'm noticing it now for the first time; a sudden letting in of daylight. I reach out to stroke the plush of the drapes. Tickle the fringe of the lace doilies. Rub the polished rail. I twist my boot into the thick meat of the carpet. I crane my neck to look at the other passengers, so hushed and nice-minded and well got up. None of this is imagination. It is real. It has passed into my hands and I can put a price on it all.

Across the table, on the sofa he shares with his books and papers, Frederick cuts his usual figure: face and fingernails scrubbed to a shine, hair parted in a manly fashion, an upright pose, feet planted and knees wide, snake pushed down one leg of his breeches; a right gorger. He fidgets round and tries to throw off my gander.

'All fine with you, Lizzie?' he says.

'Oh grand,' I says, though I'm slow to take my eyes away. I can't see the crime in it, a lady taking a moment to admire.

'Lizzie, *bitter*,' he says, rustling his newspaper, and slapping it out, and lifting it up to hide himself, 'I'm trying to read.'

I click my tongue off the roof of my mouth — for him, naught in the world has worth unless it's written down — and turn to look out the window. Outside, the country is speeding by, wind and steam, yet

not fast enough for my liking. The further we get away, and the further again, the better.

I forbade anyone from coming to the station to see us off, for I didn't want any scenes, but of course Lydia, the rag-arse, disobeyed me.

'Don't let it change you,' she said, gripping my hand and casting anxious glances up at the train as if it were a beast about to swallow me. 'Find a friend as'll listen to you and don't be on your own. It's no fine thing to be alone.'

We embraced and she cried. I squeezed her arm and fixed the hair under her bonnet and told her she was a good friend, the best.

'Find your people, Lizzie,' she said then through her tears. 'I'm told St Giles is where they be. St Giles, do you hear?'

I sat backways in the carriage so I could leave the place looking at it. To go from a familiar thing, however rough-cut, is a matter for nerves, and I suppose that's why so many people don't move. Manchester: leastwise they know the run of it.

At Euston, Frederick stands on the platform, waist-deep in smoke and soot, and takes it all in: heaves it up his nose and sucks it through his teeth and swallows it down as if all these years in Manchester have weakened his bellows and London is the only cure. Around him, around us, a mampus of folk, mixed as to their kind. Men and men and men and men, and here more men hung off by ladies dressed to death and ladies in near dishabbilly and ladies in everything between. By the pillar, an officer in boots. Over there under the hoarding, a line of shoe-blacks. A pair of news vendors. An Italian grinding tunes from a barrel-organ. And passing by now — charging through with sticks and big airs — a tribe of moneymen in toppers and showy chains, chased at heel by beggar boys so begrimed it's impossible to tell if they're Christians or coons or what.

I stop one of the railway porters and ask him to tell me what time it says on the station wall.

'Ma'am?' he says, unsure whether I'm playing a rig, for the clock is

large and plain for all except the stone-blind to read. 'That there says a quarter past two o'clock.'

I nod him my thanks. He bides for the penny. I wave him away; a tone won't win any favours from me.

'On time,' I call to Frederick. And then again to be heard over the music and the patter and the tramp of boots on the pavement: 'I says we're right on time.'

Frederick takes his watch from his fob and holds it up to the clock, makes sure the one isn't fibbing to the other. 'So it seems,' he says.

I push through to stand in front of him, my arms folded against him. 'Now don't go being slippery, Frederick, and remember what you said. You said if there were no delays we'd be able to go and see the house today. If we got here before three, you said, we wouldn't have to put it off till tomorrow.'

He drops his watch back in and wrestles his hands into his gloves. 'We'll see.'

We wait in the waiting room for our bags to be loaded onto the cab, then we wait in the weather for them to be removed to a second cab, on account of the lame nag that's preventing the first from moving off. These added minutes spent in the strangeness of this strange place — a smell of drains just like Manchester, only with a special whack to it — has given me a sick headache and has me wanting, more than ever, to get to the new house. To close the doors and be safe behind my own walls. I become impatient. I huff and stamp my foot. And by the time we climb up and are on our way, my tongue is aflame with speeches, even though I've promised not to bring them out again.

'Frederick,' I says. The bump and jolt of the wheels makes my voice tremble. '*Frederick?*'

He sighs. 'What is it?'

'My love, forgive me if my insistence bores you, but still I don't understand why we must stop with the Marxes. If our house is ready, why don't we go there direct and move ourselves in? Then we could

see Jenny and Karl at our leisure, when we're right and settled.'

He lets loose another sigh. Crosses his leg over and lands a sharp elbow on the windowsill. 'Really, Lizzie, I cannot discuss this with you again.'

'I just don't see the need, that's all. Causing trouble for Jenny, when our house is there, biding to be walked into.'

'For blazing sake, Lizzie, you know well it was Jenny's idea to have us for these few days. She desires us there so we can make the final arrangements together. Besides, it's too late to change the plans. We've been kindly invited, we've accepted the kind invitation, and that, if you'll be so kind, is the end of it.'

And though it feels to me like the depths of unkindness, I know this must indeed be the end. When a man's mind is set, there's rot-all you can say to change its direction.

I turn to watch out the window. Soon the giant station hotels give way to workshops and warehouses; now to rows of brick and stone; now to terraces and park. Like Manchester, the whole of human history is here, only more of it. I make to point something out to Frederick — the door of a house on a better kind of street — but he's not looking. He's quiet in his chair. Like a statue he sits stock-still, his gaze on his lap, his mouth pulled down.

'A penny for your thoughts,' I says.

'What's that?' he says, blinking at me like a dazed child.

'You looked a hundred miles away. Were you thinking anything?'

'*Nine, nine*,' he brings a fist to his mouth and clears his throat, 'I wasn't thinking anything. Nothing at all.'

He says this, and of course I ought to credit it, but his face and manner go for so much; I can tell he's lying. He's thinking about *her*, and it makes me sad and envious to know it. Spoken or unspoken, she hangs there between us; an atmosphere.

I arrange the cuffs on my wrists till I'm able to look at him again. When I do, I can tell he has noticed a hurt in me, though I'm sure he doesn't know what's caused it. He brightens, his mood freshens and

he speaks in the tone of a man who wants to make up for he doesn't know what.

'I have always thought it interesting,' he says, bringing his face close to the glass and squinting through it, 'I've always thought it interesting that the English divide their buildings perpendicularly into houses, whereas we Germans divide them horizontally into apartments.'

I shrug to tell him I've never thought to think about it.

'In England,' he goes on, 'every man is master of his hall and stairs and chambers, whereas back home we are obliged to use the hall and stairs in common. I believe it is just as Karl says: the possession of an entire house is desired in this country because it draws a circle round the family and hearth. This is mine. This is where I keep my joys and my sorrows, and you shan't touch it. Which is a natural feeling, I suppose. I dare say universal. But it is stronger here, much stronger, than it is in the Fatherland.'

I make a face — 'Is that so?' — and pull the window down to let the breeze in.

Don't I deserve to have some days that aren't about her?

The cab stops outside a detached house of fair style: three up and one down, a good-sized area, a flower garden and a porch. That they live bigger than their means — that they live at the rate of knots and don't use their allowance wise — isn't a surprise to me. Even so, I feel called on to speak.

'It won't be long now before they have us cleaned out.'

I take the cabby's hand and kick my skirts out so I can land my foot without stepping on my hem. I've bare touched down before the door of the house flies open and two dogs come surging out with Tussy close on their tails: '*There* you are!'

The larger of the dogs runs to Frederick and puts its paws up on his good waistcoat. Frederick bends and allows himself to be licked on the cheek and the ear. For a man so neat he has a queer love for what roots and roves. The other dog, the ratty-looking one, comes to make

circles around me. I stand frozen while it sniffs at my privy parts.

'Don't be frightened,' Frederick laughs. 'He's harmless.'

I give him a look that says I'll scream and make an episode if it's the only way.

Snorting, he takes the animal by the collar and shoos it off. 'Come on, Whiskey, come away from that mean woman.'

Tussy kisses Frederick on the lips and tells him he's late getting to London, twenty years late. He laughs and says something in the German, and she tosses her head and speaks back to him in the same, and between them now they release a mighty flow of language, one so foreign that, if you were to judge from their faces and features only, you wouldn't know what they were feeling.

When their business is done, Tussy comes and wraps herself round me, making me feel the child, for she's taller than me now and has a bust bigger. 'At last you're here, Aunt Lizzie, at last.'

'Tussy, my sweet darling, let me see you.' I hold her out and look her up and down. She has her hair in braids and a jewel at the neck and a dress that shows a new slightness of waist. Only a year since her last visit to Manchester — what a prime and drunken affair that was! — and yet, from the look of her, it'd be easy to believe thrice that time has hurtled away. Fifteen and out of her age, never to be a child again; it'd break your heart.

'You've grown all out of knowledge,' I says.

'Have I?' she says, and does a twirl, and curtsies. She sticks out her tongue and winks as she rises from the dip.

I swat her on the arm with my glove. 'You're getting more and more like your father.'

'You mean, more like a Jewess?'

I laugh. She hasn't lost her mouth. 'Mind your father doesn't hear you saying such things.'

Frederick instructs the cabby to take our belongings inside, suitcases first, boxes and gifts last. Tussy takes my arm and walks me up the path to the porch.

'I have missed you so, Aunt Lizzie.'

'And I've missed you, child.'

'And now, finally, we get to be neighbours.'

'Aye, it's been a long time coming.'

'You know, it's only twenty-two minutes away. Your new house, from here. I've been there often and have counted the distance. Door to door, twenty-two minutes on foot.'

'Is that all? A mere hop and a skip.'

'We shall do all sorts together, shan't we, Aunt Lizzie?'

'There'll be time for it all. We'll not lack for things to do, nor time to do them in.'

The rest of them are stood in the hall passage; the family display. Mother, father and eldest daughter, biding to bask in the honour they know we must feel to be connected with them. Frederick walks in and is greeted by more of the German, and more again till the air is full of it. I leave them to have their minute. Lingering on the matting, I marvel at the tree they have in a tub on the porch.

'A tree,' I says, 'in a tub.' I tug on Tussy's sleeve. 'I wouldn't let that grow any further or it'll burst out.'

Giving vent to a howl of laughter, Tussy pulls me up the step and presents me as the ringmaster presents his lioness: hip cocked back, arms stretched out, fingers twinkling, a giant grin. Young Janey comes forward first and she's a winsome sight to see. It's a beauty that might need a little bringing about, true, but it's a beauty all the same, and I wouldn't take it from her. Next comes Karl, his whiskers like bramble on my face, his lips like dried-out sausage.

'*Well coming*, Lizzie,' he says.

And final now, Jenny herself. The changes in her face speak to how long it's been. Five or six years, by my count, though she looks to have been drawn out by a decade and more. Well settled, she is now, into the autumn of her time.

'Welcome to our home, Lizzie,' she says with a bit too much energy. 'Welcome to London.'

I offer a grateful smile and now blush at the falseness of it. We're not used to playing this visiting game with each other. For some reason or another, I always decided to stay at home when Frederick took his trips to the capital; likewise Jenny never joined Karl or Tussy on their visits to Manchester, and no one ever seemed to wonder at it, no excuses were given for us, our absences were taken to be the normal and wanted way, which I suppose they were.

'And Laura?' I says, in case I forget to mention her later and am judged thoughtless for it. 'Are there tidings from Laura?'

'Safe,' Jenny says. 'They have moved from Paris to Bordeaux. They will be safe there.'

I open to inquire further but she grips my arm to say there'll be plenty of time for that, I'm not to worry, now is a moment for reunion and celebration.

Behind us, Karl and Frederick start a scuffle over who ought pay off the cabby, as if it made a piddle of difference on earth which pocket it came from: isn't it all water from the same fountain? Jenny can't help but to get involved, and I'm glad of the free moment to take off my bonnet and have a proper look. The hall, I see, is papered gay. There's a table with pottery animals and a bust. A mirror and a line of pictures, and in every wall a door. The carpet is rich and unworn and goes up to the first landing and into the beyonds. The bannisters are painted three coats of white.

Once the cabby has been dealt with, Jenny sends the men into the parlour and out of the way. She smiles a moment through the silence and now she says, 'Nim?' only the once and bare over her breath, almost a sigh.

Miraculous-like the maid comes up from the kitchen. She's wearing a simple dress and a white cap and apron. I've heard so much about her, how good she's supposed to be to look at, I'm relieved to see she's plainer in true life. Fine bones, to be sure, but the work tells upon her.

'Nim, the cases, please,' says Jenny. She whispers it, as if the giving

of orders hurts her and must be made soft. 'Into the guestrooms. Thank you.'

Nim nods at her mistress and, as she passes, gives me another as a greeting. I step aside to give her way, but not so far that I can't measure her up.

Her nose doesn't reach my shoulder!

The sight of her knocks me out of myself, for when a figure has been made famous to you — when she's been talked about till her name sounds louder in your ears than Jehovah's — you expect her to tower over and be massive, and yet here she is now, a tiny thing. As I watch her go up the stairs I'm left in no doubt as to the solidness of her frame, and her limberness — she manages to haul two burdens at a time and not be tripped by the dogs whirling about her — but there's no getting clear of the fact that, God bless her, she's but a pip. If you didn't keep an eye on her you'd lose her.

'Oh and Nim,' says Jenny when the maid is already gone round the bend of the stairs. 'When you're done with that we'll have some refreshments in the parlour.' Jenny now turns to me and makes a gesture to indicate that it's a relief to be rid of ugly tasks. She takes the bonnet out of my hand and leaves it down on the table. 'Come,' she says, and puts me on her arm and walks me off for the tour.

I count a parlour, a morning room, a conservatory, a cellar, five bedrooms, three cats and two birds.

Says Jenny: 'It is indeed a princely dwelling compared with the holes we have lived in before. In fact, to my mind it is far too large and expensive a house. I am forever telling Karl we ought to move, that we live too grandly for our circumstances. I for my part wouldn't care a damn about living in Whitechapel. But he will not hear of it. He thinks the house is the one means by which the Girls can make connections and relationships that can assure them a future.' She unfurls a finger and makes circles in the air with it. '*Surrounded* as we are by doctors and lawyers.' The shape of her mouth is supposed to tell me that such people are a necessary unpleasantness to her, like the stink of the slop

pail. Pondering a moment, she lets the face fall away. 'But I dare say Karl is right. A purely proletarian set-up would be unsuitable now, however fine it would be if we were alone, just the two of us, or if the Girls were boys.'

We've stopped outside Karl's study. By the way she puzzles at the half-open door, I can tell she's queasy about whether to venture in or to pass over it. Shamming ignorance of her unease, I unhitch myself and go through.

'It might look like a mess,' she says, following after me, 'but it has its own peculiar method.'

I make my way to a clearing on the rug, a small circle of carpet bordered by piles of books and papers.

'It may not be immediately evident but this room is actually the brightest and airiest in the house.' She picks her way through and draws the curtain back. 'The Heath right there. The air the best in London. One has only to leave the windows open a moment and that cigar smell is killed.'

I'm close enough to the chimneypiece to have a proper gander at the things littered on it: the matches, the tobacco boxes, the paperweights, the portraits of Jenny and the Girls.

'Look, here's yours,' she says, pointing at the picture of Frederick.

On the way back out, I take the liberty to push in a file that looks ready to topple from the bookcase.

'He calls them his slaves,' says Jenny, meaning the books.

Back downstairs a tray had been made ready in the parlour. Nim stands beside it, biding our wishes. Frederick and Karl have already been served liberal shorts of gin.

'Lizzie, what shall it be, tea or coffee?' says Jenny.

'Whatever you're having yourself,' I says.

'What do you say to coffee?'

'Nay, I won't have coffee, but thank you.'

'Tea, then.'

'Not much up for tea either, you're very kind.'

Karl slaps his thigh and gives out a good-humoured roar. 'Can't you see it's a drink the woman wants!'

The colour runs up Jenny's neck. She lets out a little laugh, glances at the clock and now down at her hem. 'A drink, Lizzie?'

'Aye, I'll have a nip, if it's going.' To put me into the spirits.

Nim comes to me with a half-measure. She refuses me her eyes when she hands me the glass; keeps them low on the floor.

'Thanks, Nim,' I says, loud and clear so I'm heard. 'You're awful good.'

Her mouth twitches. Someone coughs. She scuttles back to the tray and sets about readying the Girls' tea. Sat in the chair closest to her is Frederick. I watch for his behaviour, but, in actual fact, he bare notices her. More than that, he ignores her. I'd even say rude, if I didn't know Frederick to be so particular about his graces.

From his royal spot on the settee, Karl proposes us. 'To Frederick and Lizzie,' he says. 'After the darkness of Manchester, may you find happiness and rest here in London.'

Tussy rummages in a drawer and comes out with two wrapped gifts. Frederick is served first: a red neckerchief. He ties it on and marches up and down and gives a blast of the *Marseillaise*, and everyone laughs and claps. Mine is a jewellery box, and inside, lying on a bed of velvet, a silver thimble and a pin with a bit of thread already fed into it. I hold up the needle between my fingers, and they all brim over.

Says Karl between his guffaws: 'The revolutionary finally settles down to her fancywork!'

I make as if to pour my drink into the thimble. 'It'll come in handy for measuring my poteen.' And that — easy as falling off a chair — brings the house down.

When the laughter drains, the room settles into a tired silence. The tick of the clock. The sucking at glasses.

'Uncle Frederick,' says Janey after a time, 'have you finished your history of Ireland?'

This gets Tussy excited. 'Oh yes, Uncle Angel, when do we get to read it?'

'Oh, oh,' says Frederick, trifling with a corner of his jacket and frowning. 'Thank you for your interest, my dear children, but I'm afraid I've been distracted of late. It's all about France now.'

'Hmm,' gurgles Karl, 'indeed. And speaking of that damned place, we need to take a clear position on the situation. Our initial support of Prussia is proving quite an embarrassment —'

'Karl, please,' Jenny interrupts. 'Can't you leave this outside talk until you are actually outside?'

Karl puts his hands up in surrender.

Tussy giggles.

Jenny catches my eye and gestures at the tray. 'Lizzie, there is some tart here,' she says. 'But if you are hungry for something more filling I could have Nim fix you up some cold cuts.'

I shake my head, perhaps a little too fierce. 'Please don't go to any trouble. We ate on the train.'

Frederick, always liable for a man-faint if he doesn't have his in-betweens, looks about to contradict me, but he sees the arrangement of my face and checks himself. 'I fear Lizzie is getting restless. She is anxious to see the house. I promised to bring her to see it today.' He looks at Karl, as if begging leave.

Karl waves a woman's wave. 'Go on, Frederick. Show Lizzie your new home. We'll have time to catch up later.'

While I'm putting my coat and bonnet back on, Jenny tells me what she's done to the house. She calls my attention to certain arrangements and wonders if I'd like them altered.

'When I see them, I'll tell you, Jenny,' I says. 'You'll be the first to know.'

The air outside runs into me, a respite. I wouldn't mind walking the twenty-two minutes. 'Will we foot it?' I says, thinking Frederick is beside me, but when I turn I see he's clean gone. 'Frederick?'

Of a sudden, I feel him behind me, and then I see only black.

'This way it will be an even bigger surprise!' he says, bringing forth more laughter and clapping from the family gathered on the threshold, and though I notice I'm allowing it to happen, I do say to myself, I says, 'Can't I just see the blessed thing? Must it be one of their games?'

He's gone and put his new neckerchief over my face as a blindfold.