

ROSE TREMAIN



The New People

Millicent Graves is leaving.

Today, with her friend and companion, Alison Prout, she has been for her last walk to the village and back. She has sat for a while on a wooden seat under the war memorial. The ice-cream van, playing four bars of a tune she thought was called 'The Happy Wanderer', drew up by the war memorial and obscured her view of the village green, the pub, the bank and the co-op. A few kids queued at the van's window. Millicent Graves, who had heard on Radio 4 that some ice-cream men were also drug traders, stared at the children. They were pale and obese. Millicent Graves imagined that inside their skulls was confusion and darkness.

Upstairs now Alison Prout is packing clothes. The clothes are Millicent's. There are hats and furs, unworn for thirty years but preserved in boxes with mothballs and tissue paper. There is a black lace ballgown and a black velvet 'theatre dress'. There are white kid gloves and oyster-coloured stockings. Millicent can remember the feel of these ancient clothes against her skin. She has told Alison to pack them all – even the black lace gown and a hat with ostrich plumes – because she wants to believe that in her new life there will be the time and the climate for a little eccentricity. She can see herself in the old feathered hat, perfect for keeping the hot sun off her head. She might, she has decided, go shopping in it and enjoy watching the shopkeepers' faces as out from its ridiculous shade comes her order for half a kilo of parmesan. Or it might become a gardening hat, in which case it will be the nuns who

spy her on the other side of their wall – a small but striking figure in her new landscape, going round with the watering can, placing cool stones on the clematis root. Alison Prout has had a bitter argument with Millicent on the subject of clothes, certain as she is that Millicent's motive for taking them is detestable vanity. Millicent was, long ago, beautiful. Now, she is, simply, old. But the clothes, the foolish, expensive clothes, are a reminder – another among many reminders – of her power. And that power, Alison admits to herself as she folds and sorts her friend's possessions, is not yet completely spent.

In a week's time, Millicent and Alison, who have lived together in the cottage for nineteen years, will have left it for ever and The New People will have moved in.

It is a summer afternoon and the light on the garden is beguiling, Alison thinks, as she passes and re-passes the small bedroom window, carrying Millicent's things. Millicent is downstairs, dusting the weasel. She has promised Alison that she will 'make a start on the books'. There are more than two thousand of these. When The New People first arrived to look round the cottage they appeared genuinely afraid at the sight of them. They'd imagined thick walls, perhaps, but not this extra insulation of literature. Then, as Millicent led them on into the sitting room and they noticed the stuffed weasel under its glass cloche, their fear palpably increased, as if the long-dead animal was going to dart at their ankle veins. And yet they didn't retreat. They knew the weasel would be leaving with the women; their glances said, 'We can take down all these book shelves'. As they left, they muttered, 'We shall be instructing the agents . . .'

After they'd gone, Alison had started to cry. 'They'll change it all,' she sobbed, 'I always imagined people like us would buy it.' Millicent reprimanded her. 'Change is good,' she said fiercely, 'and anyway, dear, there are no more people like us.'

But later that evening, Millicent found that she too was looking at the shape and detail of rooms and wondering how they would be altered. After supper, she'd gone out into the

garden and stared at the summer night and thought, they will never see it as I see it, those New People, because even if their hands don't change it, their minds will. 'We've got ghosts now!' she announced to Alison as she went in. 'Ghosts who come before instead of after.'

Now, polishing the weasel, Millicent senses that the ghosts are with her in the sitting room. She turns round. 'What we don't understand,' they say, 'is why you're going.'

'Ah,' says Millicent.

Then she notices that Alison has crept down from sorting the old clothes and is sitting in an armchair, saying nothing.

'Is it a long story?'

'No,' says Millicent. 'I'm going because I've been replaced. I look around, in very many places where I once was and now I not only do not see myself there, I see no one who ever resembled me. It's as if I have been obliterated. And I can't, at the age of sixty-nine, accept my obliteration, so I am simply going somewhere where I shall be visible again, at least to myself.'

The New People look utterly perplexed. They want to say, 'We knew you literary folk were a bit mad, a bit touched, but we thought you tried to make sense to ordinary people. We thought this was common courtesy.'

'No,' snaps Millicent, reading their minds, 'it is not common courtesy, yet what I am saying is tediously simple.'

'Well, I'm afraid we don't understand it.'

'Of course you don't. Of course you don't . . . ' Millicent mumbles.

'What you still haven't told us,' say The New People, trying to drag the conversation on to a solid foundation, 'is where you're actually going.'

Millicent looks at Alison. Alison turns her face towards the window and the afternoon sun shines on her hair, which is still reddish and only dulled a little with grey.

'Umbria,' says Millicent.

'Sorry?' say The New People.

'Yes. The house we're buying is by a convent wall. It belonged to the nuns for centuries. It was a place where important guests were put. Now, we shall be the "guests".'

At this point, The New People get up. They say they have to leave. They say they have a great friend who's mad on Italian food and who is starting a local Foodie Society. 'Tonight,' they laugh, 'is the inaugural nosebag!'

Millicent turns away from them and goes back to her polishing. When she looks round again, she finds they've gone.

'They've gone!' she calls to Alison, who is after all upstairs and not sitting silently in a chair.

'What, Millie? Who've gone?'

'Those people,' says Millicent, 'those ghosts. For the time being.'

At supper in the kitchen, Alison says: 'I think I'm going to try not to think about The New People, and if I was you, I'd try not to think about them either.'

'What a very complicated construction that is, Alison,' says Millicent, helping herself to the raspberries she picked a few moments ago in the dusk.

'Particularly tomorrow evening,' says Alison.

'Why particularly tomorrow evening?'

'While I'm out.'

'Out? Where are you going?'

'To say goodbye to Diana.'

'I see,' says Millicent. 'Well, it is going to be extremely difficult *not* to think about them, because they will be here.'

'They're only here in your mind, Millie.'

'I mean, they will actually *be here*. They're bringing a builder.'

'Tomorrow evening?'

'Yes. They're driving down from London.'

'Oh. Then I won't go out.'

'That would be considerate.'

'On the other hand, I promised Diana . . . '

'I marvel that you feel an emotional goodbye to be necessary.'

'Not "emotional".'

'In fact, why not, when we get to Italy, just send a post-card?'

'As if we were on holiday, I suppose you mean.'

Millicent sniffs. Another thing she hopes of her future life is that Alison, fifty next year, will have no more love affairs. She's never expressed this hope, except in her recent poetry, which, as once-praising, now-contemptuous critics have noted, is all about betrayal. She hadn't realized that betrayal was so unfashionable a subject nor indeed that her poems were 'all about' it. Perhaps, she decides capriciously, she will ask The New People about these things and watch their moons of faces closely to see whether or not they understand the words.

They arrive at seven. Alison has promised to be back by seven-thirty. On entering the cottage, they say, God, they're sorry, but since their last visit someone has told them that she, Millicent Graves, is quite a famous poetess and it's awful to say they'd never heard of her.

'Oh, I see,' says Millicent. 'Then why did you say you thought literary people were mad?'

'I beg your pardon?' they say.

'You said you knew that literary folk were a bit touched . . .'

'We said that?'

'Or did I imagine it?'

'You imagined it. You must have done.'

They introduce the builder. He doesn't look, to Millicent Graves, like a builder, but more like a town councillor, wearing a brown suit and brogues. 'Perhaps you're a New Builder?' she asks. The man frowns and tugs out a pipe. He says he's been in the construction business half a lifetime. 'I think,' says Millicent, as she pictures Alison arriving at Diana's house and being greeted with a kiss, 'that everything's become very different and confusing.'

She leads them in. As they reach the sitting room, and the builder starts to look up at the bowed ceiling beams and to prod the springy, flaking plaster of the walls Millicent finds she can't remember the name of The New People and wonders in fact whether she's ever known it.

'Oh, Prue and Simon,' they tell her.

Yes, she wants to say, but the surname? What was that? Something like Haydock-Park, wasn't it, or is that a Grand Prix circuit or a racecourse? She asks the New Builder his name. 'Jack Silverstone,' he announces impatiently.

'Lord!' exclaims Millicent. 'Everybody's careering about.'

The New People glance at each other. We must obliterate every trace of her, says this fearful look. And Jack Silverstone nods, as if in reassurance: It can all be changed. You won't know it's the same house. It's going to cost a bit, that's all.

'Where do you want to start?' asks Millicent.

'Oh . . .' says Prue.

'Well . . .' says Simon.

'Upstairs,' says Jack Silverstone.

So now, as Millicent gets out the sherry bottle from Alison's tidy kitchen cupboard, they're up above her head in the bathroom. Conversations, in timber-framed houses, escape as easily as heat through the floors and Millicent can hear Prue say to Jack Silverstone: 'This is the one drawback, Jack.' And it appears that Prue wants two bathrooms. Though they will only use the cottage at weekends, she feels, 'It simply isn't viable with one.'

'What about downstairs?' asks Jack Silverstone.

'Downstairs?'

'The little room next to the kitchen.'

'Her study? Convert that into a second bathroom?'

'Why not? Got no use for a study, have you?'

'Simon?'

'Good God, no. Don't plan to bring work here. Need a phone, that's all.'

They start to clatter towards the stairs. Now they'll come

down and go into the study, where nothing has ever been disturbed but only moved about gently to accommodate the Hoover, and start a conversation about piping.

Millicent leaves the sherry unpoured and marches quickly to the desk where all the unfashionable words on the subject of dereliction have been set down and picks up the telephone. By the time The New People have opened her door and exclaimed with barely concealed annoyance at finding her there, she has dialled Diana's number and has begun to wonder whereabouts in Diana's very beautiful house Alison may be standing or sitting or even lying down, because although it is now 7.25 by the silent study clock, Millicent is certain that Alison is still there and that unless summoned immediately she will come home very late, long after The New People have gone, leaving Millicent alone with the darkness and the ghosts.

The telephone rings and isn't answered. The New People have retreated to the kitchen where impatiently in their minds they are tearing Millicent's old cupboards off the walls.

'So tell us why you're going. Won't you?' say The New People, sipping sherry.

'Well,' says Millicent, 'I'll tell you a story, if you like.'

'A story?'

'Yes. And it's this. Men have never been particularly important to me, but one man was and that was my father. He was a scientist. All his early work was in immunology. But then he became very interested in behaviours, animal behaviour and then human behaviours. And from this time, our family life was quite changed, because he started bringing to his laboratory and then into the house all kinds of strangers. They would mostly be very unhappy people and their unhappiness and noise made it impossible for us to live as we'd once lived and everything we valued – silence, for instance, and little jokes that only we as a family understood – had disappeared for ever. And then my youngest sister, Christina, whom I loved very very much, committed suicide. So you see. Sometimes one has to act.'

Three faces, turned in expectation towards Millicent, turn away.

'Dreadful story,' mumbles Prue.

'Can we have a look at the study now?' says Jack Silverstone.

'Yes,' says Millicent. 'My study in Italy overlooks the nuns' vegetable garden. They told me they hoe in silence, but I expect from time to time one might hear them murmuring, don't you think?'

They don't know how to reply. In the study, they whisper. They've understood now how their plans can be overheard.

Millicent pours herself more sherry and notices that, as she predicted, Alison is not home and that the sun has gone down behind the laurels.

The New People emerge, beaming. Clearly, they have decided where the lavatory can go and where the bath. Millicent fills their glasses. 'The convent is, of course, crumbling,' she tells them, 'that's why the nuns have been forced to sell off the guest house – to try to repair the fabric. The Church in Italy used to hold people in their blood. Prayer was food. But it isn't like that any more. It's in decay, and all over the place there are empty churches and the old plaster saints have been replaced by plastic things.'

'There's a lot of shoddy muck about,' says Jack Silverstone, 'take my trade . . .'

'One imagines that perhaps certain African or South American Indian tribes are held to certain ways and certain places in their blood, but I think no one else is, do you? Certainly not in this country, unless it's an individual held to another individual by love. What do you think?'

'Well,' says Prue.

'Time,' says Simon.

'Time?' says Millicent.

'Yes. If you're in something like Commodities, as I am, you don't have the time for any other commitments.'

'And as for the Church,' says Jack Silverstone, 'all that ever was was bloodthirsty.'

At this moment, Millicent hears the sound of Alison's car. It's eight thirty-five. The New People get up and thank Millicent for the sherry and tell her they've seen everything they needed to see.

Alison looks white. Her straight, small mouth is set into an even straighter, smaller line. Millicent decides to ignore – at least for the time being – the set of Alison's mouth and tells her friend with a smile: 'They're called the Haydock-Parks!'

'No, they are *not*, Millicent,' snaps Alison. 'Why do you always have to get names wrong?'

'What are they called, then?'

'The Hammond-Clarks.'

'Oh well, the builder is called Silverstone.'

'I very much doubt it.'

'You always doubted a great deal that was true, dear. He is called Silverstone, and I shall from now on refer to these people as the Haydock-Parks because it suits them extremely well.'

Alison goes angrily up the stairs and into her room. The door closes. Her anger, Millicent notices, has made the house throb. She wonders how many times and in what degree the timbers and lathes have shifted, over all the years, to the violent commotions of their friendship. She ponders the origin of the phrase 'brought the house down' and wonders if it was originally applied to anger and not to laughter. How splendid if, as their removal van drove away, the house gave one final shudder of release and collapsed in a pile of sticks at The New People's feet.

She waits for a while for Alison to come down. She's hungry, but she refuses to eat supper alone.

She goes out into the garden and folds up the two deck chairs. 'Order before night' was a favourite saying of her father's, and before he started imposing a more or less perpetual state of disorder on their previously calm and prospering household, he would, each evening, observe his own strict ritual of collecting every toy scattered around the house and garden and returning it to its place in the nursery, before

checking that all the downstairs windows were shut, the curtains drawn, the silver cupboard locked, the backgammon board closed, the lights extinguished and the eiderdowns in place over the bodies of his sleeping daughters. Millicent remembers that Christina once admitted to her that she would often let her eiderdown slip on to the floor on purpose and lie awake waiting for this infinitely comforting moment when it would be lifted gently from the floor and placed over her. When the strangers kept arriving, there was not time in her father's life for 'order before night'; there was, as Millicent remembers it, simply night. It descended swiftly. Patiently, the family waited for dawn, but it never came. Christina died. Millicent retreated from death by starting to write poetry.

She hadn't expected fame. It had come as suddenly and as unexpectedly as the arrival of the strangers. And it had changed her, made her bold, excited and free. Other people complained about it; Millicent Graves always found it an absorbing companion. Now, she misses it. Her frail hope is that in Italy she will miss it less. It still astonishes her that work once so highly valued can now be so utterly forgotten.

She props up the deck chairs in the porch. In the distance, she hears the church clock chime the three-quarter hour. The evening is warm. She wonders how often and for how long the convent tolls its massive bells and whether these summonses will help to structure a future which she knows she hasn't imagined fully enough. Alison has expressed anxiety about the bells, complaining that the days will seem long enough without being woken at dawn.

Resigned to an evening alone, Millicent makes a salad and eats it. She supposes Alison is sleeping, but then when the telephone rings, it's answered upstairs. Tiptoeing to the sitting room, Millicent can hear Alison talking in halting sentences, as if she's trying not to cry. Millicent sniffs. 'I'm much too old for all this!' she says aloud.

In the night, the ghosts of The New People come into

Millicent's room and tear off her wallpaper and replace her old velvet curtains with something called a festoon blind, that draws upwards into big bunches of fabric, like pairs of knickers.

'I see,' says Millicent.

They don't say anything. They're standing back and admiring the window.

'We used to wear cotton knickers like that,' Millicent tells them. 'I never saw my own, not from any provocative angle, but I used to see Elizabeth's and Christina's when we were invited to parties and they would bend down to do up their shoes, and I used to think that the backs of girls' legs looked very strong and lovely.'

The New People are utterly silent and satisfied and fulfilled by the curtains and have drifted off into a contented sleep with the festoons falling caressingly about their heads.

'Night in this cottage,' Millicent whispers, knowing that nothing she says will wake them, 'is usually kind because it's quiet. I've found that in this quiet I've often started to understand things which may not have been plain to me during the day.'

'It was during one particular night, very, very cold, with that bitter feeling of snow to come, that I decided that I couldn't endure it, the unloveliness of England, I just couldn't stand it any more, its comatose people, its ravaged landscape. Because we're in a dark age, that's what I think. But no one listens to what I think any more. Millicent Graves is out of fashion, passé, past, part of what once was, a voice we no longer hear.'

'So I decided I would go. It seemed, from that night, inevitable. And you see where I've put myself? Slap up against a convent wall! But do you know why I'm able to do that? Because the wall itself, which I believed was so strong, so much more substantial than anything we have left in this brutal-minded country, the wall itself is crumbling! The money I've paid for my little house will prop it up for a bit, but I don't

think it will rebuild it, and the best I can hope for is that it doesn't collapse on my head – not till I'm buried, at least.'

At this mention of burial, Millicent sees The New People open their eyes and listen and she thinks she knows why they look so startled: the thought has popped into their minds that despite all the expensive re-planning and re-decorating they're going to do, traces of Millicent's habitation may still remain in the house to disturb them. They imagine how they might be made aware of her. They're giving a dinner party, say. Friends of Simon's from the City will have driven down with their wives, and suddenly Prue or Simon will remember that even the walls of the dining-room used to be lined with books, and the flow of conversation, which is as easy for them as the flow of money, will be halted – just for a moment – because one of them, searching for a word or phrase, understands for a second that there are thousands of words they will never use or even know and remembers that access to these words was once here, in the very room, and is now lost. The moment passes. It's all right. But Simon and Prue both separately wonder, why is it not possible never to think of her?

'Good!' says Millicent aloud. 'That's something, at least, their little discomfort.'

She has gone to sleep and is dreaming of Italy when she's woken by Alison's gentle tap on her door. This knocking on each other's doors is a courtesy neither would want to break; it allows them to share their life without any fear of trespass.

Millicent puts on her light and Alison comes in and sits down on the end of her bed. 'I couldn't sleep, Millie,' she says, 'I think we have to talk.'

'Yes, dear,' says Millicent.

Millicent decides to put on her glasses, so that she can see Alison clearly. Dishonesty must not be allowed to slip past her because dishonesty she can never forgive. She watches Alison's breasts rise as she takes a big breath and says with great sadness: 'I'm not certain that I can go to Italy with you. I think that, for the moment, it's not possible for me to go.'

Millicent blinks. Her eyes were always like a bird's eyes, hooded above and beneath.

'Diana, I suppose.'

'Partly so.'

'And the other part?'

Alison's eyes have been turned away from Millicent until now, but as she speaks, she looks up into her face.

'I can't,' she says, 'feel all the pessimism you feel. Don't think I'm being harsh, Millie, when I say that I feel that some of it comes not from the way our world has changed, but from the way *you've* changed – from being very beautiful and praised, to being . . .'

'Old and despised.'

'That's how you choose to see it. I don't think anyone despises you. They've just learned over the years to disagree with you sometimes and not praise everything you write.'

'They don't praise any of it, Alison. They want me to be quiet.'

'Well, again, that's how you've decided to see it.'

'No. They do. But that's not what you've come to discuss. I suppose it's Diana's beauty, is it? You're infatuated.'

'I may be. What I find I can't believe when I'm with her is that this country has lost all the good things it had. I know it's lost some of them, but I don't believe it's "finished", as you say it is. I just can't believe that, Millie. I can't. And I know that if I go to Italy, I'm going to miss it. I'm going to be homesick for England.'

'What for?' says Millicent indignantly. 'For riots? For waste? For greed? For turkeyburgers?'

'Of course not.'

'Then for what? For this garden, maybe. Or Diana's garden. But what are English gardens, dear? They're fragile oases, preserved by one thing and one thing only: money. And when the economy falters, as falter it undoubtedly will, all your peace of mind – that keeps you in the garden and other people outside it, suffering in those concrete estates – will vanish. Then what joy or satisfaction will you get from the garden?'

'I can't believe it will come to that.'

'It's coming, Alison. Do you know what the Haydock-Parks are going to put in before anything else? A burglar alarm.'

'I know all that. But there are so very many decent people, Millie, who want the country to survive, who want to make things better . . .'

'Decent people? Who? Name one decent person.'

'The kind of people we've always known . . .'

'Our friends? I don't think they're "decent", Alison. I think they're infinitely corruptible and infinitely weak, and when it comes to saving England, the task simply isn't going to fall to them, it's going to fall to people like the Haydock-Parks, The New People, and what kind of "salvation" do you ever imagine that's going to be?'

Alison is silent. When she thinks about it, she is perfectly happy to let Millicent win the argument. What she will not let her do is change her mind.

The silence endures. Alison picks at the fringe of her dressing-gown cord. Millicent takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes.

'I have never,' says Millicent after a while, 'been at all good at being quite and utterly alone. How in the world do you think I'm going to get on in that Italian house without you?'

'I really don't know, Millie,' says Alison sadly, 'I expect I shall worry about you a great deal.'

Refusing to think about Alison after she has gone back to her own room, Millicent snaps out the light and lies on her back and sees the dawn starting to frame the curtains. Just outside her window is a clump of tall hazel bushes. Pigeons have roosted in these trees for as long as Millicent can remember and she thinks now that if she's going to miss one thing, it will be the murmuring of these birds.

They lull her to sleep. She dreams her dead sister, Christina, comes and stands by her bed and puts her child's hand on Millicent's grey head. 'I am wearing,' Christina announces

solemnly, 'the Haydock-Parks' curtains, just to mess them up, and in a few moments I'm going to drink this little phial of White Arsenic I've stolen from father's lab, and it will make me die.'

'Don't die, Christina,' Millicent begs, 'dear Christina . . . '

'Oh no, I'm definitely going to die,' says Christina, 'because I think loss is the saddest thing anyone could possibly imagine. Don't you, Millie? I think losing something you once had is the most unbearable thing of all. Don't you?'

'What have you lost, Christina? I'll find it again for you. I'll get it back, whatever it was. Just as long as you don't die . . . '

'No. You can't get it back. Thank you for offering, Millie, but I know that what we once had in this house went away when the strangers arrived and even if mother pleaded and begged and *made* father send them away, I know that they damaged us, damaged our love, and however hard we tried to get it for ourselves again, we never ever could.'

This dream is so sad that Millicent has to wake herself up, even though she knows that her old head which her fifteen-year-old sister was touching is very tired and in need of sleep.

Thoughts of Christina and of death linger with her. She feels, as she has never felt before, afraid not so much of death, but, in dying, of yielding territory to others who may desecrate and destroy the few things which have seemed precious to her and which, in the absence of any belief in God, have been part of a code by which she's tried to live.

In Italy, she promises her new hosts, the nuns, she will alter nothing in their house, nothing fundamental, and to the land around it she will behave kindly. But when she dies, what will happen to it? Who will come next? Which strangers?

'Probably,' she says aloud to the pigeons, 'it's wiser to own no territory at all and just be like that man in my Samuel Palmer print, who lies down alone in the landscape with his book.'

Next door, she hears Alison get up.

'Daybreak,' announces Millicent.