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The Bookshop

Written by Penelope Fitzgerald

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SHORTLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE

PENELOPE FITZGERALD

The Bookshop

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1

IN 1959 Florence Green occasionally passed a night when she was not absolutely sure whether she had slept or not. This was because of her worries as to whether to purchase a small property, the Old House, with its own warehouse on the foreshore, and to open the only bookshop in Hardborough. The uncertainty probably kept her awake. She had once seen a heron flying across the estuary and trying, while it was on the wing, to swallow an eel which it had caught. The eel, in turn, was struggling to escape from the gullet of the heron and appeared a quarter, a half, or occasionally three-quarters of the way out. The indecision expressed by both creatures was pitiable. They had taken on too much. Florence felt that if she hadn't slept at all – and people often say this when they mean nothing of the kind – she must have been kept awake by thinking of the heron.

She had a kind heart, though that is not of much use when it comes to the matter of self-preservation. For more than eight years of half a lifetime she had lived at Hardborough on the very small amount of money her late husband had left her and had recently come to wonder whether she hadn't a duty to make it clear to herself, and possibly to others, that she existed in her own right. Survival was often considered all that could be asked in the cold and clear East Anglian air. Kill or cure, the inhabitants thought – either a long old age, or immediate consignment to the salty turf of the churchyard.

She was in appearance small, wispy and wiry, somewhat insignificant from the front view, and totally so from the back. She was not much talked about, not even in Hardborough, where everyone could be seen coming over the wide distances and everything seen was discussed. She made small seasonal changes in what she wore. Everybody knew her winter coat, which was the kind that might just be made to last another year.

In 1959, when there was no fish and chips in Hardborough, no launderette, no cinema except on alternate Saturday nights, the need of all these things was felt, but no one had considered, certainly had not thought of Mrs Green as considering, the opening of a bookshop.

Of course I can't make any definite commitment on behalf of the bank at the moment – the decision is not in my hands – but I think I may say that there will be no objection in principle to a loan. The Government's word up to now has been restraint in credit to the private borrower, but there are distinct signs of relaxation – I'm not giving away any state secrets there. Of course, you'll have little or no competition – a few novels, I'm told, lent out at the Busy Bee wool shop, nothing significant. You assure me that you've had considerable experience of the trade.'

Florence, preparing to explain for the third time what she meant by this, saw herself and her friend, their hair in Eugene waves, chained pencils round their necks, young assistants of twenty-five years ago at Müller's in Wigmore Street. It was the stocktaking she remembered best, when Mr Müller, after calling for silence, read out with calculated delay the list of young ladies and their partners, drawn by lot, for the day's checking over. There were by no means enough fellows to go round, and she had been lucky to be paired, in 1934, with Charlie Green, the poetry buyer.

‘I learned the business very thoroughly when I was a girl,’ she said. ‘I don’t think it’s changed in essentials since then.’

‘But you’ve never been in a managerial position. Well, there are one or two things that might be worth saying. Call them words of advice, if you will.’

There were very few new enterprises in Hardborough, and the notion of one, like a breath of sea air far inland, faintly stirred the sluggish atmosphere of the bank.

‘I mustn’t take up your time, Mr Keble.’

‘Oh, you must allow me to be judge of that. I think I might put it in this way. You must ask yourself, when you envisage yourself opening a bookshop, what your objective really is. That is the first question needful to a business of any kind. Do you hope to give our little town a service that it needs? Do you hope for sizeable profits? Or are you, perhaps, Mrs Green, a jogger along, with little understanding of the vastly different world which the 1960s may have in store for us? I’ve often thought that it’s a pity that there isn’t some accepted course of study for the small business man or woman …’

Evidently there was an accepted course for bank managers. Launched on the familiar current, Mr Keble’s voice gathered pace, with the burden of many waters. He spoke of the necessity of professional book-keeping, systems of loan repayment, and opportunity costs.

‘… I would like to put a point, Mrs Green, which in all probability has not occurred to you, and yet which is so plain to those of us who are in a position to take the broader view. My point is this. *If over any given period of time the cash inflow cannot meet the cash outflow, it is safe to predict that money difficulties are not far away.*’

Florence had known this ever since her first payday, when, at the age of sixteen, she had become self-supporting. She prevented herself from making a sharp reply. What had become of her resolve, as she crossed the market place to the bank building, whose solid red brick defied the prevailing wind, to be sensible and tactful?

‘As to the stock, Mr Keble, you know that I’ve been given the opportunity of buying most of what I need from Müller’s, now that they’re closing down.’ She managed to say this resolutely, although she had felt the closure as a personal attack on her memories. ‘I’ve had no estimate for that as yet. And as to the premises, you agreed that £3,500 was a fair price for the freehold of the Old House and the oyster shed.’

To her surprise, the manager hesitated.

‘The property has been standing empty for a long time now. That is, of course, a matter for your house agent and your solicitor – Thornton, isn’t it?’ This was an artistic flourish, a kind of weakness, since there were only two solicitors in Hardborough. ‘But I should have thought the price might have come down further … The house won’t walk away if you decide to wait a little … deterioration … damp …’

‘The bank is the only building in Hardborough which isn’t damp,’ Florence replied. ‘Working here all day may perhaps have made you too demanding.’

‘… and then I’ve heard it suggested – I’m in a position where I can say that I understand it may have been suggested – that there are other uses to which the house might be put – though of course there is always the possibility of a re-sale.’

‘Naturally I want to reduce expenses to a minimum.’ The manager prepared to smile understandingly, but spared himself the trouble when Florence added sharply ‘But I’ve no intention of re-selling. It’s a peculiar thing to take a step forward in middle age, but having done it I don’t intend to retreat. What else do people think the Old House could be used for? Why haven’t they done anything about it in the past seven years? There were jackdaws nesting in it, half the tiles were off, it stank of rats. Wouldn’t it be better as a place where people could stand and look at books?’

‘Are you talking about culture?’ the manager said, in a voice half way between pity and respect.

‘Culture is for amateurs. I can’t run my shop at a loss. Shakespeare was a professional!’

It took less than it should have done to fluster Florence, but at least she had the good fortune to care deeply about something. The manager replied soothingly that reading took up a great deal of time. ‘I only wish I had more time at my disposal. People have quite wrong ideas, you know, about the bank’s closing hours. Speaking personally, I enjoy very little leisure in the evenings. But don’t misunderstand me, I find a good book at my bedside of incalculable value. When I eventually retire I’ve no sooner read a few pages than I’m overwhelmed with sleep.’

She reflected that at this rate one good book would last the manager for more than a year. The average price of a book was twelve shillings and sixpence. She sighed.

She did not know Mr Keble at all well. Few people in Hardborough did. Although they were constantly told, by press and radio, that these were prosperous years for Britain, most of Hardborough still felt the pinch, and avoided the bank manager on principle. The herring catch had dwindled, naval recruitment was down, and there were many retired persons living on a fixed income. These did not return Mr Keble’s smile or his wave out of the hastily wound-down window of his Austin Cambridge. Perhaps this was why he went on talking for so long to Florence, although the discussion was scarcely businesslike. Indeed it had reached, in his view, an unacceptably personal level.

Florence Green, like Mr Keble, might be accounted a lonely figure, but this did not make them exceptional in Hardborough, where many were lonely. The local naturalists, the reedcutter, the postman, Mr Raven the marshman, bicycled off one by one, leaning against the wind, the observed of all observers, who could reckon the time by their reappearance over the horizon. Not all of these solitaries even went out. Mr Brundish, a descendant of one of the most ancient Suffolk families, lived as closely in his house as a badger in its sett. If he emerged in summer, wearing tweeds between dark green and grey, he appeared a moving gorse-bush against the gorse, or earth against the silt. In autumn he went to ground. His rudeness was resented only in the same way as the weather, brilliant in the morning, clouding over later, however much it had promised.

The town itself was an island between sea and river, muttering and drawing into itself as soon as it felt the cold. Every fifty years or so it had lost, as though careless or indifferent to such things, another means of communication. By 1850 the Laze had ceased to be navigable and the wharfs and ferries rotted away. In 1910 the swing bridge fell in, and since then all traffic had to go ten miles round by Saxford in order to cross the river. In 1920 the old railway was closed. The

children of Hardborough, waders and divers all, had most of them never been in a train. They looked at the deserted LNER station with superstitious reverence. Rusty tin strips, advertising Fry's Cocoa and Iron Jelloids, hung there in the wind.

The great floods of 1953 caught the sea wall and caved it in, so that the harbour mouth was dangerous to cross, except at very low tide. A rowing-boat was now the only way to get across the Laze. The ferryman chalked up his times for the day on the door of his shed, but this was on the far shore, so that no one in Hardborough could ever be quite certain when they were.

After her interview with the bank, and resigned to the fact that everyone in the town knew that she had been there, Florence went for a walk. She crossed the wooden planks across the dykes, preceded as she tramped by a rustling and splashing as small creatures, she didn't know of what kind, took to the water. Overhead the gulls and rooks sailed confidently on the tides of the air. The wind had shifted and was blowing inshore.

Above the marshes came the rubbish tip, and then the rough fields began, just good enough for the farmers to fence. She heard her name called, or rather she saw it, since the words were blown away instantly. The marshman was summoning her.

'Good morning, Mr Raven.' That couldn't be heard either.

Raven acted, when no other help was at hand, as a kind of supernumerary vet. He was in the Council field, where the grazing was let out at five shillings a week to whoever would take it, and at the extreme opposite end stood an old chestnut gelding, a Suffolk Punch, its ears turning delicately like pegs on its round poll in the direction of the human beings in its territory. It held its ground suspiciously, with stiffened legs, against the fence.

When she got within five yards of Raven, she understood that he was asking for the loan of her raincoat. His own clothes were rigid, layer upon layer, and not removable on demand.

Raven never asked for anything unless it was absolutely necessary. He accepted that coat with a nod, and while she stood keeping as warm as she could in the lee of the thorn hedge, he walked quietly across the field to the intensely watching old beast. It followed every movement with flaring nostrils, satisfied that Raven was not carrying a halter, and refusing to stretch its comprehension any further. At last it had to decide whether to understand or not, and a deep shiver, accompanied by a sigh, ran through it from nose to tail. Then its head drooped, and Raven put one of the sleeves of the raincoat round its neck. With a last gesture of independence, it turned its head aside and pretended to look for new grass in the damp patch under the fence. There was none, and it followed the marshman awkwardly down the field, away from the indifferent cattle, towards Florence.

'What's wrong with him, Mr Raven?'

'He eats, but he's not getting any good out of the grass. His teeth are blunted, that's the reason. He tears up the grass, but that doesn't get masticated.'

'What can we do, then?' she asked with ready sympathy.

'I can fare to file them,' the marshman replied. He took a halter out of his pocket and handed back the raincoat. She turned into the wind to button herself into her property. Raven led the old horse forward.

'Now, Mrs Green, if you'd catch hold of the tongue. I wouldn't ask everybody, but I know you don't frighten.'

‘How do you know?’ she asked.

‘They’re saying that you’re about to open a bookshop. That shows you’re ready to chance some unlikely things.’

He slipped his finger under the loose skin, hideously wrinkled, above the horse’s jawbone and the mouth gradually opened in an extravagant yawn. Towering yellow teeth stood exposed. Florence seized with both hands the large slippery dark tongue, smooth above, rough beneath, and, like an old-time whaler, hung gamely on to it to lift it clear of the teeth. The horse now stood sweating quietly, waiting for the end. Only its ears twitched to signal a protest at what life had allowed to happen to it. Raven began to rasp away with a large file at the crowns of the side teeth.

‘Hang on, Mrs Green. Don’t you relax your efforts. That’s slippery as sin I know.’

The tongue writhed like a separate being. The horse stamped with one foot after another, as though doubting whether they all still touched the ground.

‘He can’t kick forwards, can he, Mr Raven?’

‘He can if he likes.’ She remembered that a Suffolk Punch can do anything, except gallop.

‘Why do you think a bookshop is unlikely?’ she shouted into the wind. ‘Don’t people want to buy books in Hardborough?’

‘They’ve lost the wish for anything of a rarity,’ said Raven, rasping away. ‘There’s many more kippers sold, for example, than bloaters that are half-smoked and have a more delicate flavour. Now you’ll tell me, I dare say, that books oughtn’t to be a rarity.’

Once released, the horse sighed cavernously and stared at them as though utterly disillusioned. From the depths of its noble belly came a brazen note, more like a trumpet than a horn, dying away to a snicker. Clouds of dust rose from its body, as though from a beaten mat. Then, dismissing the whole matter, it trotted to a safe distance and put down its head to graze. A moment later it caught sight of a patch of bright green angelica and began to eat like a maniac.

Raven declared that the old animal would not know itself, and would feel better. Florence could not honestly say the same of herself, but she had been trusted, and that was not an everyday experience in Hardborough.

2

THE property which Florence had determined to buy had not been given its name for nothing. Although scarcely any of the houses, until you got out to the half-built council estate to the north-west, were new, and many dated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, none of them compared with the Old House, and only Holt House, Mr Brundish's place, was older. Built five hundred years ago out of earth, straw, sticks and oak beams, the Old House owed its survival to a flood cellar down a flight of stone steps. In 1953 the cellar had carried seven foot of seawater until the last of the floods had subsided. On the other hand, some of the seawater was still there.

Inside was the large front room, the backhouse kitchen, and upstairs a bedroom under a sloping ceiling. Not adjoining, but two streets away on the foreshore, stood the oyster shed which went with the property and which she had hoped to use as a warehouse for the reserve stock. But it turned out that the plaster had been mixed, for convenience sake, with sand from the beach, and sea sand never dries out. Any books left there would be wrinkled with damp in a few days. Her disappointment, however, endeared her to the shopkeepers of Hardborough. They had all known better, and could have told her so. They felt a shift in the balance of intellectual power, and began to wish her well.

Those who had lived in Hardborough for some time also knew that her freehold was haunted. The subject was not avoided, it was a familiar one. The figure of a woman, for example, could sometimes be seen down at the landing-stage of the ferry, about twilight, waiting for her son to come back, although he had been drowned over a hundred years ago. But the Old House was not haunted in a touching manner. It was infested by a poltergeist which, together with the damp and an unsolved question about the drains, partly accounted for the difficulty in selling the property. The house agent was in no way legally bound to mention the poltergeist, though he perhaps alluded to it in the phrase *unusual period atmosphere*.

Poltergeists, in Hardborough, were called rappers. They might go on for years, then suddenly stop, but no one who had heard the noise, with its suggestion of furious physical frustration, as though whatever was behind it could not get out, was ever likely to mistake it for anything else. 'Your rapper's been at my adjustable spanners,' said the plumber, without rancour, when she came to see how the work was going forward. His tool bag had been upended and scattered; pale blue tiles with a nice design of waterlilies had been flung broadside about the upstairs passage. The bathroom, with its water supply half connected, had the alert air of having witnessed something. When the well-disposed plumber had gone to his tea, she shut the bathroom door, waited a few moments, and then looked sharply in again. Anyone watching her, she reflected, might have thought she was mad. The word in Hardborough for 'mad' was 'not quite right', just as 'very ill' was 'moderate'. 'Perhaps I'll end up not quite right if this goes on,' she told the plumber, wishing he wouldn't call it 'your rapper'. The plumber, Mr Wilkins, thought that she would weather it.

It was on occasions like this that she particularly missed the good friends of her early days at Müller's. When she had come in and taken off her suede glove to show her engagement ring, a diamond chip, there had been a hearteningly long list of names on the subscription list for her

present, and it was almost the same list when Charlie had died of pneumonia in an improvised reception camp at the beginning of the war. Nearly all the girls in Mailing, Despatch and Counter Staff had lost touch; and even when she had their addresses, she found herself unwilling to admit that they had grown as old as she had.

It was not that she was short of acquaintances in Hardborough. At Rhoda's Dressmaker's, for example, she was well liked. But her confidence was hardly respected. Rhoda – that is to say, Jessie Welford – who had been asked to make her up a new dress, did not hesitate to speak about it freely, and even to show the material.

'It's for General and Mrs Gamart's party at The Stead. I don't know that I'd've chosen red myself. They've guests coming down from London.'

Florence, although she knew Mrs Gamart to nod to, and to be smiled at by, after various collections for charity, had never expected to be invited to The Stead. She took it, even though none of her stock had arrived as yet from London, as a compliment to the power of books themselves.

As soon as Sam Wilkins had fixed the bath to his own satisfaction, and the tiles were re-pegged on the roof, Florence Green moved out of her flat and boldly took up residence, with her few things, at the Old House. Even with the waterlily tiles firmly hung, it was not an altogether reassuring place to live. The curious sounds associated with the haunting continued at night, long after the ill-connected water pipes had fallen silent. But courage and endurance are useless if they are never tested. She only hoped that there would be no interruption when Jessie Welford brought the new dress in for a fitting. But this particular ordeal never arose. A message came, asking her to try on at Rhoda's, next door.

'I think perhaps it's not my colour after all. Would you call it ruby?' It was a comfort when Jessie said that it was more like a garnet, or a deep rust. But there was something unsatisfactory in the red, or rust, reflexion which seemed to move unwillingly in the looking-glass.

'It doesn't seem to fit at all at the back. Perhaps if I try to stand against the wall most of the time …'

'It'll come to you as you wear it,' the dressmaker replied firmly. 'You need a bit of costume jewellery as a focus.'

'Are you sure?' asked Florence. The fitting seemed to be turning into a conspiracy to prevent anyone noticing her new dress at all.

'I dare say, when all's said and done, I'm more used to dressing up and going out in the evening than you are,' said Miss Welford. 'I'm a bridge player, you know. Not much doing here – I go over to Flintmarket twice a week. A penny a hundred in the mornings, and two-pence a hundred in the evenings. We wear long skirts then, of course.'

She walked backwards a couple of steps, throwing a shadow over the glass, then returned to pin and adjust. No change, Florence knew, would make her look anything but small.

'I wish I wasn't going to this party,' she said.

'Well, I wouldn't mind taking your place. It's a pity Mrs Gamart sees fit to order everything from London, but it will be properly done – no need to stand and count the

sandwiches. And when you get there, you won't have to bother about how you look. Nobody will mind you, and anyway you'll find you know everyone in the room.'

"Florence had felt sure she would not, and she did not. The Stead, in any case, was not the kind of place where hats and coats were left about in the hall so that you could guess, before committing yourself to an entrance, who was already there. The hall, boarded with polished elm, breathed the deep warmth of a house that has never been cold. She caught a glimpse of herself in a glass much more brilliant than Rhoda's, and wished that she had not worn red.

Through the door ahead unfamiliar voices could be heard from a beautiful room, painted in the pale green which at that time the Georgian Society still recommended. Silver photograph frames on the piano and on small tables permitted a glimpse of the network of family relations which gave Violet Gamart an access to power far beyond Hardborough itself. Her husband, the General, was opening drawers and cupboards with the object of not finding anything, to give him an excuse to wander from room to room. In the 1950s there were many plays on the London stage where the characters made frequent entrances and exits out of various doors and were seen again in the second act, three hours later. The General would have fitted well into such a play. He hovered, alert and experimentally smiling, among the refreshments, hoping that he would soon be needed, even if only for a few moments, since opening champagne is not woman's work.

There was no bank manager there, no Vicar, not even Mr Thornton, Florence's solicitor, or Mr Drury, the solicitor who was not her solicitor. She recognized the back of the rural dean, and that was all. It was a party for the county, and for visitors from London. She correctly guessed that she would find out in time why she herself had been asked.

The General, relieved to see a smallish woman who did not appear to be intimidating or a relation of his wife's, gave her a large glass of champagne from one of the dozen he had opened. If she was not a relation of his wife's there were no elementary blunders to be made, but although he felt certain he had seen her somewhere before, God knew who she was exactly. She followed his thoughts, which, indeed, were transparent in their dogged progress from one difficulty to another, and told him that she was the person who was going to open a bookshop.

'That's it, of course. Got it in one. You're thinking of opening a bookshop. Violet was interested in it. She wanted to have one or two of those words of hers with you about it. I expect she'll have a chance later.'

Since Mrs Gamart was the hostess, she could have had this chance at any time, but Florence did not deceive herself about her own importance. She drank some of the champagne, and the smaller worries of the day seemed to stream upwards as tiny pinpricks through the golden mouthfuls and to break harmlessly and vanish.

She had expected the General to feel that his duty was discharged, but he lingered.

'What kind of stuff are you going to have in your shop?' he asked.

She scarcely knew how to answer him.

'They don't have many books of poetry these days, do they?' he persisted. 'I don't see many of them about.'

‘I shall have some poetry, of course. It doesn’t sell quite as well as some other things. But it will take time to get to know all the stock.’

The General looked surprised. It had never taken him a long time, as a subaltern, to get to know all his men.

‘It is easy to be dead. Say only this, they are dead.” Do you know who wrote that?’

She would dearly have liked to have been able to say yes, but couldn’t. The faltering light of expectancy in the General’s eyes died down. Clearly he had tried to make this point before, perhaps many times. In a voice so low that against the noise of the party that sipped and clattered round them she could only just hear it, he went on:

‘Charles Sorley …’

She realized at once that Sorley must be dead.

‘How old was he?’

‘Sorley? He was twenty. He was in the Swedebashers – the Suffolks, you know – 9th Battalion, B Company. He was killed in the battle of Loos, in 1915. He’d have been sixty-four years old if he’d lived. I’m sixty-four myself. That makes me think of poor Sorley.’

The General shuffled away into the mounting racket. Florence was alone, surrounded by people who spoke to each other familiarly, and some of whom could be seen in replica in the silver frames. Who were they all? She didn’t mind; for, after all, they would have felt lost in their turn if they had found their way into the Mailing Department at Müller’s. A mild young man’s voice said from just behind her, ‘I know who you are. You must be Mrs Green.’

He wouldn’t say that, she thought, unless he was sure of being recognized himself, and she did recognize him. Everybody in Hardborough could have told you who he was, in a sense proudly, because he was known to drive up to London to work, and to be something in TV. He was Milo North, from Nelson Cottage, on the corner of Back Lane. Exactly what he did was uncertain, but Hardborough was used to not being quite certain what people did in London.

Milo North was tall, and went through life with singularly little effort. To say ‘I know who you are, you must be Mrs Green’ represented an unaccustomed output of energy. What seemed delicacy in him was usually a way of avoiding trouble; what seemed like sympathy was the instinct to prevent trouble before it started. It was hard to see what growing older would mean to such a person. His emotions, from lack of exercise, had disappeared almost altogether. Adaptability and curiosity, he had found, did just as well.

‘I know who you are, of course, Mr North,’ she said, ‘but I’ve never had an invitation to The Stead before. I expect you come here often.’

‘I’m asked here often,’ said Milo. He gave her another glass of champagne, and having expected to be left indefinitely by herself after the retreat of the General, she was grateful.

‘You’re very kind.’

‘Not very,’ said Milo, who rarely said anything that was not true. Gentleness is not kindness. His fluid personality tested and stole into the weak places of others until it found it could settle down to its own advantage. ‘You live by yourself, don’t you? You’ve just moved into the Old House all by yourself? Haven’t you ever thought of marrying again?’

Florence felt confused. It seemed to her that she was becalmed with this young man in some backwater, while louder voices grew more incoherent beyond. Time seemed to move faster

there. Plates that had been full of sandwiches and crowned with parsley when she came in now held nothing but crumbs.

'I was very happily married, since you ask,' she said. 'My husband used to work in the same place as I did. Then he went into the old Board of Trade, before it became a Ministry. He used to tell me about his work when he came home in the evenings.'

'And you were happy?'

'I loved him, and I tried to understand his work. It sometimes strikes me that men and women aren't quite the right people for each other. Something must be, of course.'

Milo looked at her more closely.

'Are you sure you're well advised to undertake the running of a business?' he asked.

'I've never met you before, Mr North, but I've felt that because of your work you might welcome a bookshop in Hardborough. You must meet writers at the BBC, and thinkers, and so forth. I expect they come down here sometimes to see you, and to get some fresh air.'

'If they did I shouldn't quite know what to do with them. Writers will go anywhere, I'm not sure about thinkers. Kattie would look after them, I expect, though.'

Kattie must certainly be the dark girl in red stockings – or perhaps they were tights, which were now obtainable in Lowestoft and Flintmarket, though not in Hardborough – who lived with Milo North. They were the only unmarried couple living together in the town. But Kattie, who was also known to work for the BBC, only came down three nights a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, which was thought to make it a little more respectable.

'It's a pity that Kattie couldn't be here tonight.'

'But it's Wednesday!' Mrs Green exclaimed, in spite of herself.

'I didn't say she wasn't down here, only that it was a pity that she couldn't come. She couldn't come because I didn't bring her. I thought it might cause more trouble than it was worth.'

Mrs Green thought that he ought to have had the courage of his convictions. Her notion was of a young couple defying the world. She herself was older, and had the right to anxiety.

'At any rate, you must come to my shop,' she said. 'I shall rely on you.'

'On no account,' Milo replied.

He took her by both elbows, the lightest possible touch, and shook her by way of emphasis.

'Why are you wearing red this evening?' he asked.

'It isn't red! It's garnet, or deep rust!'

Mrs Violet Gamart, the natural patroness of all public activities in Hardborough, came towards them. Although her back had been turned, she had noticed the shake but felt that it was suggestive of the freedom of the arts and therefore not out of place in her drawing-room. The moment, however, had come for her to have a few words with Mrs Green. She explained that she had been attempting to do this all evening, but had been repeatedly spirited away. So many people seemed to have come, but most of them she could see at any time. What she really wanted to say was how grateful everyone must feel about this new venture, such foresight and enterprise.

Mrs Gamart spoke with a kind of generous urgency. She had dark bright eyes which appeared to be kept open, as though by some mechanism, to their widest extent.

‘Bruno! Have you been introduced to my husband? Come and tell Mrs – Mrs – how delighted we all are.’

Florence felt a muddled sense of vocation, as though she would willingly devote her life to the service of Mrs Gamart.

‘Bruno!’

The General had been trying to call attention to an abrasion on his hand, caused by the twisted wire on one of the champagne corks. He went up to every group of guests in turn, hoping to raise a smile by referring to himself as walking wounded.

‘We’ve all been praying for a good bookshop in Hardborough, haven’t we, Bruno?’

Glad to be summoned, he halted towards her.

‘Of course, my dear, no harm in praying. Probably be a good thing if we all did more of it.’

‘There’s only one point, Mrs Green, a small one in a way – you haven’t actually moved into the Old House yet, have you?’

‘Yes, I’ve been there for more than a week.’

‘Oh, but there’s no water.’

‘Sam Wilkins connected the pipes for me.’

‘Don’t forget, Violet,’ the General said anxiously, ‘that you’ve been up in London a good deal lately, and haven’t been able to keep an eye on everything.’

‘Why shouldn’t I have moved in?’ Florence asked, as lightly as she could manage.

‘You mustn’t laugh at me, but I’m fortunate enough to have a kind of gift, or perhaps it’s an instinct, of fitting people and places together. For instance, only just recently – only I’m afraid it wouldn’t mean very much to you if you don’t know the two houses I’m talking about –’

‘Perhaps you could tell me which ones you’re thinking of,’ said the General, ‘and then I could explain it all slowly to Mrs Green.’

‘Anyway, to return to the Old House – that’s exactly the sort of thing I mean. I believe I might be able to save you a great deal of disappointment, and even perhaps a certain amount of expense. In fact, I want to help you, and that’s my excuse for saying all this.’

‘I am sure no excuse is needed,’ said Florence.

‘There are so many more suitable premises in Hardborough, so much more convenient in every way for a bookshop. Did you know, for example, that Deben is closing down?’

Certainly she knew that Deben’s wet fish shop was about to close. Everybody in the town knew when there were likely to be vacant premises, who was in financial straits, who would need larger family accommodation in nine months, and who was about to die.

‘We’ve been so used, I’m afraid, to the Old House standing empty that we’ve delayed from year to year – you’ve quite put us to shame by being in such a hurry, Mrs Green – but the fact is that we’re rather upset by the sudden transformation of our Old House into a shop – so many of us have the idea of converting it into some kind of centre – I mean an arts centre – for Hardborough.’

The General was listening with strained attention.

‘Might pray for that too, you know, Violet.’

'… chamber music in summer – we can't leave it all to Aldeburgh – lecturers in winter …'

'We have lectures already,' said Florence. 'The Vicar's series on Picturesque Suffolk only comes round again every three years.' They were delightful evenings, for there was no need to listen closely, and in front of the slumberous rows the coloured slides followed each other in no sort of order, disobedient to the Vicar's voice.

'We should have to be a good deal more ambitious, particularly with the summer visitors who may come from some distance away. And there is simply no other old house that would give the right ambience. Do, won't you, think it over?'

'I've been negotiating this sale for more than six months, and I can't believe that everyone in Hardborough didn't know about it. In fact, I'm sure they did.' She looked for confirmation to the General, who stared fixedly away at the empty sandwich plates.

'And of course,' Mrs Gamart went on, with even more marked emphasis, 'one great advantage, which it seems almost wrong to throw away, is that now we have exactly the right person to take charge. I mean to take charge of the centre, and put us all right about books and pictures and music, and encourage things, and get things off the ground, and keep things going, and see they're on the right lines.'

She gave Mrs Green a smile of unmistakable meaning and radiance. The moment of confusing intimacy had returned, even though Mrs Gamart, in the course of her last sentence, had withdrawn, with encouraging nods and gestures, into her protective horde of guests.

Florence, left quite alone, went out to the small room off the hall to begin the search for her coat. While she looked methodically through the piles, she reflected that, after all, she was not too old to do two jobs, perhaps get a manager for the bookshop, while she herself would have to take some sort of course in art history and music appreciation – music was always appreciated, whereas art had a history – that, she supposed, would mean journeys over to Cambridge.

Outside it was a clear night and she could see across the marshes to the Laze, marked by the riding lights of the fishing boats, waiting for the low tide. But it was cold, and the air stung her face.

'It was very good of them to ask me,' she thought. 'I daresay they found me a bit awkward to talk to.'

As soon as she had gone, the groups of guests reformed themselves, as the cattle had done when Raven took the old horse aside. Now they were all of the same kind, facing one way, grazing together. Between themselves they could arrange many matters, though what they arranged was quite often a matter of chance. As the time drew on for thinking about going home, Mrs Gamart was still a little disturbed as what seemed a check in her scheme for the Old House. This Mrs Green, though unobtrusive enough, had not quite agreed to everything on the spot. It was not of much importance. But a little more champagne, given her by Milo, caused her mind to revolve in its giddy uppermost circle, and to her cousin's second husband, who was something to do with the Arts Council, and to her own cousin once removed, who was soon going to be high up in the Directorate of Planning, and to her brilliant nephew who sat for the Longwash Division of West Suffolk and had already made his name as the persevering secretary of the Society for Providing Public Access to Places of Interest and Beauty, and to Lord Gosfield

who had ventured over from his stagnant castle in the Fens because if foot-and-mouth broke out again he wouldn't be able to come for months, she spoke of the Hardborough Centre for Music and the Arts. And in the minds of her brilliant nephew, cousin, and so on, a faint resolution formed that something might have to be done, or Violet might become rather a nuisance. Even Lord Gosfield was touched, though he had said nothing all evening, and had in fact driven the hundred odd miles expressly to say nothing in the company of his old friend Bruno. They were all kind to their hostess, because it made life easier.

It was time to be gone. They were not sure where they or their wives had put the car keys. They lingered at the front door saying that they must not let in the cold air, while the General's old dog, which lived in single-minded expectation of the door opening, thumped its tail feebly on the shining floor; then their cars would not start and the prospect of some of them returning to stay the night grew perilously close; then the last spark ignited and they roared away, calling and waving, and the marsh wind could be heard again in the silence that followed.