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Opening Extract from...

War Damage

Written by Elizabeth Wilson

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War Damage



Elizabeth Wilson



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Have you ever heard of Fei Tsui jade? … It's the only really valuable kind.

Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*

one



'How did you get a key?'

Charles slid his smile sideways, but didn't answer as he unlocked the art annexe door. The neglected appearance of this outbuilding reflected the status of art at the school. Easels and shelves for paint and brushes left little floor space for pupils, since the studio also functioned as an office, and was furnished with a couple of old wooden filing cabinets, a desk, two bent-wood chairs, and a sagging antique chaise longue. A door at the back opened onto a darkroom the size of a cupboard, separated from the main room by a flimsy partition.

Charles locked the door again on the inside, leaned back against it and stared at Trevelyan – Harry – whose eyes widened with fear and adoration. Charles knew it would be all right then. 'God!' He took hold of the boy's shoulders, steered him towards the convenient sofa, pushed him down on to it and was about to undo his flies. But then he paused and took Trevelyan's face – so gently – between his hands and kissed him. Charles's heart was beating frantically. He'd thought about this all summer. And the boy wanted him too. He was stiff. Charles was shaking as he undid the heavy flannel and his throbbing prick wrung a groan from his throat. Trevelyan came almost at once with a little strangled whimper.

Charles left a stain on the sofa. He didn't care. He lay back, breathing heavily. But as time passed a fearful lethargy came over him. He smiled at the boy and stroked his hair. But the obsession that had sustained him since the end of last term had leaked away with his sperm and he was left with a feeling of utter emptiness.

Trevelyan was trying to tidy himself up. 'Hadn't we better go? What if Carnforth comes in?'

Charles laughed. 'He won't, will he? Everyone's gone home. That's why I told you to bring your stuff – we don't have to go back to main school.' For the annexe, located at the far end of the playing fields, was near the goods entrance so that it was easy to come and go without being seen. Anyway, no one came down here after school; except, of course, the art master himself. And if Carnforth *had* by an unlucky chance turned up, well …

'But …' Trevelyan dimly sensed that there was more to it than that.

'Actually,' drawled Charles, 'Carnforth lent me the key. I told him I wanted to finish my backdrop for the play.'

Trevelyan still looked puzzled.

'He's a fan of the ballet, you see.'

'Oh.'

'He cultivates me.'

Carnforth had lent him the key some time ago, when Charles had genuinely needed to work on the backdrop, but he did not know that Charles had had a copy made.

'What d'you mean?'

Charles gazed at Trevelyan from under his eyelashes. 'My mother's a famous ballet dancer. Didn't you know? Carnforth thinks if he smarms up to me it'll please her.'

Trevelyan's mouth opened. His father, a wealthy Baptist property developer, took a dim view of theatrical performance

in any form. But this unexpected information only added to the hideous excitement he'd experienced during the past half hour.

'Yes … darling.' The endearment – daring, unthinkable in this environment – came straight from his mother's world, and the cruelty of it excited him again. He leaned forward and seized the boy quite roughly, pulling his head back and kissing, almost biting, his neck, as he felt for his prick through the coarse flannel of his trousers. The kiss too was unthinkable, almost a kind of blasphemy.

'I'll be so late home.' Trevelyan looked scared now.

'Tell them you had an extra art lesson or something.' But Charles's incipient erection subsided. He was bored again. 'It was an art lesson in a way,' he murmured, and smiled to himself. 'You're right, though. We'd better go.'

'Suppose Mr Carnforth—' and Trevelyan looked round the untidy, battered room. Charles put an arm round the younger boy's shoulders. 'God – you're shivering. Don't worry. I can twist Arthur Carnforth round my little finger. Everything'll be fine.' And he rumpled the boy's hair.

Trevelyan's eyes were as round as saucers. Charles smiled, but didn't enlighten him, other than to murmur languidly something he'd heard Freddie say: 'Love takes the strangest forms.' Trevelyan, of course, had no idea what he was talking about.

Charles locked the annexe and slipped the key into his pocket. They walked to the periphery of the playing fields and through the gate, which gave, unexpectedly, onto the main road. Fortunately Trevelyan lived in the opposite direction from Charles, so they didn't have to travel together. To have to make conversation with Trevelyan would have been unutterably tedious. The younger boy scampered across the road, and Charles waited for the bus to Hampstead underground. Emerging at Camden Town, he still felt listless as he walked up

Parkway, but he rallied slightly as he remembered it was Thursday and Freddie would probably be there when he got home.

And indeed, he was. He'd brought a red-haired woman friend along as well.

two



REGINE MILNER'S SUNDAYS were casual affairs. She never tidied up in advance. Newspapers and books lay where they fell; and coats were cast over the banisters or left in a heap on the stairs. Bottles and glasses were marshalled in advance, but she didn't bother with extra ashtrays; canapés appeared, if at all, only after several guests had arrived. Informality was still the order of the day three years after the end of the war. But then, as Freddie said, things were never going to get back to how they'd been before 1939. 'Pre-war' had become merely a sentimental gesture towards a vanished order to which most of Regine's friends hadn't belonged; and bohemian shabbiness – battered antique furniture, Persian rugs unravelling at the edges and balding velvet upholstery – suited this epoch of post-war shortages and making do. And if in the streets and squares of post-war London austerity still dulled the look of everything, in Regine's drawing room the Chinese jars gleamed, the amethyst and sapphire cushions glowed and the crimson walls produced an atmosphere of womb-like warmth in which everyone relaxed.

On this mild autumn day, the first in October, Regine was trying out the new 'separates' idea, teaming a voluminous paisley skirt (made from an old shawl she'd found in the house

– it must have belonged to Lydia) with a garnet sweater, and had tied back her tangle of red hair, so curly it fizzed and frizzed round her face, with a green ribbon. Her black suede court shoes, with their old-fashioned square toes, dated from 1942 and had worn to a shine, but that could be passed off as part of the look. And the good thing about the new long skirts was they hid the parlous state of one's precious silk stockings.

Regine's Sundays had begun almost by accident at the end of 1943. She had left the Vale of Evesham and was back in London where she had a new translating job in Whitehall. Once she and Neville were married, it just naturally came about that they opened the doors of his Hampstead house to wartime London's birds of passage. There were so many people in the war who were lonely and unanchored, separated from spouses, bombed out, home on leave, men and women rushing in and out of the capital or searching for lovers, appearing and disappearing. My sitting room's like Waterloo station, she used to say – and Sunday was the ideal day because then everything was shut and boredom could so easily set in.

Now her Sundays were monthly instead of weekly occasions and she could offer her guests gin and sherry again instead of tea, or those home-made brews – gin distilled from potatoes – or dreadful rum concoctions. Nor did she make such an effort these days to give them all something to eat; the cakes and biscuits made from soya flour and the little canapés with fish paste or even dried scrambled egg had dwindled to a few cheese straws and savoury biscuits.

Yet although she sat carelessly with her feet up on the chaise longue, she was as usual a little nervous as she waited for the first arrivals. You never knew whether four or fourteen guests would turn up, indeed she wondered, as she wondered on the first Sunday of every month, whether *anyone* would.

'Perhaps people don't need my Sundays any more. They'd

nowhere else to go in the war, but now things are looking up – the theatres open again, the lights going on, life's slowly getting back to normal, isn't it, so ...'

Neville had already started on the whisky. Without looking up from the *Sunday Times*, he murmured: 'Kitten – your Sundays are an institution. Our friends *love* coming here.'

Regine stood up and moved restlessly around the drawing room, then sat down again, this time on one of the overstuffed chairs, and looked at her husband, her gaze travelling over the familiar sharp contours of his face, the crimped, receding, mousey hair, and the neat, well-worn suit. None of the arty set's corduroys and tweeds for him; he always looked dapper. From behind his round, steel-framed glasses, his sharp gaze stared out guardedly at the world.

She sometimes felt her gratitude to him for giving her a settled and comfortable life prevented her from knowing him as intimately as she ought, from understanding him as fully as he deserved from a wife. But perhaps he didn't want to be understood, keeping his life in tidy compartments to which only he had the keys.

The door knocker rat-tatted smartly, and she sprang up in relief. But she was disappointed and even irritated to see Muriel and Hilary Jordan on the doorstep. When Regine had first met Hilary during the war, he'd been a cheerily aggressive bohemian with libertarian views, but Muriel had transformed him into a living embodiment of Austerity. Like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the lantern-jawed Sir Stafford Cripps, Hilary was now an extreme vegetarian who ate only raw food and probably took cold baths. Muriel had strange eyes, like a hawk's, each golden iris encircled by a dark ring. Her hooked nose reinforced the likeness to a censorious bird of prey. She stared at Regine. 'What a wonderful *ensemble*, very Hampstead,' she said. 'How do you do it on the coupons?'

This was an attack, thinly disguised as admiration. Regine had purchased the coupons from her charlady, but why should she feel guilty? Mrs Havelock needed the money and couldn't afford new clothes anyway.

'Oh—' and Muriel made a darting movement, her finger poked at Regine's cheek, 'your lipstick's smudged.'

Regine recoiled in horror, but managed a smile. 'Go and say hallo to Neville, he's holding court in the library.' Though that was hardly an accurate description of Neville behind his newspaper.

'I saw Arthur Carnforth at church this morning,' said Muriel. 'We go to All Saints Margaret Street, you know – very High Church, but I don't like our local vicar … anyway, I said to him, haven't seen you at the Milners' for a long time. He said he might come along.'

Mingled with Regine's dismay at the mention of Arthur Carnforth's name was an awareness, more definite than ever before, that she really disliked Muriel. She said coldly: 'You know quite well he and Neville had a falling out some time ago.' What an interfering, nosy person Muriel was – and the cheek of taking it upon herself to suggest such a thing.

Arthur Carnforth, that grim, awkward man – a failure, a misfit. Regine remembered his clammy handshake, the way he blinked nervously when he talked … Freddie disliked him, although they'd all been friends before the war.

'Yes,' said Muriel, unabashed, 'but Neville was very kind to Arthur when—'

'When he had his breakdown. Yes, I know that.' Regine felt patronised, Muriel's patronising smile infuriated her – as if *she* knew Neville better than his own wife.

Now, though – thank God! – Freddie was in the open doorway. His bulk dominated the crowded little hall. 'Regine! Darling!' As if he hadn't seen her for years, when it was only last Thursday.

Arm in arm they swerved into the drawing room and sat down on Regine's great dark green Victorian chaise longue, the pièce de résistance of the room. Freddie had got hold of it for her. Away with all that frightful Moderne rubbish, he'd boomed, enough of ghastly Syrie Maughan white walls and Omega designs, the nineteenth century knew a thing or two about luxury, the more ornament the better.

'So what did Edith Blake have to say about your latest translation?' he began.

'She liked it. She's given me a book about tenth-century France to work on now.'

'That'll give you something to get your teeth into.'

'It's more likely to break my jaw! I mean, it's nice to have something serious, but the Dark Ages are so depressing.'

'The Dark Ages … darling, that's what we're having now, isn't it, a post-war Dark Ages.' That was so Freddie – a sombre remark, its sting neutralised by his camp laugh. 'There's something I must talk to you about,' he said, speaking more quietly than usual. 'Not now, but perhaps we could have lunch tomorrow. It's quite important. Someone we used to know—'

But he was interrupted by another knock on the front door.

'Phil will answer it. Go on. Say what you were going to say. Someone?'

Perhaps it was Arthur Carnforth.

'No, darling, this isn't the moment. Tomorrow, when I have you to myself. *Now* I must tell you about my marvellous idea. A new ballet magazine. My photographs will be at the centre of it, of course, but I just *know* there's a demand for new writing, more information, something different from the old dance magazines. *God* knows how I'll scrape the money together.' Freddie passed his hand over his fading blond hair. 'By the way – ' and he leaned forward so that she caught a whiff of eau de cologne, 'Vivienne *is* coming – she'll be here any minute – in

fact, I'm going to wait for her outside—' and he sprang to his feet. Then he paused. 'What did you think of her house?'

'It must be dreadfully uncomfortable to live in while it's being restored – but of course it'll be lovely when it's finished. Makes this place seem like a doll's house.'

'They paid nearly eight thousand for it, you know. *Eight thousand*!'

Freddie had taken her to tea with the ballerina the previous Thursday: 'I want my two best girls to get to know each other.' But it hadn't been a success. Vivienne had seemed withdrawn; there'd been little rapport. The only moment of animation had been when her son had turned up as they were all sitting stilted in the middle of her ruin of a house on the canal. The boy had leaned against the door jamb, languidly still and silent so that they'd had to look at him.

'I'm thrilled she's coming. You're marvellous, Freddie.' Vivienne Hallam, or rather Evanskaya – the stage name an adaptation of the mundane Welsh Evans – was certainly a scalp for her salon, as Regine secretly thought of her Sundays, especially as the dancer was quite reclusive, didn't go out much at all. Or so Freddie said.

'I'll wait for her outside,' repeated Freddie. 'She's rather shy, you know.'

Regine strolled away to look for Phil the lodger. Phil was a godsend. Soon he'd be moving around with a tray of drinks, leaving Regine free to devote herself to her guests. And of course it was Phil who'd made sure Cato, their great, bony poodle, was safely shut away upstairs where he couldn't knock over ashtrays with his tail or threateningly rear up on his hind legs in an attempt to hug guests. He'd barked and howled for a bit, but now there was a sulky silence.

By the time Freddie ushered Vivienne Hallam into the drawing room, seven or eight guests had gathered. At this early

stage they were bright-eyed with expectancy and a first drink. The space the ballerina's still potent fame created around her brought an almost imperceptible pause as the others recognised her, but too polite to show it, continued their conversations.

She walked as ballerinas did on stage, with feet turned out, like an elegant duck, each step slightly springing. Her son followed behind. Everyone looked at him too.

'My husband sends his apologies – he's on call this weekend.'

Just as well, Regine thought. Freddie said he was the gloomiest man this side of the Iron Curtain.

'This is my son, Charles. I didn't introduce you properly the other day.'

The boy shook hands with Regine and as Freddie settled on the chaise longue between his two 'best girls', Charles perched on the arm at his mother's side.

'Isn't he divinely Caravaggio?' whispered Freddie in Regine's ear; then, aloud, he turned towards Vivienne Hallam and said: 'Now, darling, about my ballet magazine. You see, it would be marvellous, Vivienne, if we could have something about the company in the war. You were *heroic*, your escape from the Nazis in Holland, travelling about all over England through the Blitz, bringing dance to the people, keeping art going through the darkest days – it was so vital for morale. And it *transformed* ballet from a minor specialised art form into what it is today. Thanks to you everyone *loves* ballet.'

Vivienne Hallam smiled, but to Regine her dark eyes seemed full of melancholy. 'I'm not sure John would look at it like that. And it's such a long time ago, Freddie.'

'Rubbish – five years, four years. What are you *talking* about! It will be just the thing for the first issue. You have to support me, darling, this ballet magazine is going to be a huge success. There's an audience out there just waiting to adore you

all over again – and with my pictures – and the original sketches for the scenery designs – '

'Won't it cost a lot to produce?' enquired Regine. 'And what about the paper shortage?'

Freddie frowned. 'Oh, my God – *expense*! I'm trying to scrape the capital together at the moment. Any ideas – and offers of help, of course, are welcome.'

'Oh Freddie,' murmured Vivienne, 'I don't know …'

'I'll get the lolly together somehow, don't you worry. But the main thing will be *you*, your public *demands* it, the first issue a special edition dedicated to you: your memories; an interview; and the photographs, of course. You must come and choose for yourself.'

'You've so much energy, Freddie. Where do you get it from?' Vivienne spoke faintly as if exhausted by his enthusiasm. Charles stood up and the dancer glanced after her son as he moved through the room, lifting a glass from Phil's tray en route.

Regine hoped that was all right. 'Is he allowed?'

Vivienne shrugged. 'He's sixteen – nearly. And his father says he has to learn to hold his drink.'

'He's very self-possessed, isn't he.'

'Well, he was in America during the war. John insisted – you know, at the beginning, when we thought the Germans were going to invade. He seemed so much older when he got back. Well, of course he *was* older.' She smiled and Regine thought she looked sadder than ever.

'Didn't you miss him terribly?'

'Terribly.'

'But you were dancing, weren't you, darling. You couldn't have done that if you'd had to look after the boy,' said Freddie.

'He'd have been at school.'

'You couldn't have done it. All that travelling. And you

know he had a wonderful time in New York.'

'Oh, he did. Thanks to those wonderful friends of yours, only …'

'Exactly. The Denton-Bradshaws will be tremendously useful to him in the future. American connections are so important these days.' Airily Freddie swept Vivienne's maternal guilt away. 'But I must tell you about my *other* plan. I am thinking of organising an exhibition on Diaghilev, and I need your help with that too, darling. If you'll give it your support – your name means so much.'

'A Diaghilev exhibition!' Vivienne Hallam looked more doubtful than ever. 'But how can I help? I didn't know Diaghilev.'

'You can conjure the money out of the ground. All your connections with the ballet world – oh, I know I have connections too, but your name is so much more persuasive – do say you'll help, darling.'

Regine sprang to her feet. 'You should talk to Alan Wentworth. He'd love to do something about Diaghilev on his arts programme.'

'Not *yet*! Oh – I shouldn't have *mentioned* it. It's just a gleam in my eye at the moment. The ballet magazine's the priority, that's the first thing, of course, but then it will be a forum for the discussion of the exhibition, a platform to float it from, it'll be a way of raising more money.'

'You always seem to be broke, Freddie,' said Vivienne plaintively.

'Darling, you know me, I never have a bean – all the family money went on the stately pile and Daddy's gambling debts. And when I do have any it runs through my fingers like water. But this is different – it's not for me, it's for art, it's for the *dance*, darling.'

In search of Alan Wentworth, Regine paused to chat to

Dorothy Redfern, who was discussing the previous evening's performance of *Rosenkavalier* at Covent Garden with one of Neville's colleagues. 'Oh – I didn't know you were there, Dorothy,' cried Regine. 'Didn't you think Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was *marvellous*?'

'We were in the gods, you wouldn't have seen us, Reggie dear. And no – actually I didn't. The voice is wonderful, of course, but I thought her performance was so terribly *arch*.'

'Oh …' Regine, who hadn't great confidence in her own artistic judgements, felt a little downcast.

'And I'm not sure one shouldn't boycott her,' continued Dorothy. 'They say she was a Nazi in the war.'

In so many ways Dorothy always held the high ground, moral as well as aesthetic. She added: 'Of course, it's very hard to know what one would have done. Most people compromise, don't they, when you really come down to it. Except those of us who had no choice.'

Regine found Alan Wentworth in the library. He and Neville were talking to Noel Valentine. Vivienne's son was there too, leafing through a book on Chinese art.

Regine slid her arm through Alan's. 'You're looking well.'

'Not as well and gorgeous as you, Reggie, the Rita Hayworth of Hampstead.'

She laughed off his ponderous flirting. 'Where's Dinah?'

'She's gone to some meeting. The local Labour Party's trying to start a women's peace group, or something. You know – against the atom bomb.'

'Tell her I'll call round one day next week.'

'She's at the Courtauld most days. Come in the evening, when I'm home from work as well.'

He resumed his conversation with the other two. Regine sat on the arm of Charles's chair, looking at the prints with him. 'They're exquisite, aren't they.' The boy nodded, lifting with

long fingers the fragile tissue protecting the next plate. 'Your mother tells me you were in New York during the war. That must have been exciting.'

He looked up at her and she saw what Freddie had meant about Caravaggio: the pale skin, so utterly unblemished by adolescent spots; the heavy-lidded glance; the sinuous lips. With a startling throb of desire she imagined those long hands on her body. Senseless French words came into her head: *elle se penchait sur ce corps … le visage exquis d'un éphèbe …*

'I stayed with a rather nice family. They had an apartment on the Upper East Side, *Eleven Hundred Park Avenue, East Eighty-ninth and Park*.' He chanted the address like a spell. 'In the summer we went to their house on Long Island,' he added.

The mysterious names reinforced Regine's vision of an imaginary New York, where all the women looked like the Duchess of Windsor and all the men like Humphrey Bogart. In the American films she'd seen, brash, noisy streets, wise-cracking trilby-hatted men and long-legged showgirls defined the city, but Charles's careless allusions suggested a different Manhattan, of martinis and stilted elegance. 'You are so lucky. I've always wanted to go to New York.'

'It was swell,' he said with an exaggerated American accent. Then in his normal voice: 'It was great fun and rather grand; the house had its own lift and three bathrooms.'

'*Three bathrooms*?'

'They had a daughter my age, Lally. We became great friends. I miss her rather. It was coming home that was the hard part. It's been frightfully difficult getting used to the food.'

What a blasé little tike he was! Speaking of a house with *three bathrooms* as though it were the most normal thing in the world! At the same time his blasé air shaded towards a melancholy that was like his mother's. 'And I suppose there was lashings of food – no rationing. And New York itself? Do tell me about it.'

'I was only eight when I arrived, you know.' He was still turning the pages of the print book. Silence; he wasn't going to say any more.

'I've lived abroad too, in Shanghai, but that was before the war.'

Now he looked interested. 'Shanghai? Freddie was there. Did you know him then? I'm madly interested in China. They're having a revolution.'

'Yes, that's where I first met Freddie – in Shanghai. The thing is – I must go and look after my other guests, but – why don't you come round for tea one afternoon? You could come over after school? I could show you my souvenirs.'

'I'd like that.' He smiled faintly, as if the invitation concealed a vaguely indecent meaning, to which only he had access. Then he began to turn the pages again. She'd been dismissed.

She stood up. 'Alan – go and talk to Freddie. He wants to organise a Diaghilev exhibition.'

The boy joined in again. 'Freddie's potty about Diaghilev. Isn't he the one who was in love with Nijinsky, the famous dancer, who went mad? Freddie told me a fortune teller predicted Diaghilev would die on water, so he never went anywhere by boat. But then eventually he died in Venice, which *is* built on water. And when they lowered the coffin into the grave on the cemetery island there, his two lovers jumped in after it and started to fight each other. Freddie said he'd visited it at the end of the war – I forget the name of the island, but anyway, he said there were flowers by the grave and even a pair of ballet slippers.'

'That's just Freddie's sort of thing,' said Regine, and to Alan: 'You could do a wonderful programme on Diaghilev.'

'That's a good idea.' Noel pricked up his ears. His art gallery specialised in modern and contemporary art, but everything to do with the arts fascinated him.

'Is it?' said Alan.

'Yes,' said Noel. 'Go on. I'll join you in a minute.' He turned back to Neville, with whom he was discussing a forthcoming auction.

'Ian Roxburgh will probably be along later,' said Neville. 'Did you meet him here before? I'd like to know what you think of him. He's been in the Far East, knows a lot about China. Seems to think he could get hold of some vases for me …'

Noel raised his eyebrows.

'Freddie brought him along originally,' said Regine. 'Earlier this year.' She tried to remember exactly when it had been. These days the two seemed thick as thieves. Of course she wasn't jealous, that would have been absurd, but … she wasn't crazy about Ian Roxburgh.

Phil came into the library with his drinks tray. 'Cynthia's here,' he murmured to Regine, raised his eyebrows and jerked his head in the direction of the garden.

Regine found Cynthia in a cluster of people, including the Jordans. At her side, shorter than she, stood a sleek, besuited figure.

So Cynthia had finally brought him. Together in public … that must mean … was it going to be official? Was he actually going to …?

She approached them, Cynthia made the introductions and Regine shook hands with Ernie Appleton, as though it were the most usual thing in the world to find a government minister standing on her lawn. Cynthia said: 'We've just dropped in for a moment, we can't stay long.'

But Muriel Jordan began to talk about the Berlin airlift, transparently trying to draw the politician out. He merely smiled enigmatically as she gave him the benefit of her views on the current crisis, but when she moved seamlessly on to the rumours about the Board of Trade Cynthia and her companion

moved indoors, and Muriel turned to Regine. 'How extraordinary! You don't mean to tell me—'

Regine looked blankly at the older woman. 'Cynthia works at the Board of Trade too, you know,' she said repressively. 'But what were you saying about the Berlin airlift, Muriel?'

Ignoring the question, Muriel contorted her face into a knowing grimace, literally eagle-eyed. 'Oh, *really*!' she said with laboured theatrical sarcasm. 'Is that what it's called! As if he isn't in enough trouble already.'

Regine had no idea what the last comment meant. 'How long do you think the Berlin airlift can go on?' she persisted rather desperately, longing to be talking to Cynthia. She hated Muriel's endless tedious complaints about everything and her manner of casting blame on all and sundry – and all the time she pretended to be so holy.

In any case, being against the bad news that surged across the papers every day was about as much good as railing against bad weather. The atom bomb was terrifying, but Regine hadn't spent nearly two years in Shanghai for nothing. She knew that with war raging nearby, it was perfectly possible for life to continue in a normal, indeed thrilling way and that if you were dancing on the edge of a volcano it was better not to look down into its fiery heart. 'No one will want to go to war over Berlin,' she said. 'Things are bound to get better soon.'

'You're unbelievably frivolous, Reggie. Talk about *après moi le déluge*!'

Happily Cynthia and her escort re-emerged, accompanied now by Freddie. Regine wondered what on earth Cynthia saw in this paunchy, balding politician. And yet the very fact he was a member of the government lent him an aura … of sorts. 'We must be off, I'm afraid,' said Cynthia, 'but I'll ring you soon, Reggie.' Ernie Appleton shook hands again. He smiled in a way that made you think he had to smile too often when he didn't

feel like it. Freddie walked them to the gate, where they stayed chatting for a moment, and then went back into the house.

Hilary watched Freddie. 'Don't know why you give him house room.'

Regine was used to Hilary's extraordinary rudeness. *That* hadn't changed. He never stinted what he called his honest, forthright and unvarnished views.

'You know perfectly well Freddie is my oldest friend. I've known him since Shanghai. Please don't talk like that about him. He's the kindest person in the world.'

Hilary probably didn't realise how rude he was. Unusually he even apologised. 'Sorry, old girl, didn't mean to offend, but there's no getting away from the fact that moral degeneracy is on the rise. During the war things got completely out of hand – I mean, look at the illegitimacy rates – '

Regine laughed. 'You can hardly blame the Freddies of this world for that!'

'It's no laughing matter, Regine.'

'No.' A different topic was needed. Fortunately Muriel embarked on a new grumble.

'The state of the Heath! That army camp opposite us in East Heath Road – it's an absolute disgrace; the Nissen huts, great slabs of concrete, barbed wire, old tins, broken glass – weeds all over it now, of course, but you can still see it all poking through—'

'And all those new asphalt paths all over the Heath and so much of it still fenced off,' added Hilary. 'Still, at least they didn't put prefabs up all over Parliament Hill Fields. We must be grateful for small mercies, I suppose.'

'They wanted to build permanent housing,' snapped Muriel. 'They've still got their eye on it probably.'

The war was over, yet its effects lingered on, like a hangover, or, no, a debilitating infection, a sort of malaria of the

mind that, once contracted, continued to lurk within the system, never finally cured. But grumbling didn't help and Regine was all for getting completely away from the war. The best medicine, she was sure, was simply to enjoy life as much as one possibly could.

Noel Valentine came out onto the lawn, and she drew him into their conversation. He at least wasn't full of dismal political views. Unlike Hilary, whose sweeping statements brooked no denial, Noel always saw the detail. Detail is everything, he said. That's what's wrong with Arthur Carnforth's painting, he'd once said to Regine. He's not good enough on the detail, fuzzy impressionism just won't do.

Once he and the Jordans were safely talking about the Van Gogh exhibition, Regine returned indoors. She was looking for Charles. I think I've fallen for him, she thought. 'Mad about the boy' – that song Freddie used to sing. But after all, she'd been so good for so long … a fifteen-year-old, well, nearly sixteen; it reminded her of the Colette novel she'd read on the boat home. *Chéri*. Darling.