

THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE

Muriel Spark

Introduced by Alan Taylor

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I

The boys, as they talked to the girls from Marcia Blaine School, stood on the far side of their bicycles holding the handlebars, which established a protective fence of bicycle between the sexes, and the impression that at any moment the boys were likely to be away.

The girls could not take off their panama hats because this was not far from the school gates and hatlessness was an offence. Certain departures from the proper set of the hat on the head were overlooked in the case of fourth-form girls and upwards so long as nobody wore their hat at an angle. But there were other subtle variants from the ordinary rule of wearing the brim turned up at the back and down at the front. The five girls, standing very close to each other because of the boys, wore their hats each with a definite difference.

These girls formed the Brodie set. That was what they had been called even before the headmistress had given them the name, in scorn, when they had moved from the Junior to the Senior school at the age of twelve. At that time they had been immediately recognisable as Miss Brodie's pupils, being vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum, as the headmistress said, and useless to the school as a school. These girls were discovered to have heard of the Buchmanites and Mussolini, the Italian Renaissance painters, the advantages to the skin of cleansing cream and witch-hazel over honest soap and water, and the

word 'menarche'; the interior decoration of the London house of the author of *Winnie the Pooh* had been described to them, as had the love lives of Charlotte Brontë and of Miss Brodie herself. They were aware of the existence of Einstein and the arguments of those who considered the Bible to be untrue. They knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland. All of the Brodie set, save one, counted on its fingers, as had Miss Brodie, with accurate results more or less.

By the time they were sixteen, and had reached the fourth form, and loitered beyond the gates after school, and had adapted themselves to the orthodox régime, they remained unmistakably Brodie, and were all famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking. They had no team spirit and very little in common with each other outside their continuing friendship with Jean Brodie. She still taught in the Junior department. She was held in great suspicion.

Marcia Blaine School for Girls was a day school which had been partially endowed in the middle of the nineteenth century by the wealthy widow of an Edinburgh book-binder. She had been an admirer of Garibaldi before she died. Her manly portrait hung in the great hall, and was honoured every Founder's Day by a bunch of hard-wearing flowers such as chrysanthemums or dahlias. These were placed in a vase beneath the portrait, upon a lectern which also held an open Bible with the text underlined in red ink, 'O where shall I find a virtuous woman, for her price is above rubies.'

The girls who loitered beneath the tree, shoulder to shoulder, very close to each other because of the boys, were all famous for something. Now, at sixteen, Monica Douglas was a prefect, famous mostly for mathematics which she could do in her brain, and for her anger which, when it was lively enough,

drove her to slap out to right and left. She had a very red nose, winter and summer, long dark plaits, and fat, peg-like legs. Since she had turned sixteen, Monica wore her panama hat rather higher on her head than normal, perched as if it were too small and as if she knew she looked grotesque in any case.

Rose Stanley was famous for sex. Her hat was placed quite unobtrusively on her blonde short hair, but she dented in the crown on either side.

Eunice Gardiner, small, neat, and famous for her spritely gymnastics and glamorous swimming, had the brim of her hat turned up at the front and down at the back.

Sandy Stranger wore it turned up all round and as far back on her head as it could possibly go; to assist this, she had attached to her hat a strip of elastic which went under the chin. Sometimes Sandy chewed this elastic and when it was chewed down she sewed on a new piece. She was merely notorious for her small, almost non-existent, eyes, but she was famous for her vowel sounds which, long ago in the long past, in the Junior school, had enraptured Miss Brodie. 'Well, come and recite for us, please, because it has been a tiring day.'

'She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.'

'It lifts one up,' Miss Brodie usually said, passing her hand outwards from her breast towards the class of ten-year-old girls who were listening for the bell which would release them. 'Where there is no vision,' Miss Brodie had assured them, 'the people perish. Eunice, come and do a somersault in order that we may have comic relief.'

But now, the boys with their bicycles were cheerfully insulting Jenny Gray about her way of speech which she had got from her elocution classes. She was going to be an actress. She was Sandy's best friend. She wore her hat with the front brim bent sharply downwards; she was the prettiest and most graceful girl of the set, and this was her fame. 'Don't be a lout, Andrew,' she said with her uppish tone. There were three Andrews among the five boys, and these three Andrews now started mimicking Jenny: 'Don't be a lout, Andrew,' while the girls laughed beneath their bobbing panamas.

Along came Mary Macgregor, the last member of the set, whose fame rested on her being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame. With her was an outsider, Joyce Emily Hammond, the very rich girl, their delinquent, who had been recently sent to Blaine as a last hope, because no other school, no governess, could manage her. She still wore the green uniform of her old school. The others wore deep violet. The most she had done, so far, was to throw paper pellets sometimes at the singing master. She insisted on the use of her two names, Joyce Emily. This Joyce Emily was trying very hard to get into the famous set, and thought the two names might establish her as a something, but there was no chance of it and she could not see why.

Joyce Emily said, 'There's a teacher coming out,' and nodded towards the gates.

Two of the Andrews wheeled their bicycles out on to the road and departed. The other three boys remained defiantly, but looking the other way as if they might have stopped to admire the clouds on the Pentland Hills. The girls crowded round each other as if in discussion. 'Good afternoon,' said Miss Brodie when she approached the group. 'I haven't seen you for some days. I think we won't detain these young men and their bicycles. Good afternoon, boys.' The famous set

moved off with her, and Joyce, the new delinquent, followed. 'I think I haven't met this new girl,' said Miss Brodie, looking closely at Joyce. And when they were introduced she said: 'Well, we must be on our way, my dear.'

Sandy looked back as Joyce Emily walked, and then skipped, leggy and uncontrolled for her age, in the opposite direction, and the Brodie set was left to their secret life as it had been six years ago in their childhood.

'I am putting old heads on your young shoulders,' Miss Brodie had told them at that time, 'and all my pupils are the *crème de la crème*.'

Sandy looked with her little screwed-up eyes at Monica's very red nose and remembered this saying as she followed the set in the wake of Miss Brodie.

'I should like you girls to come to supper tomorrow night,' Miss Brodie said. 'Make sure you are free.'

'The Dramatic Society . . . ' murmured Jenny.

'Send an excuse,' said Miss Brodie. 'I have to consult you about a new plot which is afoot to force me to resign. Needless to say, I shall not resign.' She spoke calmly as she always did in spite of her forceful words.

Miss Brodie never discussed her affairs with the other members of the staff, but only with those former pupils whom she had trained up in her confidence. There had been previous plots to remove her from Blaine, which had been foiled.

'It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools, where my methods would be more suited to the system than they are at Blaine. But I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory. There needs must be a leaven in the lump. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life.'

The Brodie set smiled in understanding of various kinds.

Miss Brodie forced her brown eyes to flash as a meaningful accompaniment to her quiet voice. She looked a mighty woman with her dark Roman profile in the sun. The Brodie set did not for a moment doubt that she would prevail. As soon expect Julius Caesar to apply for a job at a crank school as Miss Brodie. She would never resign. If the authorities wanted to get rid of her she would have to be assassinated.

‘Who are the gang, this time?’ said Rose, who was famous for sex-appeal.

‘We shall discuss tomorrow night the persons who oppose me,’ said Miss Brodie. ‘But rest assured they shall not succeed.’

‘No,’ said everyone. ‘No, of course they won’t.’

‘Not while I am in my prime,’ she said. ‘These years are still the years of my prime. It is important to recognise the years of one’s prime, always remember that. Here is my tram-car. I dare say I’ll not get a seat. This is nineteen thirty-six. The age of chivalry is past.’

Six years previously, Miss Brodie had led her new class into the garden for a history lesson underneath the big elm. On the way through the school corridors they passed the head-mistress’s study. The door was wide open, the room was empty.

‘Little girls,’ said Miss Brodie, ‘come and observe this.’

They clustered round the open door while she pointed to a large poster pinned with drawing-pins on the opposite wall within the room. It depicted a man’s big face. Underneath were the words ‘Safety First’.

‘This is Stanley Baldwin who got in as Prime Minister and got out again ere long,’ said Miss Brodie. ‘Miss Mackay retains him on the wall because she believes in the slogan

“Safety First”. But Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me.’

This was the first intimation, to the girls, of an odds between Miss Brodie and the rest of the teaching staff. Indeed, to some of them, it was the first time they had realised it was possible for people glued together in grown-up authority to differ at all. Taking inward note of this, and with the exhilarating feeling of being in on the faint smell of row, without being endangered by it, they followed dangerous Miss Brodie into the secure shade of the elm.

Often, that sunny autumn, when the weather permitted, the small girls took their lessons seated on three benches arranged about the elm.

‘Hold up your books,’ said Miss Brodie quite often that autumn, ‘prop them up in your hands, in case of intruders. If there are any intruders, we are doing our history lesson . . . our poetry . . . English grammar.’

The small girls held up their books with their eyes not on them, but on Miss Brodie.

‘Meantime I will tell you about my last summer holiday in Egypt . . . I will tell you about care of the skin, and of the hands . . . about the Frenchman I met in the train to Biarritz . . . and I must tell you about the Italian paintings I saw. Who is the greatest Italian painter?’

‘Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.’

‘That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.’

Some days it seemed to Sandy that Miss Brodie’s chest was flat, no bulges at all, but straight as her back. On other days her chest was breast-shaped and large, very noticeable, something for Sandy to sit and peer at through her tiny eyes while Miss Brodie on a day of lessons indoors stood erect, with her brown head held high, staring out of the window like Joan of Arc as she spoke.

'I have frequently told you, and the holidays just past have convinced me, that my prime has truly begun. One's prime is elusive. You little girls, when you grow up, must be on the alert to recognise your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur. You must then live it to the full. Mary, what have you got under your desk, what are you looking at?'

Mary sat lump-like and too stupid to invent something. She was too stupid ever to tell a lie; she didn't know how to cover up.

'A comic, Miss Brodie,' she said.

'Do you mean a comedian, a droll?'

Everyone tittered.

'A comic paper,' said Mary.

'A comic paper, forsooth. How old are you?'

'Ten, ma'am.'

'You are too old for comic papers at ten. Give it to me.'

Miss Brodie looked at the coloured sheets. '*Tiger Tim's* forsooth,' she said, and threw it into the waste-paper basket. Perceiving all eyes upon it she lifted it out of the basket, tore it up beyond redemption and put it back again.

'Attend to me, girls. One's prime is the moment one was born for. Now that my prime has begun – Sandy, your attention is wandering. What have I been talking about?'

'Your prime, Miss Brodie.'

'If anyone comes along,' said Miss Brodie, 'in the course of the following lesson, remember that it is the hour for English grammar. Meantime I will tell you a little of my life when I was younger than I am now, though six years older than the man himself.'

She leaned against the elm. It was one of the last autumn days when the leaves were falling in little gusts. They fell on the children who were thankful for this excuse to wriggle

and for the allowable movements in brushing the leaves from their hair and laps.

‘Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. I was engaged to a young man at the beginning of the War but he fell on Flanders Field,’ said Miss Brodie. ‘Are you thinking, Sandy, of doing a day’s washing?’

‘No, Miss Brodie.’

‘Because you have got your sleeves rolled up. I won’t have to do with girls who roll up the sleeves of their blouses, however fine the weather. Roll them down at once, we are civilised beings. He fell the week before Armistice was declared. He fell like an autumn leaf, although he was only twenty-two years of age. When we go indoors we shall look on the map at Flanders, and the spot where my lover was laid before you were born. He was poor. He came from Ayrshire, a countryman, but a hard-working and clever scholar. He said, when he asked me to marry him, “We shall have to drink water and walk slow.” That was Hugh’s country way of expressing that we would live quietly. We shall drink water and walk slow. What does the saying signify, Rose?’

‘That you would live quietly, Miss Brodie,’ said Rose Stanley who six years later had a great reputation for sex.

The story of Miss Brodie’s felled fiancé was well on its way when the headmistress, Miss Mackay, was seen to approach across the lawn. Tears had already started to drop from Sandy’s little pig-like eyes and Sandy’s tears now affected her friend Jenny, later famous in the school for her beauty, who gave a sob and groped up the leg of her knickers for her handkerchief. ‘Hugh was killed,’ said Miss Brodie, ‘a week before the Armistice. After that there was a general election and people were saying “Hang the Kaiser!” Hugh was one of the Flowers of the Forest, lying in his grave.’ Rose Stanley had now begun to weep. Sandy slid her wet

eyes sideways, watching the advance of Miss Mackay, head and shoulders forward, across the lawn.

‘I am come to see you and I have to be off,’ she said. ‘What are you little girls crying for?’

‘They are moved by a story I have been telling them. We are having a history lesson,’ said Miss Brodie, catching a falling leaf neatly in her hand as she spoke.

‘Crying over a story at ten years of age!’ said Miss Mackay to the girls who had stragglingly risen from the benches, still dazed with Hugh the warrior. ‘I am only come to see you and I must be off. Well, girls, the new term has begun. I hope you all had a splendid summer holiday and I look forward to seeing your splendid essays on how you spent them. You shouldn’t be crying over history at the age of ten. My word!’

‘You did well,’ said Miss Brodie to the class, when Miss Mackay had gone, ‘not to answer the question put to you. It is well, when in difficulties, to say never a word, neither black nor white. Speech is silver but silence is golden. Mary, are you listening? What was I saying?’

Mary Macgregor, lumpy, with merely two eyes, a nose and a mouth like a snowman, who was later famous for being stupid and always to blame and who, at the age of twenty-three, lost her life in a hotel fire, ventured, ‘Golden.’

‘What did I say was golden?’

Mary cast her eyes around her and up above. Sandy whispered, ‘The falling leaves.’

‘The falling leaves,’ said Mary.

‘Plainly,’ said Miss Brodie, ‘you were not listening to me. If only you small girls would listen to me I would make of you the *crème de la crème*.’