THE MANDELBAUM GATE

Muriel Spark

Introduced by Gabriel Josipovici

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1

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CONTENTS

PART ONE

1	Freddy's Walk	3
2	Barbara Vaughan's Identity	19
3	A Delightful English Atmosphere	56
4	Abdul's Orange Groves	93
5	The Via Dolorosa	134
6	Jerusalem, My Happy Home	179

PART TWO

7	The Passionate Pilgrims	235

PART ONE

I

FREDDY'S WALK

Sometimes, instead of a letter to thank his hostess, Freddy Hamilton would compose a set of formal verses – rondeaux, redoubles, villanelles, rondels or Sicilian octaves – to express his thanks neatly. It was part of his modest nature to do this. He always felt he had perhaps been boring during his stay, and it was one's duty in life to be agreeable. Not so much at the time as afterwards, he felt it keenly on his conscience that he had said no word between the soup and the fish when the bright talk began; he felt at fault in retrospect of the cocktail hours when he had contributed nothing but the smile for which he had been renowned in his pram and, in the following fifty years, elsewhere.

'Oh of course, Freddy Hamilton. Everyone loves old Freddy my dear; Freddy's sweet.'

Freddy, of so many British consulates throughout his subdued, obedient career, would have been touched to hear it; he would have smiled. He did not really want to excite any sort of passion in his friends, or linger in their minds under some inflammable aspect. A very boring guest or a very entertaining one could provoke all sorts of undesirable feelings in people – revulsion, heart-quickenings, murderous attachments, the sort of emotions that had always led to trouble at school and university, and they led to international incidents as well.

He liked to get his verses off quickly so that there should be no apparent sign of effort on his part. As he walked through the amazing alleys of the Orthodox Quarter of Israel's Jerusalem which teemed so dangerously close to the Mandelbaum Gate, he started thinking of a triolet in his long-practised manner to catch the next day's Foreign Office bag into Jordan. Freddy had just come through the Gate. He had diplomatic immunity and so was permitted to pass through the Gate every weekend from Israel into Jordan and back again; from Jerusalem to Jerusalem. Few people passed from Israel into Jordan; there were difficulties, and for Europeans a certificate of baptism was required. Foreign diplomats were not allowed to pass by motor-car, which was understandable, as papers and bombs might be concealed in a car.

Freddy carried his weekend luggage – a zipper-bag – and took his usual route into the New City. It was the hottest day so far of 1961. He had refused the taxi-cab that waited at the Gate; he hated taking taxi-cabs anywhere in the world; he felt morally against the tips, as all his uncles before him had felt. Excepting, of course, one uncle, the one who had messed up the money in the thirties and absolutely ruined the family, and who had not felt strongly against giving away tips to cabbies and so on. As Freddy turned a corner he came into collision with a tiny dark-eyed boy with fluffy side-hair falling down his cheeks, too fine as yet to be formed into shining ringlets like those of his male elders among the Orthodox sect. The child's nose bumped into Freddy's knee, and Freddy took him by the hand to steady him out of his bewilderment. A bearded, befrocked old man with a very large face muttered in Hebrew to the infant, who had already regained his bearings and was busy studying Freddy from head to feet. A woman of unguessable age, wearing lots of black clothes, snatched the child

away, and he trotted off, his legs in their long woollen stockings moving like swift shuttles to keep up with his mother, but he still craned his head round wonderingly at Freddy. The woman scolded the child meantime, evidently trying to impress on him the undesirable nature of Freddy. Freddy walked on behind the heavily garbed pair, feeling decidedly in the wrong for having touched the child's hand; they had probably taken him for a modern Jew, one of the regular Israelis of whom this sect disapproved perhaps more heavily than they did of the honest unclean foreigner. Well, thought Freddy, to continue . . .

. . . would have preferred
To make my grateful feelings heard,
But every time articulate
Scarcely a word.

It was not a triolet after all. Joanna, his hostess on the other side, had been extremely agreeable to him since his posting to Israel. He had spent three weekends in her cool villa, and she loved to have these bread-and-butter verses. There would have to be an additional stanza, perhaps two. Joanna was to visit him over here in Israel; she had not yet been to Israel. He would have to remind her about her visa, and tell her how best to make the crossing. It was not a triolet after all, but a form of rondeau. There was the business of Joanna's getting a visa, and he would meet her on this side of the Mandelbaum Gate. The intensity at the Gate was quite absurd. One could understand the border incidents where soldiers would flare up an incident suddenly and unaccountably. But there at the Gate the precautions and suspicions of the guards were quite absurd. No Israeli money allowed into Jordan, no Israeli postcards, the Jordanian police

almost biologically unable to utter the word 'Israel'. The Israeli police were inordinately dramatic: 'Safe crossing,' they would say as one left the emigration hut. The Israeli porter would run and dump one's baggage half-way and run for the life of him back to his post. The Jordanian porter would wait till the path was clear; he would run the few seconds' space to pick up the bags and run for the life of him back to his post. They dramatised everything. Why did people have to go to extremes, why couldn't they be moderate? Freddy bumped into a man in European dress, rushing out of a shop as they all did. The man said something in Arabic. Freddy had thought he was a Jew. You couldn't tell the difference sometimes. Some of them had extremely dark skins, almost jetters. Why couldn't people be moderate?

It was not a triolet after all, but a sort of rondeau. Freddy turned up an alley. Another child, a girl, bumped into him in the narrow, crowded street. This time he did not put out a guiding hand, and she slipped away with the subdued expression of the children of this quarter, quite unlike the vivacious young of the regular Israelis. Freddy was rather sorry for the boys with their sausage side-curls and black knickerbocker rig-out, especially those adolescent boys who walked in a goody-goody way, by twos and threes. It must be hell for them, he thought, to be so different from the rest of the country, especially if they ever want to break away. He had felt sorry for the Arab boys on the other side – underfed, driving their mangy donkeys, thin, and in rags. He was moved to pity for all young boys, on the whole, recalling the term-times of his youth. He was convinced that the boys with ringlets were going through the same sort of hell, which was the only sort Freddy knew. The ringlets, like the Gate, were quite absurd.

'Quite absurd!' On the strength of this phrase he had struck up friendships all over the place. He was accustomed to exotic sights and squalid smells, narrow oriental streets, and people who went to extremes, it was all part of the Foreign Service. But outside of the Embassy, and even inside it, he never really felt at ease with chaps until sooner or later they remarked that the place was quite absurd.

. . . feelings heard,
But every time articulate
Scarcely a word.
But you have far too long deferred
Your visit to the Modern State,
So choose and name the cheerful date.
Joanna, I can hardly wait
To meet you at the quite absurd
Mandelbaum Gate.

He was approaching the end of the Orthodox Jewish quarter, and had turned into a street at the end of which rattled the modern state. There, small shops burst their sides with business, large cars streaked along the highway, and everywhere the radio sets told the news in several tongues ranging from Hebrew to that of the B.B.C., or attacked the hot air with oriental jazz. Up there at the end of this orthodox street, it was said, the Orthodox Jews would gather on a Saturday morning, piously to stone the passing motor-cars, breakers of the Sabbath. And across the street, streamers stretched from building to building, bearing an injunction in Hebrew, French and English:

DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, OBSERVE MODESTY
IN THESE STREETS!

This, Freddy assumed to be for the benefit of any tourist-woman who might, for some mad reason, wish to walk in this Orthodox Jewish quarter wearing shorts or a low-cut sun dress; the local women themselves needed no such warning, being clad and covered, one way and another, all over.

For the time being Freddy had been placed in rooms in a Jerusalem hotel while waiting for an Embassy flat to fall vacant. He was in no great hurry for the flat, preferring hotel life where one need not mix, need not entertain one's colleagues, and could generally escape. His colleagues at this posting seemed a bit intense and know-all; they were on the young side and had not yet settled down. Freddy noticed, crossing the street, a young woman who was at present staying at his hotel, a Miss Vaughan. She was accompanied by a tall, intellectual-looking Jew. Freddy put down his bag in the hot street. He wanted to be specially civil to Miss Vaughan, having struck up her acquaintance in the cool leafy courtyard of the hotel one evening over two long drinks, and having then, on another occasion, inadvertently said the wrong thing; whereupon Miss Vaughan had felt for his embarrassment.

They crossed over to him where he waited on the kerb, and inquired if he had enjoyed his weekend. He had once before, very briefly, met her companion, a teacher of archaeology, Dr Saul Ephraim of the Hebrew University, who was acting as Miss Vaughan's guide. He had turned out to be amiable in the surprising way of the Israeli intellectuals; it took one by surprise because one did not expect a violin with its strings taut and tuned for immediate performance to be suddenly amiable. Dr Ephraim spoke a slightly American tone of English, suddenly amiable and easy as if from some resource that had been waiting under his skin for an encounter with Freddy. He wore an open-necked shirt and flannels,

his neck lean and long-muscled. Freddy chatted as he observed these things, telling of his weekend in Jordan: 'I've got some charming friends over there.' Ephraim would be in his young thirties. He was anxious to hear news of Jordan.

'Haven't you ever been there?' said Freddy.

'Not since the war.'

'Of course, not since the war.' To Ephraim 'the war' was the war of 1948.

'It's absurd,' said young Dr Ephraim.

An unloading of water melons began to take place close to them. Freddy had once been hit by the corner of a crate while passing an unloading operation at Covent Garden. He was nervous, and moved the couple aside along with himself.

'Both of you come and join me for a drink when you've finished,' said Freddy then, lifting up his bag.

Miss Vaughan was about to say something when an old bearded man out of the many, with small ancient eyes, approached them and spoke to Dr Ephraim in guttural Yiddish. Ephraim answered some brief thing, using his hands and shoulders to throw off the subject to the air. The old man spoke a few more words and moved away, muttering and glancing backward at Miss Vaughan.

'What did he say?' said Miss Vaughan.

'He said, "Tell your lady-friend to dress herself properly in these sacred streets as they have always done before."'

Freddy looked at Miss Vaughan to see how she was dressed. She was wearing a harmless blouse, sleeveless, and a dark skirt. He looked up at the admonishing banners and smiled his smile. He smiled again at Miss Vaughan, who stood with her sharp features and prim grey and black hair drawn back, looking less intense than Freddy feared she really was. It occurred to him that by contrast with Ephraim she would be in her late thirties. She was still questioning Dr

Ephraim about his conversation with the old man. 'And what did you say to that?'

'I said, "Well, it's a hot day." And he replied, "Well, it was a hot day two thousand years ago."'

Freddy was glad he had met the couple, for he was always lonely after his weekends on the other side. He pushed his way up the streets among the loitering mystics and beggars whom the Israelis in general abhorred, being bumped into quite often by the women who inevitably darted out of the shop doors with their purchases and their children, without looking first to right or left. He thought he might ask young Saul Ephraim to recommend him a Hebrew teacher if Miss Vaughan remembered to bring him back to the hotel for a drink. One ought to learn some modern Hebrew to get along in this country. Ephraim might take on the job himself, but Freddy, reflecting that this was highly improbable, was instantly annoyed with himself for thinking it in the first place. One did not meet many Israelis, only the officials and so on, but of course one had not much time. The weekly visits to the other side took up his free days. Dr Ephraim would be thirty-one or thirty-two. Abdul Ramdez, the life-insurance agent who kept trying, without success, to sell Freddy a policy, but who was amusing, had undertaken to give him lessons in Arabic. Ramdez would be in his middle twenties. One had to be careful about one's teachers of Hebrew and Arabic; here on the spot they were all apt to get intense. Ramdez was an Armenian Arab, or so he claimed.

A chanting of children's voices came from an upper-storey window as Freddy pushed up the street towards modernity and his hotel. This upper storey was a school; it was always in full chant when he passed, for the children of this sect

learned their lessons, all subjects alike, by plaintive rote, singing them out in Hebrew. This always fascinated him, at the same time as it put him off his stroke, for usually, when he passed the spot, he was thinking of his thank-you verses. At present his mind was already on the third stanza of his current piece, so that Joanna could be suitably and gracefully reminded to get a visa and make sure that she stated she was coming on a pilgrimage to the Christian shrines.

But he could not get his rhythm right against the chanting of these children of the Orient, even after he could hear it no longer and was out among the speedy wide streets of people and motor traffic in the modern city. All the way back to his hotel, when he was really too hot to bother and his thoughts were mere heatwaves, the chant went on at the back of his head, accompanied, as always on these return journeys, by an assertive counter-chant rising spontaneously from something indomitable in Freddy; and so, pitting culture against culture, the metrical precepts of Samuel Taylor Coleridge chanted themselves lovingly round his brain:

> Trochee trips from long to short;
> From long to long in solemn sort,
> Slow Spondee stalks; strong foot! yet ill able
> Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.
> Iambics march from short to long: –
> With a leap and a bound the swift Anapaests throng;
> One syllable long, with one short at each side,
> Amphibrachys hastes with a stately stride: –
> First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer
> Strikes his thundering hoofs, like a proud high-bred racer.

Even in his bath, when he was thinking of other things, Coleridge's lines continued to churn in the background – even

when they had chased away the Hebrew plain-chant; and even, although he was scarcely aware of it, when he sat out in the small green courtyard of the hotel to await Miss Vaughan and Dr Ephraim. He wanted to be specially agreeable to Miss Vaughan, having put his foot in it last week on their third or fourth meeting. Freddy hated more than anything the thought that he had hurt someone's feelings in a direct encounter. He hoped she would bring the archaeologist with the lean brown neck. The afternoon was fading, and he tapped silently with his fingers on the wicker arm of his chair and gazed up through the lofty trellis at the cooling light.

Trochee trips from long to short;

The waiter brought his drink and Freddy dwelt for a gay and not indelicate moment on the young Israeli, and he felt like Horace in the Ode, demanding simple service under his lattice vine. *Persicos odi, puer* . . .

From where he sat he saw Miss Vaughan come into the hotel entrance, alone. She moved towards the staircase but glanced towards the terrace. Freddy rose and raised an arm in a welcoming way, and she turned and joined him.

'Dr Ephraim couldn't manage as it was rather late and his family were expecting him. I ought to go and change.'

'What will you drink?' said Freddy. His first meeting with Miss Vaughan now came back to him, fused with subsequent meetings here in the green courtyard. He saw them all with that total perceptivity of his which might have made a poet of him, given the missing element. His first impression had been of a pleasant English spinster; she was a teacher of English at a girls' school; she was on a tour of the Holy Land;

Freddy had discussed with her the dear subject of formal English lyrical verse; he had, on another occasion, confided in her that he was compiling an anthology in his spare time, and had before the war published a volume of his own occasional verses. She had responded in a detached sort of way, which was what one liked. She was edgy; she wore on her engagement finger a ring of antique design embedded with a dark-blue stone; but for some reason Freddy had not felt that the ring referred to an engagement to marry anyone; such things were not unaccountable in an English spinster; it was probably somebody killed in the war.

Now, sitting with her near the same spot as when they had first spoken three weeks ago, he was filled with a sense of her dangerousness; he was obscurely afraid. He wished the young archaeologist had come with her.

But he was obliged to be particularly civil to Miss Vaughan. He fingered the wicker chair.

With a leap and a bound the swift Anapaests throng . . .

Last week he had joined her out here after dinner. The State of Israel had that day sent up its first guided rocket. He remarked that there seemed to be a lot of rejoicing going on in the streets, and one of them suggested going out later on to watch the children dancing. The children danced in the public gardens until late every night in any case. They fell to talking about politicians and the Bomb.

She had said, in a lazy casual way – for by this time they were fairly at ease with each other – 'Sometimes I think we ought to chuck out the politicians from world government and put in the Pope, the Chief Rabbi, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Dalai Lama instead. They couldn't do worse and they might do better.'

Freddy had reflected on this without undue seriousness. 'There would have to be a Greek Patriarch as well,' he said, 'and then the Buddhists and the Hindus would want their say. There would be no end to it. But it's a good idea. I imagine there would be objections from the Jews to the Chief Rabbi. Most of these Jews here are unbelievers, so far as I can gather.'

'Not quite,' said Miss Vaughan. 'I think they believe in a different way from what you mean. They believe with their blood. Being a Jew isn't something they consider in their minds, weigh up, and give assent to as one does in the Western Christian tradition. Being a Jew is inherent.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.' Freddy gave a little laugh.

As if he had not spoken at all, she continued. 'As a half-Jew myself, I think I understand how –'

'Oh, I didn't mean to say . . . I mean . . . One says things without thinking, you know.'

She said, 'You might have said worse.'

Freddy felt terrible. He groped for the idea that, being a half-Jew, she might be only half-offended. After all, one might speak in that manner of the Wogs or the Commies, and everyone knew what one meant.

He now noticed the Jewishness of her appearance, something dark and intense beyond her actual shape and colouring. Freddy felt worse. It was a diplomatic as well as a social error, here in this country. This was the first year of the Eichmann trial. Freddy felt like a wanted man who had been found hiding in a dark cupboard. He felt an urge to explain that he was not a mass-butcher and that he had never desired to become a *Sturmbannführer, Obersturmbannführer, Supersturmbannführer*. He said, 'I like your young guide. How did you come by him?'

She said, 'He's a friend of a friend of mine, another

archaeologist who's working on the stuff at Qumran just now.' Plainly, she was embarrassed by his embarrassment.

Freddy clutched at the subject of the Dead Sea scrolls as at a slice of melon in the Sahara. He said, 'That must be enormously exciting. I want to visit the place myself some time soon.'

But she was occupied with her reaction to Freddy's distress. She began to speak, with furious exasperation, about the Israeli, a former Czech, who had been allotted to her as a guide to the holy places. He had been overbearing. He had been obstructive. He had taken her on a trip to Nazareth and had wanted her to whizz through the whole scene in half an hour, whereas she had insisted on spending the day there. He was a fanatical Christian-hater who had wanted to show her the cement factories and pipelines of Israel instead of the shrines, and had been reluctant to drive her to the top of Mount Tabor, the probable scene of the Transfiguration, and she had not insisted because this insufferable man . . . It emerged that she herself was a Roman Catholic.

Anxious about the extremity and urgency of her tone, Freddy looked round for the waiter. He said to her, 'Let's try the white wine.' He ordered two glasses, and called after the waiter, 'But it should be chilled.' He said to Miss Vaughan, 'They are inclined to serve it warm.'

The waiter appeared with two glasses of local white wine. In them were floating two chips of ice, rapidly melting from their original cubic form. Freddy and Miss Vaughan were silent until the waiter had gone. The ice melted entirely in the hot evening air. Freddy smiled at the two glasses on the table. Eventually, they even sipped the lukewarm mixture. 'They simply don't understand about wine at most of these hotels,' Freddy said. Well, it was a

relief, at least, that they could have an English giggle about something.

Freddy now wondered if it was his long walk through the Orthodox quarter in the afternoon heat that had put him on edge. He felt decidedly afraid of Miss Vaughan. She fidgeted with the ring on her engagement finger. She looked very strained. Perhaps she, too, was feeling the heat. However, he was resolved to be agreeable in view of his blunder last week.

She said, 'Your geraniums are flourishing.'

He had given her two of his pots of geraniums before leaving for Jordan last week. They were special geraniums. He had smuggled them across from Joanna's prize collection.

He said, 'Good. I was hoping Dr Ephraim would look in. I want to consult him about a Hebrew teacher.'

'He had to return to his wife and family.'

'Oh yes, quite.'

'He might give you Hebrew lessons himself. They don't get well paid at the University here.'

'Well, I was sort of hoping that.'

She said, 'Before I go to Jordan we must arrange a meeting.'

'When are you going?' he said.

'I don't know yet.'

It was a puzzle to him that she had not already gone to Jordan. She kept saying she was 'waiting to go to Jordan'. He wondered if she waited for a visa. If they suspected her Jewish blood she would not get a visa. But, on the other hand, if she had a certificate of baptism and kept quiet it should be easy.

He saw that she was pulling at a fraying piece of wicker on the arm of her chair.

Iambics march from short to long . . .

She said, 'I'm glad to have the geraniums. I water them every morning when the post arrives. It takes my mind off things. I'm waiting for a letter to arrive before I can go off to Jordan.'

'If it's a question of a visa, perhaps I could help,' said Freddy.

'Thank you, but you can't help,' she said.

'The Christian shrines over there are far more interesting than here,' he said. 'At least, there are more of them.'

'I know,' she said, 'I hope to be able to see them soon. In fact, I'm hoping to get married quite soon to an archaeologist who's working over there. The one who's at the Dead Sea area.'

'I'm sure I could help if it's only a matter of a visa.'

'I'm waiting for news from Rome,' she said. 'He has been married and is divorced. It's a question of whether his marriage can be annulled or whether it can't be annulled. I mean annulled by the Church. If it isn't annulled by the Church then the marriage is off. There's a fifty-fifty chance.'

'Oh dear,' said Freddy. He said, 'Is it as serious as that?'

She said, 'Yes.'

'Won't you be going to join him in Jordan?' Freddy said. He noticed she was pulling at the fraying wicker, and felt a panic about where this conversation might lead; he could see she was feeling strongly about something or other. He was afraid she had some tiresome deep conviction.

She said she would not go to Jordan at all if the news from Rome was against the nullity of his previous marriage. She said she would never see the man again in that case.

'Oh dear,' said Freddy. He said, 'What does your fiancé feel about this?'

'Well, of course, he feels it's a bit unfair. He isn't a Catholic himself.'

'It does seem a bit unfair,' said Freddy mildly. 'It seems a bit extreme, when a couple of grown-up people –'

'Do you know,' said this passionate spinster in a cold and terrifying voice, 'a passage in the Book of the Apocalypse that applies to your point of view?'

'I'm afraid the Apocalypse is beyond me,' Freddy said. 'I've never had the faintest clue what it's all about. I can cope with the Gospels, at least some parts, but –'

'It goes like this,' she said, enunciating her words slowly, almost like a chant:

> I know of thy doings, and find thee neither cold nor hot; cold or hot, I would thou wert one or the other. Being what thou art, lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, thou wilt make me vomit thee out of my mouth.

Freddy did not reply. People should definitely not quote the Scriptures at one. It was quite absurd.

Miss Vaughan leaned back in her chair and drew her hand over her prim hair in a relaxed way. Freddy remained silent.

> First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer
> Strikes his thundering hoofs, like a proud high-bred racer . . .

Then Freddy rose as one who had quietly closed a door and said, 'I must go and get off a bread-and-butter letter to my hostess before dinner.'