

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Book

When the great statesman Lord Slane dies, everyone assumes his dutiful wife will slowly fade away, the paying guest of each of her six children. But Lady Slane surprises everyone by escaping to a rented house in Hampstead where she revels in her new freedom, revives youthful ambitions and gathers some very unsuitable companions. Irreverent, entertaining and insightful, this is a tale of the unexpected joys of growing older.

About the Author

Victoria Mary Sackville-West, known as Vita, was born in 1892 at Knole in Kent, the only child of aristocratic parents. In 1913 she married diplomat Harold Nicolson, with whom she had two sons and travelled extensively before settling at Sissinghurst Castle in 1930, where she devoted much of her time to creating its now worldfamous garden. Throughout her life Sackville-West had a number of other relationships with both men and women, and her unconventional marriage would later become the subject of a biography written by her son Nigel Nicolson. Though she produced a substantial body of work, amongst which are writings on travel and gardening, Sackville-West is best known for her novels *The Edwardians* (1930) and All Passion Spent (1931), and for the pastoral poem The Land (1926) which was awarded the prestigious Hawthornden Prize. She died in 1962 at Sissinghurst.

ALSO BY VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

Novels

Heritage
The Dragon in Shallow Waters
The Heir
Challenge
Seducers in Ecuador
The Edwardians
Family History
Grand Canyon

Non-Fiction

Passenger to Teheran Saint Joan of Arc English Country Houses Pepita The Eagle and The Dove Sissinghurst: The Creation of a Garden

VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

All Passion Spent

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY Joanna Lumley

VINTAGE

For Benedict and Nigel who are young This story of people who are old

His servants he with new acquist Of true experience from this great event With peace and consolation hath dismist, And calm of mind, all passion spent.

Samson Agonistes

Introduction

It is always exciting to join a story just as a tumultuous event occurs, in this case the death of a distinguished statesman, Lord Slane, paterfamilias beyond reproach, whose rather ghastly children are themselves already of advanced years, and whose widow ('Mother is wonderful') is widely held to have 'lived only for Father' and to have 'no will of her own'. We have all been there: the hushed voices and changed behaviour of families at death's bedside, trite sentiments veiling underlying anxieties about one's own life being inconvenienced and altered. There is a rustle of expectation about who will be left what, who shall own the jewels, who will benefit from the money, 'the loot', that will have been left. There is the dilemma of who should take responsibility for the bereaved relict, who for the few days between death and funeral is of paramount importance but thereafter becomes an encumbrance.

Although published in 1931, *All Passion Spent* could have been written yesterday, so sharp and relevant are the observations about an old person, in Lady Slane's case eighty-eight years old, who must be cared for as her own days dwindle down. She must be kept safe, and at a convenient distance to visit – perhaps she should be shunted about regularly so that each of her offspring can help to share the burden. When Lady Slane decides to follow her heart to a house in Hampstead, and live there alone with her devoted and ancient French maid Genoux, it is like a window opening into a different world – a world very shocking to her children. Only Edith, her youngest daughter, thinks her mother 'not mad, but most conspicuously sane'. Edith, the most sympathetic of the tribe, is Lady Slane's favourite child, along with Kay, a strange bachelor figure

obsessed with globes, compasses and astrolabes, who cherishes his solitary monkish existence, enlivened by dinners at the club with odd Mr FitzGeorge. The family members are drawn with a keen eye for the absurd, and yet is recognisable circle in one our own acquaintances. Sackville-West writes simply wonderfully and many passages make me laugh out loud, for example Lady Slane's first glimpse of Mr Bucktrout as he taps the imaginary barometer on the wall of her new home. Others are utterly beautiful: the butterflies flittering around the carriage as the Slanes travelled through the Persian desert. 'All tiny things, contemptibly tiny things, ennobled only by their vast background, the background of Death.'

As Lady Slane travels to view the property she remembers so well, even though she last saw it thirty years before, she begins her reveries: memories of her past are punctuated by the stations on the Underground, as she passes from the respectable streets of South Kensington into what was then a remote village in north London. The delight that the house inspires in her is infectious; how strange that Vita Sackville-West aged only thirty-eight should have such a clear grasp of an old woman's yearnings. I am halfway between her age when she wrote the book and that of her delicious protagonist, and already I am longing for my own version of her shabby red-brick Georgian house, with its big windows and intruding ivy tendrils, its sunshine and her unexpected and charming companions, Mr Bucktrout, the owner, and Mr Gosheran, the splendid old jack-of-all-trades.

The house is repaired and decorated, and Lady Slane's own life unfolds as she daydreams under the peach tree in the south-facing garden; a character emerges that is very different from the passively serene Vicereine of India known to the outside world. Inside her, waiting to escape but never doing so, is a shy tomboy, a girl who longs to paint, to cut off her hair and dress like a boy, but who somehow stumbles into marriage and hears the door slam forever on her

ambitions and hopes. Even though she understands the extent of the sacrifices she will have to make, expectations are such that she feels there is no other choice open to her:

She supposed that she was not in love with Henry, but, even had she been in love with him, she could see therein no reason for foregoing the whole of her own separate existence. Henry was in love with her, but no one proposed that he should forego his. On the contrary, it appeared that in acquiring her he was merely adding something extra to it ... he would continue to enjoy his free, varied, and masculine life, with no ring upon his finger or difference in his name to indicate the change in his estate; but whenever he felt inclined to come home she must be there ... and even if he beckoned her across the world she must follow ... Her ambitions, her secret existence, all had given way.

Lady Slane becomes 'an appendage' to her husband on marriage, always falling in line with his wishes; a way of life which in her own marriage Vita Sackville-West chose to reject. Vita, in contrast to her fictional heroine, kept her own name, and although she too was married to a diplomat, Harold Nicolson, her writing remained her professional priority. Instead of travelling abroad with her husband on his diplomatic assignments, she chose to remain at home in order to pursue her own career. Eventually Vita persuaded Harold to abandon his diplomatic career entirely so that he was able to stay in England with her. The role of women was a burning issue of the day, and Lady Slane's situation reflects many of the concerns raised in the feminist essay *A Room of One's Own*, written by Vita's friend and lover Virginia Woolf, and published only two years before.

'She never laid brush to canvas', it is true, but when Lady Slane was discovered arranging flowers on the floor in the vice-regal residency in India, with her small son in a cot

beside her, she was engrossed in her painterly placing of colours and shapes (later reflected in Mr Bucktrout's own offerings of flowers in the Hampstead house). Vita Sackville-West's own talents as a gardener seem to fill the pages with a peculiar visual brilliance, as bright as her observations on human behaviour. The revelation that Lady Slane's son's friend, the eccentric and miserly Mr FitzGeorge, was part of her young life comes as a shock, for he too was a different man in those far-off days, when a chance encounter with the beautiful young vicereine as she knelt arranging flowers altered his life forever. He, with a keen collector's eye, loves and amasses things of beauty, but is obsessed by their value; she, like Mr Bucktrout, just loves beauty for itself. He re-enters her life in the most unexpected manner, altering her last months in a way that brings her companionship and a new fortune for her children to worry about.

Events and circumstances are shown as if in a fading photograph in an album, pored over as time ticks by for Lady Slane. A peaceful acceptance of the certainty of death comforts her, and her excellent friend Mr Bucktrout, whose friendship she grows to treasure as much as her visits from Mr FitzGeorge, has philosophies which chime exactly with her own. She loved her husband, but does not miss him, does not miss the splendour of a life that was bounded only by the extent of the British Empire at its peak: horizons begin to shrink as you get older, desires fade away, and belongings become an encumbrance. Her memories parade before her eyes ceaselessly, and become more important than the actual world. By looking back she seems to be searching for an explanation of how her life turned out the way it did, so that she may be reconciled to it before death comes for her.

How marvellous and strange that a book which begins and ends with death should be so joyous and so wickedly funny. This is Vita Sackville-West writing at the height of her powers, and when I finish this introduction I shall pick up the book again and reread it immediately, savouring every sentence, sitting with Lady Slane as the afternoon sunlight slants through the windows into her cosy little drawing room, where she sits, all passion spent, dreaming of days gone by.

Joanna Lumley, 2011

Part One

Henry Lyulph Holland, first Earl of Slane, had existed for so long that the public had begun to regard him as immortal. The public, as a whole, finds reassurance in longevity, and, after the necessary interlude of reaction, is disposed to recognise extreme old age as a sign of excellence. The longliver has triumphed over at least one of man's initial handicaps: the brevity of life. To filch twenty years from eternal annihilation is to impose one's superiority on an allotted programme. So small is the scale upon which we arrange our values. It was thus with a start of real incredulity that City men, opening their papers in the train on a warm May morning, read that Lord Slane, at the age of ninety-four, had passed away suddenly after dinner on the previous evening, 'Heart failure,' they said sagaciously, though they were actually quoting from the papers; and then added with a sigh, 'Well, another old landmark gone.' That was the dominant feeling: another old landmark gone, another reminder of insecurity. All the events progressions of Henry Holland's life were gathered up and recorded in a final burst of publicity by the papers; they were gathered together into a handful as hard as a cricketball, and flung in the faces of the public, from the days of his 'brilliant university career,' through the days when Mr Holland, at an astonishingly early age, had occupied a seat in the Cabinet, to this very last day when as Earl of Slane, K.G., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., etc. etc. - his diminishing honours trailing away behind him like the tail of a comet drooped in his chair after dinner, and the accumulation of ninety years had receded abruptly into history. Time seemed to have made a little jump forward,

now that the figure of old Slane was no longer there with outstretched arms to dam it back. For some fifteen years he had taken no very active part in public life, but he had been there, and on occasion the irrefutable suavity, common sense, and mockery of his eloquence in Parliament had disturbed, though it could not actually arrest, his more extreme colleagues upon the brink of folly. pronouncements had been rare, for Henry Holland had always been a man to appreciate the value of economy, but by their very rarity they produced a wholesome sense of uneasiness, since men knew them to be backed up by a legend of experience: if the old man, the octogenarian, the nonagenarian, could bestir himself to the extent of stalking down to Westminster and unburdening himself, in his incomparable way, of opinions carefully, soberly, but cynically gestated, then the Press and the public were compelled into attention. Nobody had ever seriously attacked Lord Slane. Nobody had ever accused Lord Slane of being a back-number. His humour, his charm, his languor, and his good sense, had rendered him sacrosanct to all generations and to all parties; of him alone among statesmen and politicians, perhaps, could that be said. Perhaps, because he seemed to have touched life on every side, and yet never seemed to have touched life, the common life, at all, by virtue of his proverbial detachment, he had never drawn upon himself the execration and mistrust commonly accorded to the mere expert. Hedonist, humanist, sportsman, philosopher, scholar, charmer, wit; one of those rare Englishmen whose fortune it is to be born equipped with a truly adult mind. His colleagues and his subordinates had been alternately delighted and infuriated by his assumed reluctance to deal with any practical question. It was difficult to get a yes or a no out of the man. The more important a question was, the more flippantly he dealt with it. 'Yes,' he would write at the bottom of a memorandum setting forth the advantages of two opposite lines of policy; and his myrmidons passed their hands over their brows, distraught. He was destroyed as a statesman, they said, because he always saw both sides of the case; but even as they said it with exasperation, they did not mean it, for they knew that on occasion, when finally pushed into a corner, he would be more incisive, more deadly, than any man seated four-square and full of importance at a governmental desk. He could cast his eye over a report, and pick out its heart and its weakness before another man had had time to read it through. In his exquisitely courteous way, he would annihilate alike the optimism and the myopia of his correspondent. Courteous always, and civilised, he left his competitors dead.

His personal idiosyncrasies, too, were dear to the public as to the caricaturists; his black satin stock, his eyeglass swung on an extravagantly wide ribbon, the coral buttons to his evening waistcoat, the private hansom he maintained long after motors had come into fashion – by all this was he buttressed through the confused justice and injustice of legend; and when, at the age of eighty-five, he finally succeeded in winning the Derby, no man ever received a greater ovation. His wife alone suspected how closely those idiosyncrasies were associated with a settled policy. The least cynical of people by nature, she had learned to lay a veneer of cynicism over herself after seventy years' association with Henry Holland. 'Dear old man,' said the City men in the train; 'well, he's gone.'

He was gone indeed, very finally and irretrievably gone. So thought his widow, looking down at him as he lay on his bed in Elm Park Gardens. The blinds were not lowered, for he had always stipulated that when he came to die the house should not be darkened, and even after his death nobody would have dreamed of disobeying his orders. He lay there in the full sunlight, sparing the stone-mason the trouble of carving his effigy. His favourite great-grandchild, to whom everything was permitted, had often twitted him,

saying that he would make a handsome corpse; and now that the joke had become a reality, the reality gained in impressiveness for having been anticipated by a joke. His was the type of face which, even in life, one associates prophetically with the high dignity of death. The bony architecture of nose, chin, and temples, stood out in greater relief for the slight sinking of the flesh; the lips took a firmer line, and a lifetime of wisdom lay sealed behind them. Moreover, and most importantly, Lord Slane looked as soigné in death as he had looked in life. 'Here,' you would say, even though the bedclothes covered him, 'is a dandy.'

Yet, for all its dignity, death brought a revelation. The face which had been so noble in life lost a trifle of its nobility in death; the lips which had been too humorous to be unpleasantly sardonic now betrayed their thinness; the carefully concealed ambition now revealed itself fully in the proud curve of the nostril. The hardness which had disguised itself under the charming manner now remained alone, robbed of the protection of a smile. He was beautiful, but he was less agreeable. Alone in the room his widow contemplated him, filled with thoughts that would greatly have surprised her children, could they but have read her mind.

Her children, however, were not there to observe her. They were collected in the drawing-room, all six of them; two wives and a husband bringing the number up to nine. A sufficiently formidable family gathering – old, black ravens, thought Edith, the youngest, who was always flustered and always trying to confine things into the shape of a phrase, like pouring water into a ewer, but great gouts of meaning and implication invariably ran over and slopped about and were lost. To attempt to recapture them after they had spilt was as hopeless as trying to hold the water in your hand. Perhaps, if one had a notebook and pencil always ready – but then the thought would be lost while one was looking for the right word; and, moreover, it would be difficult to use a

notebook without everybody seeing. Shorthand? - but one must not let one's thoughts run on like this; one must discipline one's mind, keeping one's attention on the present matter, as other people seemed to do without any difficulty; though, to be sure, if one had not learnt that lesson by the time one was sixty, one was never likely to learn it. A formidable family gathering, thought Edith, coming back: Herbert, Carrie, Charles, William, and Kay; Mabel, Lavinia; Roland. They went in groups: the Hollands themselves, the sisters-in-law, the brother-in-law; then they sorted themselves differently: Herbert and Mabel, Carrie and Roland; Charles; William and Lavinia; and then Kay all by himself. It was not often that they all met together, none missing - curious, Edith thought, that Death should be the convener, as though all the living rushed instantly together for protection and mutual support. Dear me, how old we all are. Herbert must be sixty-eight, and I'm sixty; and Father was over ninety, and Mother is eighty-eight. Edith, who had begun making a sum of their total ages, surprised them all very much by asking, 'How old are you, Lavinia?' Thus taken aback, they rebuked Edith by their stare; but that was Edith all over, she never listened to what was being said, and then suddenly came out with some irrelevant remark. Edith could have told them that all her life she had been trying to say what she meant, and had never yet succeeded. Only too often, she said something precisely the opposite of what she wanted to say. Her terror was that she should one day use an indecent word by mistake. 'Isn't it splendid that Father is dead,' she might say, instead of, 'Isn't it terrible'; and there were other possibilities, even more appalling, by which one might use a really dreadful word, the sort of word that butcher-boys scrawled in pencil on the white-washed walls of the basement passage, and about which one had to speak, most evasively, to the cook. An unpleasant task; the sort of task that fell to Edith in Elm Park Gardens and to a