
Opening Extract from...

The Charming Quirks of Others

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'Saturday evening,' remarked Isabel Dalhousie. 'A time for the burning of ears.'

Guy Peploe, seated opposite her in the back neuk at Glass & Thompson's café, looked at her blankly. Isabel was given to making puzzling pronouncements – he knew that, and did not mind – but this one, he thought, was unusually Delphic.

He stirred his coffee. 'I'm not quite with you, Isabel. Not quite. Burning ears?'

She smiled. She had not intended to be opaque and it was Guy, after all, who had brought up the subject of Saturday evenings; she was merely picking up on the theme. He had mentioned an opening he had attended last Saturday, a show featuring a Scottish realist painter who had been ignored in his lifetime but who was now lauded as a genius. Everybody had been there; which meant, he said with a laugh, everybody who went to Saturday-evening openings at galleries. The remaining four hundred and eighty thousand people who lived in Edinburgh and its immediate environs had presumably been doing something else.

That had triggered Isabel's remark about burning ears, which she now went on to explain. 'What I meant is that on a Saturday evening,' she said, 'there are always a number of dinner parties in Edinburgh. The same people go to dinner with the same people. Backwards and forwards. And what do they talk about on these occasions?'

'Those who aren't there?' suggested Guy.

Isabel agreed. 'Exactly. And there are certain people who are talked about a lot. This is not a particularly big pond, you know. In some ways it's a village.'

Guy nodded. 'All cities have their villages,' he said. 'Even the big ones. London claims to be full of them. New York, too.'

'But New York *has* a village,' said Isabel. 'It's called The Village. Which is helpful, I suppose.'

Guy laughed; Isabel's wry comments, dropped as asides, could seem so arresting even if, when you analysed them, it was hard to say why: this was an example. There was nothing exceptional about what she had said – not on the face of it – but the comment about helpfulness tripped one up.

'Of course,' Isabel continued, 'to use the definite article about one's village demonstrates – how should one put it? – a good conceit of oneself. That clan chief called The MacGregor: does he correct people who call him *a* MacGregor? Would he have to say "No, *The* MacGregor, please"?'

'I'm sure he wouldn't,' said Guy. 'People like that are usually very modest. If you've been on the go for five hundred years, you're usually fairly low key about it.'

Isabel thought that was quite true. She knew a Nobel laureate who referred to 'a little prize they were once kind enough to give me – totally undeserved, of course'. That took some doing, and some strength of character too; how many of us, she

wondered, would hide a Nobel prize under our bushel? Her friend had heard the news, she remembered his telling her, through a message left on his telephone answering machine. *This is the Nobel Committee in Stockholm and we are delighted to inform you that you have been awarded the Nobel Prize this year for . . .*

But there was something else to be said about MacGregors. 'You do know that their name was interdicted?' she said. 'James the Sixth, I'm afraid, reacted rather harshly to some bit of bad behaviour by the MacGregors and made their name illegal. It's an odd notion, don't you think? Making a name illegal. They had to start calling themselves things like Murray and so on.'

Guy knew that. Isabel had spoken about it before; she often brought up the Stuarts, for some reason that completely escaped him. People had their historical enthusiasms, he supposed, and the Stuarts were not exactly a tedious dynasty. It might have been better, he thought, if they had been; better for them, that is.

'Mind you,' said Isabel, 'it has to be said that James the Sixth was a somewhat miserable piece of work. I've tried to like the later Stuarts, you know, but I have to say it's an effort. Charles the First was such a weak and self-indulged man, and by the time we get to Bonnie Prince Charlie the genes had gone pretty bad. James the Sixth, I suppose, was far brighter than most of them, but he must have been rather difficult company much of the time. Interesting, though: gay kings usually are.'

'Didn't he have a wretched childhood?' said Guy. 'That's sometimes an excuse, isn't it? The fact that one has had an awful time as a child can explain so much, can't it.'

Isabel reached for her cup of coffee. 'Does it? I wonder. I

think that there's a case for putting your early years behind you. Plenty of people have done that. They grow up and then draw a line.'

Guy considered this. 'Yet the early years won't necessarily go away. If you're desperately unhappy when you're young, aren't you damaged goods?'

Isabel was prepared to concede this of James VI. 'He had that awful tutor, that Buchanan man, who intimidated him.'

Guy nodded. 'An inhumane humanist. Very grim.'

'And James,' Isabel continued, 'was brought up in such a loveless atmosphere. A major case of maternal deprivation. Then his mother had her head chopped off, we must remind ourselves. That hardly leads to happiness. And his father was blown up, wasn't he? Again not a good thing for a parent, or for anyone, actually.' She paused, warming to the theme, which was a favourite one of hers. She thought Henry Darnley, Mary's husband, was vain and scheming, a narcissist, and even if one would not wish an explosion on anybody, there were some who did seem to ask for it. 'And even before he was blown up he would hardly have been a particularly good father, murdering Mary's secretary, for heaven's sake, and having all those affairs.'

She glanced about her. A woman at a nearby table was listening, and not bothering to disguise it; did she realise, Isabel wondered, that they were discussing events of four hundred years ago? But let her listen. 'Then, of course, when some light comes into James's life at last, it is taken away from him.'

'Light?'

'His cousin,' said Isabel. 'Esmé Stuart, his cousin from France. He turned up in Scotland when James was thirteen, and James fell in love with him. He was very beautiful, by all accounts, and James at last had a friend. Poor boy.'

The eavesdropper's eyes widened involuntarily.

He wrote poetry, Isabel continued. This sad, boy-king of Scots wrote poetry. After Esmé Stuart had been forced out of Scotland by scheming nobles, James had written a poem about a rare Arabian phoenix coming to Scotland and being persecuted. 'That was Esmé,' she said. 'The boy he loved. He disguised him in the poem as a female phoenix because, well, in those days . . . It was so sad. And they are lovely lines – full of sorrow and loss.' And well they might have been, she thought. What sorrow there must be in loving somebody who does not love you back; or to love somebody whom the world says you cannot love?

They both fell silent. Then Guy said, 'You were talking about ears burning.'

Isabel toyed with her cup. 'Yes. There are a few people in this city who know that every Saturday their names are going to be mentioned at numerous dinner parties. They know it. Imagine that, Guy. Imagine knowing that there are ten, maybe twenty tables at which you are being taken to pieces and then put together again – if you're lucky.'

Guy made a face. 'Uncomfortable.'

'Yes. Deconstruction always is. And that's where the burning of ears comes in. If there's any truth in the idea that your ears burn when somebody's talking about you – and there isn't, of course – then imagine the ears of these unfortunates. They must glow like beacons in the night.'

'Gossip,' said Guy. 'Nobody should worry about gossip. There's no need for ears to burn.'

Isabel looked up sharply. 'Oh really? Don't you think that gossip can be pretty wounding?'

'Yes,' said Guy. 'Malicious gossip can. But a lot of gossip is mild – and really a bit pointless.'

Isabel agreed. 'Utterly pointless,' she said. 'Look at those glossy magazines that publish tittle-tattle about the doings of celebrities. None of these people actually *does* anything of any worth to anybody. Not really. But do people like to read about their private lives? Yes, they do. And how. He breaks up with her. She buys a house in France or is seen on so-and-so's boat. She goes to the gym, and is photographed coming out of it. And so on and so on. Why do people read that sort of thing?'

'Do you read them?' asked Guy.

'Me? Of course not,' said Isabel. She paused. Even as she gave her answer, she realised that this was not true and would have to be corrected. One should never mislead a friend, or an enemy for that matter, she thought. We owed the same duty of truthfulness to everybody, no matter what we thought of them. 'I don't buy them, but as for reading – well, never, that is never unless my teeth play up.'

Again Guy looked at her blankly.

'I read them when I go to the dentist,' she said. 'There are some magazines that we read only when we go to the dentist. Mine has all of them in his waiting room. He also has those ritzy fashion magazines with advertisements for expensive designer sunglasses and so on, and magazines about boats. He has a boat, he told me. So I read these magazines from time to time. But only at the dentist's.' She looked at him apologetically. 'Should I feel ashamed?'

Guy shook his head. 'No. We all have guilty pleasures. Yours is harmless enough.' He paused. 'But back to burning ears. Who are these people whose ears burn?'

Isabel smiled. 'The principals of schools,' she said. 'Listen next time you go to a dinner party. People talk about the principals of their children's school. They do it all the time.'

Guy digested this. He frowned. 'Strange.'

Isabel shrugged. 'It keeps people going. Not that these teachers do anything dramatic – or not usually, although there was a good bit of gossip doing the rounds last year when one of the schools appointed a new head of French and then unappointed – or, should we say, disappointed him – before he even arrived to take up the job.'

Guy said that he had heard about that – vaguely.

'The rumour mill went into full-time operation,' said Isabel. 'There were all sorts of stories going the rounds.'

'Such as?'

'Amazing things. One I heard was that he had applied under a false name and was wanted by the French police. The French police! I suppose to be wanted by the French police is somehow more exotic than being wanted by other police forces. It can't be very glamorous to be wanted by the Glasgow police – rather ordinary, in fact – but the French police – now there's a cachet.'

'And the truth?'

'The board had a change of heart. They had their reasons, no doubt, but these were probably pretty prosaic, and no reflection on the candidate. The French police wouldn't have come into it, I would have thought.'

Guy changed the subject. He had a catalogue that Isabel had expressed an interest in seeing, and he had brought it to show her. There was an auction coming up at Christie's in London and there were several paintings, including a Raeburn that Isabel said she had heard about. Now, as he put the glossy publication on the table, Isabel went straight to one of the pages he had marked with a small, yellow sticky note.

'Sir Henry Raeburn,' said Guy, as Isabel opened the

catalogue. 'Look at it. *Portrait of Mrs Alexander and her Granddaughter.*'

Isabel studied the photograph that took up most of one of the pages. A woman in a white-collared red dress was seated against a background of dark green. Beside her was a young girl, of eight perhaps, half-crouching, arms resting on the woman's chair.

'His colours,' said Isabel. 'Raeburn used those fabulous colours, didn't he? He occupied a world of dark greens and reds. Was that the Edinburgh of his day, do you think?'

'Their interiors were like that, I suppose,' said Guy. 'Those curtains. Look.'

Isabel reached out and touched the photograph, her finger tracing the line of the fabrics draped behind the sitters. 'I find myself thinking of what their world was like,' she said. 'When was this painted? Does it say?'

'It's late Raeburn,' said Guy. 'Eighteen-twenty? Something like that.'

'So this little girl,' said Isabel. 'Might have lived until when? Eighteen-seventy, perhaps. If she was lucky.'

'I suppose so.'

'And then her own daughter – the great-granddaughter of our Mrs Alexander – would have lived from, let's say, 1840 until 1900, and *her* daughter from 1870 until 1930 or even 1940. Though she was actually a bit older when she died.'

Guy looked at her enquiringly. 'Oh?'

Isabel sat back. 'My paternal grandmother,' she said. 'Which makes her . . .' She pointed to the girl, 'my four-times great-grandmother.'

Guy's surprise was evident. 'So that's why you asked me about this. You'd heard?'

'Yes. I knew that one of my ancestors had been painted by Raeburn – two, in fact. My father told me about it when I was a teenager – he showed me some of the Raeburns in the Portrait Gallery, and he said that on his mother's side we were Alexanders. The painting was mentioned in one of the books about Raeburn, but its whereabouts were described as unknown.' She pointed to the catalogue. 'Until now.'

Guy nodded. 'I see. Well, that makes this sale rather important to you. Do you want to go for the painting?'

Isabel reached out to take the catalogue. Opening it, she turned to the full-page photograph. 'What do you think?'

Guy shrugged. 'It's a fine double portrait. Everything that makes Raeburn such a great portraitist is there. The ease of it – he painted very quickly, you know, which gives his paintings a wonderful fluidity. That's there. And the faces . . . well, they're rather charming, aren't they? The girl has a rather impish look to her. Perhaps she was planning some naughtiness, or Raeburn was telling her an amusing story to keep her still while he worked. It's very intimate in its feel.'

Isabel thought that this was right, but it was not what mattered to her. What mattered was the link that existed between her and two people in the picture. My people, she thought. My people.

'How much do you think it'll go for?'

There could be no clear answer to this, and they both knew it. 'It depends. It always depends in an auction. You never know who's going to be in the room. You never know who's going to take a fancy to a painting. Some people have deeper pockets than others.'

She wanted him to put a figure on it, and she pressed him.

'Forty thousand pounds,' he said. 'Something like that. But

you could be lucky and get it for twenty-five or thirty. Interested?'

Isabel had forty thousand pounds. Not in cash, of course, but she could raise that if she needed it by selling shares. That year she had bought two paintings – one for three thousand pounds and one for eight hundred. She was not used to spending much larger sums on art, although she had done so before. This, though, was special. She nodded her assent. 'Will you try?'

'I'll do my best,' said Guy. 'I'll get a condition report and check that everything's all right. Then we can go for it, if you like. Give me an upper limit.'

She closed her eyes and saw, rather to her surprise, her mother, her *sainted American mother* as she called her. 'Don't miss your chances in this life,' her mother had said to her. And now she was saying it again.

'Thirty . . .' she hesitated. Her sainted American mother had something to say. *Thirty-eight.*

'Yes?'

'A hammer price of thirty-eight thousand. Let's not go any higher than that.'

Guy took the catalogue and made a note in the margin. 'We should be all right,' he said.

Isabel looked at her watch. Grace was looking after Charlie for a couple of hours; she had taken him to see her friend who had a child of the same age. She would be back, she said, at two, and Isabel wanted to be at home when they returned.

'I have to get back,' she said, rising to her feet. 'When is the sale?'

'Six weeks from now,' said Guy. 'Plenty of time. It's down in London, and so we'll bid by phone. If you change your mind, let me know.'

'I won't change it.'

Guy knew that she would not. He knew Isabel reasonably well, and he had noticed two things about her. She told the truth, and she was as good as her word. He too rose to his feet, and as he did so, an elderly woman who had been sitting at a nearby table leaned over and addressed him.

'Mr Peploe? You are Mr Peploe, aren't you?'

Guy inclined his head. 'Yes.'

'I just wanted you to know how much I like your paintings,' said the woman. 'Those lovely pictures of the island of Iona. And Mull too. So striking.'

Isabel bit her lip.

'I'm afraid they're not mine,' said Guy politely. 'My grandfather. Samuel Peploe. He painted them.'

The woman looked surprised. 'Really? Well, doesn't time pass? My goodness. Well, I still want you to know that I like them very much indeed, even if it was your grandfather, not you.'

Guy thanked her politely; he avoided catching Isabel's eye. Once outside, he looked at her, his eyes bright with amusement. 'Well!'

Isabel was thinking of the Raeburn, and of the woman and her granddaughter. We were all tied to one another – ourselves and those who came before us; this had been their city too, these streets their thoroughfares, these stone buildings their homes. The curious, anachronistic mistake of the woman in Glass & Thompson merely showed that the barriers between present and past could be porous. Isabel had closed her eyes and seen her mother; as easily might she look into the mirror and see something in the shape of her nose, or the line of her brow, that she might discern in the two sitters in that Raeburn

portrait. We were ourselves, but we were others too; our past written on us like lines drawn on a palimpsest, or the artist's rough sketch beneath the surface of a painting. And little Charlie – she saw herself in him sometimes, in the way his mouth turned when he smiled; and her father was there, too, in Charlie's eyes, which were like two sparkling little pools of grey and green.

She looked at her watch; she would have to rush to be home when Charlie arrived. She wanted to be there in the hall, to take him from Grace and to hold him tightly against her, which he allowed, but only for a few seconds, before he began to struggle to escape her embrace. That was the lot of the mother of sons; one embraced and held them, but even in their tenderness they were struggling to get away, and would.