

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# My American

Stella Gibbons

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## About the Book

*My American* follows the lives and loves of Amy Lee and Robert Vorst: from a chance childhood meeting to the comic, tragic and romantic trysts that follow. A baker's daughter, Amy has dreams of becoming a writer, whilst Robert is destined to be a doctor. Later, embarking on a lecture tour, Amy is reminded of 'her American' and endeavours to find him amidst Depression-era America.

## About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

*Cold Comfort Farm*

*Bassett*

*Enbury Heath*

*Nightingale Wood*

*Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm*

*The Rich House*

*Ticky*

*The Bachelor*

*Westwood*

*The Matchmaker*

*Conference at Cold Comfort Farm*

*Here Be Dragons*

*White Sand and Grey Sand*

*The Charmers*

*Starlight*

STELLA GIBBONS

# My American

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

# PART I



## CHAPTER I

IT WAS AUTUMN. Kenwood House, the eighteenth-century mansion on the edge of Hampstead Heath, had been recently opened to the public by King George the Fifth and its beauties were still sufficiently unfamiliar to attract crowds of Londoners, as well as foreign visitors, to stare at them and admire the collection of pictures inside the building.

But on this Saturday afternoon it was so cold that all but a few people had gone home. Showers of leaves drifted from the gigantic copper beech below the terrace in a slight icy wind, and the grass bank was alive with their dark running shapes. The sky was covered with a low pack of violet-grey clouds, moving slowly. Soon it would be dusk, but there was still a yellow gap in the west, looking wonderfully far away and peaceful.

The paved yard in front of the mansion was lighter than the terrace because it caught some of the glow from the west, and the chauffeur of a big car waiting there could see comfortably to read his newspaper. The soft noise of his leather gloves slapping together as he struck his cold hands to shake the blood into them was the only sound in the courtyard. When he stopped, all he could hear was the rustling of leaves over the stone. A black kitten was pouncing and darting after them. Suddenly it ran behind one of the four high columns in front of the house and did not come out again.

The front of the house had some domestic details to break its bleak elegance; two old lampstands of wrought iron, painted cream, and two flights of area steps, one on each side of the lofty columns. Against the railing of the steps on the left a boy of about thirteen was leaning, hands

in the pockets of a loose fawn overcoat, one heel tapping softly, boredly, against the railing. A big fawn cap pulled over his eyes showed only high cheek-bones, fair-skinned cheeks, a childish mouth and firm chin, but his clothes were so un-English and his pose so assured that two late visitors hurrying out through the door under the columns five minutes since had turned to stare curiously at him. He kept looking towards the door as if waiting for someone to come out, and whistling softly through his teeth.

The courtyard was lonely, under the late afternoon sky. It looked across a lawn to a high barrier of beech trees, almost bare of leaves, moving slowly to and fro with a sighing sound, the yellow light showing through them. The chauffeur began to slap his hands again, bending closer over his paper.

Suddenly, from behind one of the columns, a little girl slowly walked out and advanced on the boy. She looked about twelve years old, and was dressed in a shabby brown coat with a white beret and black shoes and stockings, and in her arms she clasped the kitten, struggling and mewing thinly, pulling its claws down the front of her coat. She held it firmly with her little hands, hidden in rather dirty white woollen gloves. Her face was small and pale and pointed and seemed to have no features but large light brown eyes. The boy took no notice of her until she was at his side, then he looked up, surprised.

"Excuse me," she said very quietly in a thin, faintly cockney voice, "but please could you lend me sixpence?"

He stared at her. She returned the stare with a steady, polite look while her hands stroked the struggling kitten.

"What for?" he inquired at last, in a fresh charming drawl.

"To get home with."

"Haven't you got any money?"

She shook her head. The kitten made a violent movement, and suddenly scratched her thin wrist where

glove and coat sleeve met and drew blood, then wriggled down and darted off sideways over the courtyard, tail on end. Both children turned their heads slightly to watch it go.

"Mean to say," he demanded incredulously, "you came out without a dime in your pocket?"

"Oh, no," she explained eagerly, coming a little nearer and sucking her scratched wrist while her light brown eyes looked at him across her glove. "I did have a shilling for my birthday but I spent it." She held up a packet of the postcards sold inside the mansion. "I got these. I've only got a penny left now, and I live at Highbury and it costs twopence to get there and I thought I'd get some hot chestnuts on the way back, as I'm rather hungry. I didn't have any tea. Or any dinner."

"Gosh!" he interrupted, admiration and pity in his voice. "You must be hungry, I guess."

"Yes, I am," she said. She added proudly, "I feel sick, I'm so hungry."

He looked impressed at this but also rather embarrassed. The chauffeur had put down his paper and was staring idly across at them.

"Haven't your folks any money?" muttered the boy, diving into his pocket and not looking at her.

"I've only got Dad. My father, I mean. He gave me the shilling. I haven't got any mother."

She said the last words in the quietest possible voice, looking down at the ground.

"Gee, I'm sorry. That's bad. Say, you'd better have a shilling so's you can buy something to eat as well. Oh, go on ..." (as she shook her head, murmuring: "Sixpence'll do, truly") ... "do have it!" And he held out a coin to her between the forefinger and thumb of his thick fur-lined glove.

She took it, and peeled back her own glove and carefully fitted the coin into her palm and pulled the glove over it.

once more, but all the time she kept her eyes fixed on his face.

"Thanks *very* much. I'll send it back to you. You give me your name and address, and I promise honour bright I'll send it back, you see'f I don't."

"I don't want you to do that, honest I don't. You must be a crazy kid spending your birthday money on a lot of old postcards. I'll give it to you, that's what. For a birthday present."

"Thanks. I'm most awfully bucked," she said carefully, as though repeating something she had heard someone else say. They stared at one another for a second or two in silence. Then she said:

"I say, what's your name? And where d'you live?"

"Robert Vorst. And I live in America and I'm going back home there to-morrow, and am I glad! Oh, boy!" He did a quick little double-shuffle, expertly neat and pleasing to watch.

"What part of America?" she persisted.

"Vine Falls. That's in Paul County, New Leicester. Say, I must go. There's my mother. Hope you get home safe. G'd-bye."

He was running off to join two ladies who came out through the doors of the mansion at that moment, and who were looking round the courtyard as if in search of him, when he turned back. The little girl, who had half-retreated behind the column again, saw the last of the daylight on his fair face as he called to her:

"What's *your* name, Limey?"

"Amy Lee," she called softly, putting her own little face round the column so that it caught in its turn the last of the yellow light. A plait of dark hair slipped slowly over her shoulder and hung there, swinging, as she leant forward.

"Bob!" called one of the ladies, in a slow sweet drawl, getting into the car with a display of apricot silk stockings above the knee, "How many times have I told you not to

use that word? Where have you been? We've been looking for you all over. Come right along now, this minute." But she did not sound cross.

Amy Lee heard the boy protesting something that sounded like: "Dan says it," and then he followed the two ladies into the car, and the chauffeur shut the door and reseated himself. The car began slowly to move.

The boy sat opposite to the two ladies. He was looking across at Amy where she stood with one arm round the column and her plait swinging over her shoulder, and as she watched him, he pulled off his cap and waved it to her and for the first time he smiled. His hair was thick and fair and longer than an English boy's and one lock fell over his forehead, but at that distance she could not see the colour of his eyes.

The car turned the corner, and was gone.

At once the courtyard was twice as lonely and quiet. The kitten was over in a far corner by one of the grey brick wings of the house, chasing a leaf, and Amy went over and made one or two attempts to catch it, but it easily avoided her. She stood and watched it for a little while, the leaves whirling round her feet with their dry sound. A man came out of the house and locked the door, glancing indifferently over at her as he did so, then went away towards the old stables that had been turned into tea rooms.

The yellow gleam in the west had gone, and it was beginning to get dusk. She carefully turned up the collar of her coat round her thin little neck, murmuring something, then put her hands in her pockets and walked quickly away.

She went round to the right of the house, past the garden with dead brown roses on the bushes, and through a tunnel covered with ivy. At the end of this tunnel, in the valley, the lake gleamed dully. One swan glided slowly over the water, hardly seeming to move. She stopped in the twilight of the tunnel, where the wind blew coldly, to stare for a while at the swan, then walked on.

Along the empty terrace she went, where the beech leaves were blowing. The long windows of the house were shuttered now, and against the white wood it could be seen that some of them had pale purple glass. That was pretty; she stopped to admire it, then went on. She was not exactly hurrying, but she was such a light-stepping child that it was difficult to imagine her walking slowly or dawdling; her movement was like that of the running leaves themselves. Sometimes she stared at the wall of beeches beyond the lake, where flocks of pigeons, dark against the sky and pale against the trees, were settling down for the night. There were two people walking along the path by the lake, but that was all. The scene was as lonely as it was beautiful; it might have been in any romantic, faraway place rather than on the edge of London slums. Amy stared at the swan again, then at the low, slow-moving clouds, then suddenly drove both hands into her pockets, shook her plait over her shoulder, gave an excited little prance, and began to run. She held the coin the boy had given her tightly in her palm, and as she ran she whistled very softly in time to her running, a tune she had heard at the pictures and named to herself, "The Cowboy's Rescue." Down the terrace she flew, feeling her feet pushing the ground away behind her. *She* was the cowboy, riding to rescue someone, and behind her rode the enemy on fiery mustangs! She glanced sideways at the grass, temptingly green in the low evening light, but shook her head, muttering again.

When she came out of the grounds of Kenwood House she turned away from the Heath, which now lay spread beneath her. The valleys and hillocks were blue-green and the trees were dark brown on this dull yet clear evening, above the lights of London already sparkling in the valley far below. She went on until she came out into a quiet road where big houses stood back in large gardens, and then up a steep hill, skipping as she went along under the

darkening sky with the shilling and the penny safe in the palm of her glove.

It had been a nice day to-day, and the nicest thing that had happened had been speaking to that boy from America. Now I've spoken to an American, she thought. I know how they talk. She tried to imitate the way he had spoken, repeating *Robert* (Somebody; the unfamiliar name in the unusual accent had defeated her), *Vine Falls, Paul County, New Leicester*, but found the intonation too difficult. When I get home, she thought, I'll have my supper, and read *The Gold Bug*, and look up Vine Falls on the atlas ... *oh!* It's Saturday. Father'll be home. I can't. The disappointment made her stop dead for a moment. Then she murmured a few words, as though reassuring an invisible companion, and went slowly on, past the playing fields of Highgate School, up to Highgate Village.

She had been fascinated by the unfamiliar American voices as the party got out of the car, and had followed the two ladies and the boy as they toured the mansion. There were some other people going round as well, and no one took any notice of Amy, who was not a pretty or attractive child. Unnoticed in the little group, she had been able to stare at the Americans as much as she liked. The ladies were not a bit English-looking. Their feet were so small and pretty, and their clothes were different, somehow, from English clothes, and they asked so many questions and seemed more interested than anyone else. They were quite old, but the one the little boy called Aunt Carol was awfully pretty, with the biggest blue eyes Amy had ever seen. The boy's mother was not so pretty, but she looked very kind. She called him "son," and once she put her little hand on his shoulder when she wanted him to look at one of the pictures.

But he soon got tired of going round, and loitered behind. Once he had poked a bed with one finger, and said "Gee!" Amy waited until he had dawdled into the next

room, then she emerged from an alcove where she had been lurking and poked the bed in her turn, but could not see why he had said "Gee!" She would have liked to ask him, but was afraid to.

They all three seemed so happy and rich-looking (the Aunt-Carol-one had a lovely diamond brooch on her blouse) that Amy could not stop looking at them, and when the boy at last slipped away and out into the yard, she had followed him. His queer clothes and handsome untroubled young face had attracted her so strongly that she felt she must speak to him. He looked so happy! I'm sure he has a lovely time, thought Amy, watching him from behind the pillar. He's looking cross now, because he didn't like the pictures, but he has a happy look, really. I expect he goes coasting, and lives in one of those old brownstone houses they have in my American books at home.

Then she began to imagine herself asking him to lend her sixpence to get home with, and before she knew that she meant to ... moving forward as if in a dream ... she really *was* asking him.

She often imagined herself doing things, and then did them, like that.

Here was Highgate Village, with all the little old shops lit up. It stood on the highest hilltop for miles. Amy was always glad when the Number 11 tram got to the bottom of Highgate Hill in case it ran away faster and faster, and fell at last into the twinkling, sparkling mass of lights at the bottom.

There was a Number 11 waiting now. She ran, and climbed hastily up to the top; and then of course it did not go for quite a long time. She was the only passenger, and she was content to sit there staring out of the window, now dashed with big rain drops, in a dream. Her head felt funny, but that was only because she was hungry, and it was all right, there was a cold fried herring at home, and some milk and four uncooked sausages. I shall fry up the herring



and buy a bottle of Ka-Ola, she decided, with my shilling. He did say I was to buy something to eat. I should like to keep it, really, as it was a present from the only American I've ever spoken to, but I did ask him to lend it me so's I could get home and buy some chestnuts, so it wouldn't be fair to keep it. But Ka-Ola would count as chestnuts, really, because it's a sort of food. She rolled down her glove to make sure the shilling was still there.

It was there, but it was not a shilling. Instead of the King's Head, an utterly unfamiliar one confronted her ... the savage profile of a Red Indian, his plaited hair dressed with feathers, and above his arched nose the tiny word LIBERTY. Bewildered, she turned the coin over and stared at the humped shoulders of a bison with horned and bearded head, bent towards the words Five Cents. And over the bison's back, in a curve, the words UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Amy's first feeling was bitterest disappointment, but not because she would now have to walk half-way home and go without her Ka-Ola.

"He did it on purpose!" she muttered furiously, tears rushing to her eyes. "It was a horrid, beastly *joke*. Just the kind of thing a *boy* would think funny!"

She dashed the coin on the dirty floor.

"Here ... here ... what's all this?" demanded the conductor, who had come up unseen behind her. "Throw-in' money about. What's the matter with it?"

"Someone gave it me, and I thought it was a shilling," she muttered, stooping to pick it up.

"Serves you right for not lookin' at it when they gave it you. Always count your change, always look at a bit of money before you put it in your bag, then you can't go far wrong. Here, let's see."

She held it out, not very near. She did not want him to handle it. Already she felt sure that the American boy had only made a mistake, not been unkind.

But he took it from her and turned it round in his tired-looking, dirty hands.

"Kind of an American coin, that would be," he said at last. "Who gave it you?"

"A friend," she said, looking up at him with a polite, steady expression. It was the look she always put on when she was lying. "A lady," she added, not too hastily.

"Sure it wasn't a gentleman?" snapped the conductor, suddenly cross. "Now you get off my tram, and quick. Tryin' to get a ride for nothing, I know your sort. Go on, be off with you, or I'll fetch the inspector."

She got up, without hurry, and followed him down the stairs. She would wait for the next tram and take a penny ride to Holloway Arcade and walk the rest of the way.

In a few minutes she was rocking down the hill through the rain that dashed furiously in crystal streaks against the glass. This conductor was all right, he took her penny without a word. She had waited until the first tram had gone so that the cross conductor should not tell any other conductor about it.

She loved riding on top of trams, but now she was so very hungry that the movement made her feel sick. Never mind (she murmured), I'll soon be home. If only Dad isn't in.

The coin was again tucked in her glove. Now I shall keep it, she decided, because it won't be a temptation to spend it. And after all, it was a present. He said so.

She got off the tram at the Holloway Arcade and set out on the walk along Holloway Road to Highbury Fields, where she lived. It was not far, and she walked along so quickly and lightly that she almost ran, the cold rain beating in her face. No one bumped into her—she saw to that—but it was tiring dodging people, and once a car nearly ran her down when she crossed a road. Everyone shouted at her, looking frightened and furious. Her head felt queerer and queerer, but she took no notice of that, and

as usual, enjoyed the walk. She took in the golden windows of the shops, the cold winter smell of the celery piled outside a greengrocer's, the lovely face of Dolores Costello gazing out dreamily from a cinema hoarding. Amy loved walking in London; yet hardly knew that she loved it. She never said she did, or walked when she might ride, but when once she drifted into one of her long walks through the streets she was utterly happy. Unnoticed as a leaf, hands in pockets, she moved lightly along, in a dream, but a dream in which she noticed a thousand funny or frightening or pretty things and people.

At the pub called The Hen and Chickens she crossed over, turned down Corsica Street and left the trams and buses and bright shops behind, went along Calabria-road, then through Baalbec Road into Highbury Place. Here the Fields faced her, their tall trees behind a railing shining silver with the wet.

The Fields are an open space shaped like a half-heart, and surrounded by Highbury Crescent and Highbury Place, two rows of tall, early nineteenth century houses of dark brown brick with elegant details in their fanlights, railings and balconies. There is plenty of life in the Fields, for the National School boys play football there and babies are brought from the poorer streets to sun-bathe and enjoy the bit of green, but the houses have the spell of the past on them.

Amy went down Highbury Walk, where there are two or three quiet little shops, and stopped at one with "D. Beeding, Baker and Confectioner" over it. This was where she lived.

She peered in through the window of the shop before going on to the door at the side, which was ajar. Mrs. Beeding was there, leaning forward over the counter with her hands spread out on the bleached wood and talking to a pretty, dark woman who was just going out carrying a wrapped loaf. Amy slipped in as the woman came out.

"Hullo, Amy ... good night, then, Mrs. Flower," said Mrs. Beeding, sitting down again on a broad chair close to a brightly burning oil stove and starting to knit. "'Ave yer had a nice birthday, luv?"

"Very nice, thank you, Mrs. Beeding. Is Dad in?" She looked intently at Mrs. Beeding.

"He's oopstairs. It's all right, luv." Mrs. Beeding glanced up, nodding calmly. "I've got the rent. He gave it to me the minute he come in, and he's all right, too. You go on oop. Here's a few cakes for you. Custard tarts, they are, for your birthday." She nodded towards a paper bag on the counter. "Did yer see the pictures, luv?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Beeding." Amy picked up the bag, opened it and sniffed delicious hot vanilla from the warm tarts. "Thank you *very much* for these."

"And were they pretty?"

"Yes, very pretty."

"That's right. Now you run on upstairs, Amy. Mona'll bring up the letters if there's any for you. Good night, luv."

"Good night, Mrs. Beeding, and thank you *very much* for the tarts."

The shining cleanliness of the shop, the bright flame of the oil stove, the lightness of the pastries, the calmness of Mrs. Beeding's pink face and the neatness of her bobbed hair and fat body were all explained the instant that she spoke by her voice. It was a patronizing yet comfortingly competent voice, subduing rebellion almost before it had started, dismissing ghosts, looking Life straight in the eye and asking it what it thought it was up to now, taking obedience, cleanness and self-respect for granted like the daylight. It was the voice of Yorkshire.

Mrs. Beeding was within two months of having her fifth child. She was forty-seven years old, thickly built even when she was not going to have a baby, with straight yellow hair, a firm little mouth and small bright grey eyes. She was not pretty to look at, but she was surprisingly satisfying.

She wore a dark blue dress and a large concealing print overall, with a white collar that set off her pink cheeks. Her complexion was her only weakness. She put Stuff on it at night. None of her children knew what the Stuff was. Gran up in Yorkshire had given the recipe to Mum years ago, and Mum made some more Stuff whenever she wanted it. Mona, the younger girl, who had spots, was as sarcastic about Mum and her Stuff as she dared be.

Mrs. Beeding, strong as a horse, was pleased about the new baby, for the youngest boy was now five and the Beedings were beginning to feel the lack of a baby in the house. Dora, who was nineteen and worked as junior typist in a firm of sherry importers in the City, had said at first that it really was the limit, Mum having another at her age; but now even Dora was more pleased than shocked about the baby. The Beedings enjoyed babies.

Amy went slowly up the dark stairs. Her head felt so swimmy that she had to hang on to the banisters to keep herself from falling down while she carefully, without hurry, packed her mouth with custard tart. As soon as she had swallowed one she crammed her mouth again, walking slowly upstairs all the time, past long windows showing the dark brown sky of London's night, and closed doors whose white handles glimmered in the dimness. The house smelled clean, but stuffy and old. On the top landing as she finished the last tart, she opened the door of the three rooms that were her home.

Her father was dozing over *The Star* in an armchair by the gas stove, and started awake at the sound of the door opening.

"Hullo, where've you been?" he asked, flinging his arms above his head, his long legs out, and the paper all over the floor in a tremendous, savage, prolonged yawn. "I came back specially to take you to the pictures. Want to come?"

"Oh, yes, please, Dad!"

"Don't call me Dad, there's a dear, good girl."

"Father, I mean. Sorry. Yes, I would, please, only I'd like my supper first."

"All right. It's only ... what is it?" glancing down at his bare wrist and then frowning. "Did you notice the shop clock as you came up?"

"It's half-past five."

"Plenty of time. We'll have supper and get to the Majestic (God help us) about seven. What's on there, d'you know?"

"It's *Beau Geste*," she answered at once, pausing at the door of her room and looking round at him, her face pink and her eyes bright with excitement.

"Not too bad. Get the supper, will you, there's a good monkey, I'm hungry." He picked up his paper again.

Amy hurried to change her frock. It was nearly a month since she had been to the pictures. This was certainly being a good birthday! At breakfast he had given her a shilling (of course it had come out of his watch-pawning money, and that was worrying; it meant he had been betting on that dog-racing again, but he would get it out again next Friday when he was paid), and now *Beau Geste*!

When she came back she wore a teacloth tied firmly round the waist of her dark blue gym tunic and the sleeves of her white blouse were rolled up. She had changed into rubber shoes and brushed her hair, parted in the middle of a high round creamy forehead, and put on a worn but still brilliant silk necktie striped with dark red, pale blue, and rich dark green. Presently her father stopped skimming the paper and sat watching her as she went between the living-room and the tiny kitchen opening off it; a plain, queer little gnome of a girl.

She's too small for her age, he thought. Wants feeding up. Oh God, I can't help it. She'll have to take her chance. Millions of children grow up and get themselves through life. She's Edie's responsibility, not mine. I never wanted a child.

One of the horrible waves of misery that burst over him when he thought of his dead wife came on him now, and he got up, because it was not possible to bear it if he sat still, and went into his room and drew the curtains and pulled the quilt over the rumped bed. He had been asleep all the afternoon.

He was a tall, fair, slim man of thirty-eight, but looking much younger, whose face was so weak and desolate (as though he had not one strong idea or happy thought behind it) that he was hardly attractive any more. But it was plain that ten years ago he had been beautiful, when his curly mouth had laughed instead of looking sulky, before his blue eyes became bloodshot. His profile was still fine and his gilt hair, receding rapidly now from a high forehead, kept its curl.

He had been born a gentleman; and to keep him a gentleman and to fit him to get himself through life, some two thousand pounds had been spent. He now earned six pounds a week as a seller of advertising space on that old-fashioned but modestly prosperous paper for boys, *The Prize*, and nothing was left to show for the two thousand pounds but this: he was a gentleman still. This fact was a comfort to no one but himself, and not much to him. It helped him to get a job with *The Prize*, where the quality was valued, but it did not help him to sell advertising space and it made him dislike being called Dad in Amy's thin, faintly cockney voice.

He always thought about Amy's voice immediately after a wave of wretchedness had drenched him, and he was thinking about it as he came back into the sitting-room. It's the people she's always with, he thought, sitting down again. Nasal little rats at that appalling school, Mona Beeding always in and out of the place ... she never hears a decent accent except mine from one year to the next. Oh, well ... I can't help it. Or I suppose I could but I'm — if I've got the energy.

Amy had fried the sausages with some bread and put the kettle on and opened a tin of loganberries. Now she would have a nicer supper than she had planned, because, if he had not been in, she would have had to save the sausages for his breakfast. If only nothing awful happened, this would be almost the nicest day since Mother. ...

She breathed in, quickly, exactly as though she had bitten on an aching tooth, but continued to pour the boiling water steadily into the teapot. Just for a minute she had forgotten. She went across to the cupboard and got out the milk jug and rinsed it, very carefully and slowly to stop herself from thinking that on her last birthday her mother had been alive.

"You still hang on to that old thing of mine," said her father, noticing her necktie with some amusement. The colours were those of the rowing club at his old college. "It's in ribbons."

"It's pretty," she said. "Prettier than ours. The school one, I mean."

"Christ, so I should hope."

"The Old Girls is quite pretty. It's dark brown and light brown and pale yellow."

"Charming," he said, yawning and staring at the window with a dreary, bored expression.

"It's ready," said Amy, in a few minutes.

They sat down and began to eat.

The room was long and low, with two big windows and a cheap creamy wallpaper. The floor was stained and inadequately covered by three long Persian rugs, their colours almost worn away. The table they sat at was a good piece of late Victorian mahogany, stained with hot plate marks, but the sofa and two swollen armchairs were Early Hire Purchase; and the smaller chairs were imitation ladderbacks, varnished shiny brown like the ugly circular bookshelf beside the gas stove. There was not enough



furniture in the room, and the bright orange curtains over the windows increased the desolate, temporary look.

But the pictures had been chosen by someone who had liked them. There was a reproduction of a crowded, brilliant battle scene with much red and blue in it by some Italian master, a branch laden with flowers, birds and snow against a grey sky by a Japanese, and a large coloured print of ladies and gentlemen in Victorian dress skating against a yellow sunset with a bonfire burning.

The house was very quiet. The gas stove hissed and faint cries came up sometimes from the distant streets.

"Well, what was Kenwood House like?" he asked at last, making conversation with an effort.

"Very pretty," said Amy, her cheeks exactly the colour of a pink cyclamen petal from the hot tea and sausage and good bread and butter. "It's very big, you know, and there are a lot of famous pictures there."

"You're an extraordinary child. What made you want to go off there by yourself?"

"They told us about it at school," she explained, "And Miss Eckeridge, the drawing mistress, said we ought to go and see it."

"They ought to have got up one of their highly cultural expeditions. More fun for you than going by yourself."

"P'raps they will next term," she said, giving him her polite, steady look instead of answering that they had, but that she had purposely not gone with it. He would have paid for her to go if she had asked him, but she hated going to places with a lot of people. She liked the sound of Kenwood House; but had decided to go there alone on her birthday, which was most fortunately a Saturday, and that was exactly what she had done. She hoped he would say no more about it, and he did not.

While they were eating the loganberries Amy began to think about *Beau Geste* and how lovely it would be. (She always enjoyed only one nice thing at a time, so as to get

the best out of it in case something dreadful happened and spoiled it.) Supper was nearly over without a row or him saying anything about her cockney accent, and there would not be much to enjoy on the walk to the cinema, so now she could allow herself to think about *Beau Geste*.

Nothing could stop them going to it, now, surely; it was nearly seven o'clock and in ten minutes, after she had cleared away, they would go. Nothing ... (she went quickly in her mind through all the things that might stop them going) ... nothing ... *Oh, suppose that beastly, horrible old Mr. Porteous is home this week?*

It would have surprised Mr. Porteous (known to the Boys as Porty) even more than it would have enraged him to hear himself called horrible, beastly and old, for he was only sixty and saw himself as a rich-natured, generous, warm-hearted man in the prime, bringing a leaven of colour and guts into the not-so-good lives of the Highbury boys and the Canonbury boys, and sometimes the Islington and Angel boys. Wherever the boys were, there was Mr. Porteous; old Porty, always up to something, Porty was; make you — laughing, Porty could. Heard Porty's latest, boys?

The girls of Highbury, Canonbury, Islington and the Angel did not like old Porty at all, but seldom dared to tell their husbands as much. Porty only knew one way of spending money. Rent, doctor, shoes, school fees, food, light, heat ... Porty never thought about money in connection with them. He was employed by a small firm which was trying to put a new brand of women's artificial silk underclothes on the market, having been given the job because, said his employers, he had just the convincing, jolly yet clean sales-talk which would get all the old girls who ran little haberdashery shops in the outer suburbs.

Old Porty, who was unmarried, was sometimes away for a week travelling, and sometimes at home doing the new suburbs like Mill Hill and Edgware; and the chief horror

the Highbury girls had to cope with was never knowing which week he would be at home and able to pop in. Amy, like all the other girls whose boys were acquainted with old Porty, did not know whether he was at home this week; and suddenly dreaded that he would pop in and carry off her father before they could get away to the pictures. Her father sometimes called old Porty a filthy fellow, but he always seemed amused to see him.

She began to clear away very quickly, listening tensely for the bell or footsteps on the stairs, while her father lit a cigarette and changed his shoes.

Below in the rainy darkness Old Porty's car advanced cheerfully towards Highbury Walk.

Mrs. Beeding glanced up from her knitting as it drew up outside the shop, got up without haste (there was plenty of time; he always fiddled with the car), and walked clumsily into the dark passage and quietly shut the door. Then she stood there, listening. Presently the Lee's bell rang. Mrs. Beeding quickly opened the door and confronted Old Porty. He wore a very light tweed overcoat, a red scarf with horseshoes on it, and his hat on the back of his head.

"Hullo there! It's all the same in the dark, as the nigger said to the nun!" roared Porty, peering at Mrs. Beeding to see who she was and hoping she was her daughter Mona. "Oh ... Mrs. Beeding. Evening! Beastly night, isn't it? Beg your pardon ... didn't mean to bring you up to the door. Mr. Lee in?"

"I was passing," said Mrs. Beeding. "No. He's gone to the pictures with the little girl." (Tim had mentioned earlier in the evening that he wanted to take Amy out when asking his landlady if she knew where Amy was.)

"Oh, well, never mind, never mind. Just popped in," said Porty, and was going away again without a trace of disappointment (the world is full of boys), when voices and footsteps were heard coming down the stairs.

"Good night," said Mrs. Beeding, beginning to shut the door.

But it was too late.

"Hullo, Tiger!" roared Porty, as Tim and Amy came down into the hall. "Just caught you, you old bu ... sorry, ladies, that was a near thing, wasn't it! Ma here said you'd gone off to the pictures."

"We're just on our way," said Tim, rather disagreeably.

"I'll run you round, and we can drop in at the Chickens and have a quick one on the way. How's that? How's Amy to-night, eh?" And Porty gave her pigtail a spiteful wrench. He hated quiet, dull little girls of twelve. He did not mind them so much at about fourteen, especially if they were on the plump side.

"It's her birthday," said Tim, glancing down at his daughter. Poor monkey, she looked pretty sick, though she was trying not to. "But we've time for a quick one."

"In you get." Porty invitingly opened the door of the car, which smelled of stale tobacco smoke, and off they went.

"Just a quick one at the Chickens," said Porty. "Ju-u-u-u-ust a leetle quick one, eh, Tiger?"

"All right."

Amy sat at the back of the car, trying not to look at Porty's wicked old face in the little mirror over his head. It was just visible in the dim light from the streets lamps; his greying eyebrows of long coarse hair and his cruel little eyes almost hidden in their deep sockets and his hooked nose and buttoned-in little mouth which twisted sideways when he laughed. His face was bright purple red.

He's my idea of an ogre, thought Amy. Not a giant; they have beards and you can imagine them being kind. Ogre. He just exactly fits the word.

She began to think what she would do when she got home, to make up for missing *Beau Geste*. I can put away the coin that the American boy gave me in my box, and look

up Vine Falls on the Atlas and start another chapter of *The Wolf of Leningrad*. Yes, that's what I'll do.

They stopped outside The Hen and Chickens.

Twenty minutes later, while Mrs. Beeding was locking up the shop for the night, she heard the side door open.

"Amy? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Beeding."

Amy came and stood in the doorway that led from the passage into the shop. Her pale little face was expressionless.

"Never mind, luv." Mrs. Beeding put a sheet of muslin over a tray of jam tarts. "You and Mona go next week, when you get your pocket-money. Mona's going. It's Pola Negri in *Barbed Wire*."

"Yes, that sounds lovely," said Amy, politely.

"Didn't yer wait at all, luv?" Mrs. Beeding pulled down the blind across the window.

"Oh, no. I knew he wouldn't come out till closing time."

"Never you mind, luv. Have yer got a nice book to read?"

"Yes, thank you."

"That's right. Good night, then, Amy."

"Good night, Mrs. Beeding, and thank you for the custard tarts. They were *lovely*."

Mrs. Beeding went slowly downstairs and Amy went slowly up. The house was full of the delicious smell of freshly baked bread; Mr. Beeding was already at work in the bakehouse.

Back in the living-room, she re-lit the gas stove, drew the curtains more closely, pulled a chair up to the table and fetched a glass of water from the kitchen, then went into her own room to take off her hat and coat.

It was a small room, with one large window, covered by a faded purple curtain, overlooking large gardens with big trees. The floor had been painstakingly stained with permanganate of potash which was beginning to wear off and there was a blue rug beside the iron bedstead, a

kitchen table for Amy's mirror, brush and comb, and a battered wardrobe, painted white, for her clothes. It was a shabby little room, but every object there looked as though the owner loved it; and the patchy yellow walls blazed with pictures, carefully cut out and pasted on sheets of white paper. There were pictures from advertisements, fashion plates, magazine covers and travel pamphlets, all widely differing in subject but all gorgeously coloured and exciting or beautiful. She had an affectionate, refreshing look at them while she changed her shoes. Then she took from the back of the wardrobe, from behind her school hat, a penny bottle of purple ink, a purple pen, and a brown exercise book. On the cover was neatly printed

THE WOLF OF LENINGRAD  
A Thrilling Story of  
The Russian Revolution

She carried these into the next room, arranged them on the table, and sat down in front of them. Then she sighed deeply, uncorked the ink, dipped the pen into it, and slowly began to write.

The room was very quiet. Sometimes the child stretched out her wrist as though to rest it, or took a sip of water from the glass. Her little hand moved slowly, tracing the characters as though she loved doing it.

Presently she said, without looking up and in a voice quite different from her usual one, deeper, slow and absorbed:

"Mother."

She paused just long enough for someone sitting reading to look up and answer:

*"What, my pet?"*

"I've done the bit about Tamara rescuing Ivan. Would you like to hear?"