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published by Alma Classics

Between the Acts

Flush

Jacob's Room

Monday or Tuesday

Mrs Dalloway

Night and Day

Orlando

A Room of One's Own

To the Lighthouse

The Voyage Out

The Waves

The Years

IT WAS AN UNCERTAIN SPRING. The weather, perpetually changing, sent clouds of blue and of purple flying over the land. In the country farmers, looking at the fields, were apprehensive; in London umbrellas were opened and then shut by people looking up at the sky. But in April such weather was to be expected. Thousands of shop assistants made that remark, as they handed neat parcels to ladies in flounced dresses standing on the other side of the counter at Whiteleys and the Army & Navy Stores.* Interminable processions of shoppers in the West End, of businessmen in the east,* paraded the pavements, like caravans perpetually marching – so it seemed to those who had any reason to pause, say, to post a letter, or at a club window in Piccadilly. The stream of landaus, victorias and hansom cabs* was incessant, for the season was beginning.* In the quieter streets musicians doled out their frail and for the most part melancholy pipe of sound, which was echoed, or parodied, here in the trees of Hyde Park, here in St James’s* by the twitter of sparrows and the sudden outbursts of the amorous but intermittent thrush. The pigeons in the squares shuffled in the treetops, letting fall a twig or two, and crooned over and over again the lullaby that was always interrupted. The gates at the Marble Arch and Apsley House* were blocked in the afternoon by ladies in many-coloured dresses wearing bustles, and by gentlemen in frock coats carrying canes, wearing carnations. Here came the Princess,* and as she passed hats were lifted. In the basements of the long avenues of the residential quarters servant girls in cap and apron prepared tea. Deviously ascending from the basement the silver teapot was placed on the table, and virgins and spinsters with hands that had staunched the sores of Bermondsey and Hoxton* carefully measured out one, two, three, four spoonfuls of tea. When the sun went down, a million little gaslights, shaped like the eyes in peacocks’ feathers, opened in their glass cages, but nevertheless broad stretches of darkness were left on the pavement. The mixed light of the lamps and the setting sun was reflected equally in the placid waters of the Round Pond and the Serpentine.* Diners-out, trotting over the bridge* in hansom cabs, looked for a moment at the charming vista. At length the moon rose, and its polished coin, though obscured now and then by wisps

of cloud, shone out with serenity, with severity, or perhaps with complete indifference. Slowly wheeling, like the rays of a searchlight, the days, the weeks, the years passed one after another across the sky.

COLONEL ABEL PARGITER was sitting after luncheon in his club talking. Since his companions in the leather armchairs were men of his own type, men who had been soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired, they were reviving with old jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt, and then, by a natural transition, they turned to the present. It was a question of some appointment, of some possible appointment.

Suddenly the youngest and the sprucest of the three leant forward. Yesterday he had lunched with... Here the voice of the speaker fell. The others bent towards him; with a brief wave of his hand Colonel Abel dismissed the servant who was removing the coffee cups. The three baldish and greyish heads remained close together for a few minutes. Then Colonel Abel threw himself back in his chair. The curious gleam which had come into all their eyes when Major Elkin began his story had faded completely from Colonel Pargiter's face. He sat staring ahead of him with bright-blue eyes that seemed a little screwed up, as if the glare of the East were still in them, and puckered at the corners as if the dust were still in them. Some thought had struck him that made what the others were saying of no interest to him – indeed, it was disagreeable to him. He rose and looked out of the window down into Piccadilly. Holding his cigar suspended he looked down on the tops of omnibuses, hansom cabs, victorias, vans and landaus. He was out of it all, his attitude seemed to say – he had no longer any finger in that pie. Gloom settled on his red handsome face as he stood gazing. Suddenly a thought struck him. He had a question to ask – he turned to ask it, but his friends were gone. The little group had broken up. Elkins was already hurrying through the door; Brand had moved off to talk to another man. Colonel Pargiter shut his mouth on the thing he might have said, and turned back again to the window overlooking Piccadilly. Everybody in the crowded street, it seemed, had some end in view. Everybody was hurrying along to keep some appointment. Even the ladies in their victorias and broughams* were trotting down Piccadilly on some errand or other. People were coming back to London – they were settling in for the season. But for him there would be no season – for him there was nothing to do. His wife was dying – but she did not die. She was better today, would be worse tomorrow; a new nurse was coming – and so it went on. He picked up a paper and turned over the pages. He looked

at a picture of the west front of Cologne Cathedral. He tossed the paper back into its place among the other papers. One of these days – that was his euphemism for the time when his wife was dead – he would give up London, he thought, and live in the country. But then there was the house; then there were the children, and there was also... His face changed – it became less discontented, but also a little furtive and uneasy.

He had somewhere to go, after all. While they were gossiping he had kept that thought at the back of his mind. When he turned round and found them gone, that was the balm he clapped on his wound. He would go and see Mira – Mira at least would be glad to see him. Thus when he left the club he turned not east, where the busy men were going, nor west, where his own house in Abercorn Terrace was, but took his way along the hard paths through the Green Park towards Westminster. The grass was very green; the leaves were beginning to shoot; little green claws, like birds' claws, were pushing out from the branches; there was a sparkle, an animation everywhere; the air smelt clean and brisk. But Colonel Pargiter saw neither the grass nor the trees. He marched through the park, in his closely buttoned coat, looking straight ahead of him. But when he came to Westminster he stopped. He did not like this part of the business at all. Every time he approached the little street that lay under the huge bulk of the Abbey, the street of dingy little houses, with yellow curtains and cards in the window, the street where the muffin man seemed always to be ringing his bell, where children screamed and hopped in and out of white chalk marks on the pavement, he paused, looked to the right, looked to the left, and then walked very sharply to No. 30 and rang the bell. He gazed straight at the door as he waited with his head rather sunk. He did not wish to be seen standing on that doorstep. He did not like waiting to be let in. He did not like it when Mrs Sims let him in. There was always a smell in the house – there were always dirty clothes hanging on a line in the back garden. He went up the stairs, sulkily and heavily, and entered the sitting room.

Nobody was there – he was too early. He looked round the room with distaste. There were too many little objects about. He felt out of place, and altogether too large as he stood upright before the draped fireplace in front of a screen upon which was painted a kingfisher in the act of alighting on some bulrushes. Footsteps scurried about hither and thither on the floor above. Was there somebody with her? he asked himself, listening. Children screamed in the street outside. It was sordid; it was mean; it was furtive. One of these days, he said to himself... but the door opened and his mistress, Mira, came in.

“Oh, Bogy, dear!” she exclaimed. Her hair was very untidy; she was a little fluffy-looking, but she was very much younger than he was and really glad to see him, he thought. The little dog bounced up at her.

“Lulu, Lulu,” she cried, catching the little dog in one hand while she put the other to her hair, “come and let Uncle Bogy look at you.”

The Colonel settled himself in the creaking basket chair. She put the dog on his knee. There was a red patch – possibly eczema – behind one of its ears. The Colonel put on his glasses and bent down to look at the dog’s ear. Mira kissed him where his collar met his neck. Then his glasses fell off. She snatched them and put them on the dog. The old boy was out of spirits today, she felt. In that mysterious world of clubs and family life of which he never spoke to her, something was wrong. He had come before she had done her hair, which was a nuisance. But her duty was to distract him. So she flitted – her figure, enlarging as it was, still allowed her to glide between table and chair – hither and thither, removed the fire screen and set a light, before he could stop her, to the grudging lodging-house fire. Then she perched on the arm of his chair.

“Oh, Mira!” she said, glancing at herself in the looking glass and shifting her hairpins. “What a dreadfully untidy girl you are!” She loosed a long coil and let it fall over her shoulders. It was beautiful gold-glancing hair still, though she was nearing forty and had, if the truth were known, a daughter of eight boarded out with friends at Bedford. The hair began to fall of its own accord, of its own weight, and Bogy seeing it fall stooped and kissed her hair. A barrel organ had begun to play down the street and the children all rushed in that direction, leaving a sudden silence. The Colonel began to stroke her neck. He began fumbling, with the hand that had lost two fingers, rather lower down, where the neck joins the shoulders. Mira slipped onto the floor and leant her back against his knee.

Then there was a creaking on the stairs; someone tapped as if to warn them of her presence. Mira at once pinned her hair together, got up and shut the door.

The Colonel began in his methodical way to examine the dog’s ears again. Was it eczema? Or was it not eczema? He looked at the red patch, then set the dog on its legs in the basket and waited. He did not like the prolonged whispering on the landing outside. At length Mira came back – she looked worried, and when she looked worried she looked old. She began hunting about under cushions and covers. She wanted her bag, she said. Where had she put her bag? In that litter of things, the Colonel thought, it might be anywhere. It was a lean, poverty-stricken-looking bag

when she found it under the cushions in the corner of the sofa. She turned it upside down. Pocket handkerchiefs, screwed up bits of paper, silver and coppers fell out as she shook it. But there should have been a sovereign, she said. "I'm sure I had one yesterday," she murmured.

"How much?" said the Colonel.

It came to one pound – no, it came to one pound eight and sixpence, she said, muttering something about the washing. The Colonel slipped two sovereigns out of his little gold case and gave them to her. She took them and there was more whispering on the landing.

"Washing?..." thought the Colonel, looking round the room. It was a dingy little hole, but being so much older than she was it did not do to ask questions about the washing. Here she was again. She flitted across the room and sat on the floor and put her head against his knee. The grudging fire which had been flickering feebly had died down now. "Let it be," he said impatiently as she took up the poker. "Let it go out." She resigned the poker. The dog snored; the barrel organ played. His hand began its voyage up and down her neck, in and out of the long thick hair. In this small room, so close to the other houses, dusk came quickly, and the curtains were half drawn. He drew her to him – he kissed her on the nape of the neck, and then the hand that had lost two fingers began to fumble rather lower down where the neck joins the shoulders.

A SUDDEN SQUALL of rain struck the pavement, and the children, who had been skipping in and out of their chalk cages, scudded away home. The elderly street singer, who had been swaying along the kerb, with a fisherman's cap stuck jauntily on the back of his head, lustily chanting "Count your blessings, count your blessings..."*, turned up his coat collar and took refuge under the portico of a public house, where he finished his injunction: "Count your blessings. Every One." Then the sun shone again, and dried the pavement.

"IT'S NOT BOILING," said Milly Pargiter, looking at the tea kettle. She was sitting at the round table in the front drawing room of the house in Abercorn Terrace. "Not nearly boiling," she repeated. The kettle was an old-fashioned brass kettle, chased* with a design of roses that was almost obliterated. A feeble little flame flickered up and down beneath the brass bowl. Her sister Delia, lying back in a chair beside her, watched it too. "Must a kettle boil?" she asked idly after a moment, as if she expected no answer, and Milly did not answer. They sat in silence watching the

little flame on a tuft of yellow wick. There were many plates and cups, as if other people were coming, but at the moment they were alone. The room was full of furniture. Opposite them stood a Dutch cabinet with blue china on the shelves – the sun of the April evening made a bright stain here and there on the glass. Over the fireplace the portrait of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap smiled down on them.

Milly took a hairpin from her head and began to fray the wick into separate strands so as to increase the size of the flame.

“But that doesn’t do any good,” Delia said irritably as she watched her. She fidgeted. Everything seemed to take such an intolerable time. Then Crosby came in and said, should she boil the kettle in the kitchen? And Milly said no. How can I put a stop to this fiddling and trifling, she said to herself, tapping a knife on the table and looking at the feeble flame that her sister was teasing with a hairpin. A gnat’s voice began to wail under the kettle, but here the door burst open again and a little girl in a stiff pink frock came in.

“I think Nurse might have put you on a clean pinafore,” said Milly severely, imitating the manner of a grown-up person. There was a green smudge on her pinafore, as if she had been climbing trees.

“It hadn’t come back from the wash,” said Rose, the little girl, grumpily. She looked at the table, but there was no question of tea yet.

Milly applied her hairpin to the wick again. Delia leant back and glanced over her shoulder out of the window. From where she sat she could see the front doorsteps.

“Now, there’s Martin,” she said gloomily. The door slammed; books were slapped down on the hall table, and Martin, a boy of twelve, came in. He had the red hair of the woman in the picture, but it was rumped.

“Go and make yourself tidy,” said Delia severely. “You’ve plenty of time,” she added. “The kettle isn’t boiling yet.”

They all looked at the kettle. It still kept up its faint melancholy singing as the little flame flickered under the swinging bowl of brass.

“Blast that kettle,” said Martin, turning sharply away.

“Mama wouldn’t like you to use language like that,” Milly reproved him, as if in imitation of an older person, for their mother had been ill so long that both sisters had taken to imitating her manner with the children. The door opened again.

“The tray, miss...” said Crosby, keeping the door open with her foot. She had an invalid’s tray in her hands.

“The tray,” said Milly. “Now, who’s going to take up the tray?” Again she imitated the manner of an older person who wishes to be tactful with children.

“Not you, Rose. It’s too heavy. Let Martin carry it, and you can go with him. But don’t stay. Just tell Mama what you’ve been doing – and then the kettle... the kettle...”

Here she applied her hairpin to the wick again. A thin puff of steam issued from the serpent-shaped spout. At first intermittent, it gradually became more and more powerful, until, just as they heard steps on the stairs, one jet of powerful steam issued from the spout.

“It’s boiling!” Milly exclaimed. “It’s boiling!”

THEY ATE IN SILENCE. The sun, judging from the changing lights on the glass of the Dutch cabinet, seemed to be going in and out. Sometimes a bowl shone deep blue, then became livid. Lights rested furtively upon the furniture in the other room. Here was a pattern; here was a bald patch. Somewhere there’s beauty, Delia thought, somewhere there’s freedom, and somewhere, she thought, *he* is – wearing his white flower... But a stick grated in the hall.

“It’s Papa!” Milly exclaimed warningly.

Instantly Martin wriggled out of his father’s armchair; Delia sat upright. Milly at once moved forward a very large rose-sprinkled cup that did not match the rest. The Colonel stood at the door and surveyed the group rather fiercely. His small blue eyes looked round them as if to find fault; at the moment there was no particular fault to find, but he was out of temper – they knew at once before he spoke that he was out of temper.

“Grubby little ruffian,” he said, pinching Rose by the ear as he passed her. She put her hand at once over the stain on her pinafore.

“Mama all right?” he said, letting himself down in one solid mass into the big armchair. He detested tea, but he always sipped a little from the huge old cup that had been his father’s. He raised it and sipped perfunctorily.

“And what have you all been up to?” he asked.

He looked round him with the smoky but shrewd gaze that could be genial, but was surly now.

“Delia had her music lesson, and I went to Whiteleys...” Milly began, rather as if she were a child reciting a lesson.

“Spending money, eh?” said her father sharply, but not unkindly.

“No, Papa, I told you. They sent the wrong sheets—”

“And you, Martin?” Colonel Pargiter asked, cutting short his daughter’s statement. “Bottom of the class as usual?”

“Top!” shouted Martin, bolting the word out as if he had restrained it with difficulty until this moment.

“Hm – you don’t say so,” said his father. His gloom relaxed a little. He put his hand into his trouser pocket and brought out a handful of silver. His children watched him as he tried to single out one sixpence from all the florins. He had lost two fingers of the right hand in the Mutiny,* and the muscles had shrunk so that the right hand resembled the claw of some aged bird. He shuffled and fumbled, but as he always ignored the injury, his children dared not help him. The shiny knobs of the mutilated fingers fascinated Rose.

“Here you are, Martin,” he said at length, handing the sixpence to his son. Then he sipped his tea again and wiped his moustaches.

“Where’s Eleanor?” he said at last, as if to break the silence.

“It’s her Grove day,”* Milly reminded him.

“Oh, her Grove day,” muttered the Colonel. He stirred the sugar round and round in the cup as if to demolish it.

“The dear old Levys,” said Delia tentatively. She was his favourite daughter, but she felt uncertain in his present mood how much she could venture.

He said nothing.

“Bertie Levy’s got six toes on one foot,” Rose piped up suddenly. The others laughed. But the Colonel cut them short.

“You hurry up and get off to your prep, my boy,” he said, glancing at Martin, who was still eating.

“Let him finish his tea, Papa,” said Milly, again imitating the manner of an older person.

“And the new nurse?” the Colonel asked, drumming on the edge of the table. “Has she come?”

“Yes...” Milly began. But there was a rustling in the hall and in came Eleanor. It was much to their relief – especially to Milly’s. Thank goodness, there’s Eleanor, she thought, looking up – the soother, the maker-up of quarrels, the buffer between her and the intensities and strifes of family life. She adored her sister. She would have called her “goddess” and endowed her with a beauty that was not hers, with clothes that were not hers, had she not been carrying a pile of little mottled books and two black gloves. Protect me, she thought, handing her a teacup, who am such a mousy, downtrodden inefficient little chit, compared with Delia, who always gets her way, while I’m always snubbed by Papa, who was grumpy

for some reason. The Colonel smiled at Eleanor. And the red dog on the hearthrug looked up too and wagged his tail, as if he recognized her for one of those satisfactory women who give you a bone but wash their hands afterwards. She was the eldest of the daughters, about twenty-two, no beauty, but healthy, and though tired at the moment, naturally cheerful.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I got kept. And I didn't expect..." She looked at her father.

"I got off earlier than I thought," he said hastily. "The meeting..." He stopped short. There had been another row with Mira.

"And how's your Grove, eh?" he added.

"Oh, my Grove..." she repeated, but Milly handed her the covered dish.

"I got kept," Eleanor said again, helping herself. She began to eat; the atmosphere lightened.

"Now tell us, Papa," said Delia boldly – she was his favourite daughter – "what you've been doing with yourself. Had any adventures?"

The remark was unfortunate.

"There aren't any adventures for an old foggy like me," said the Colonel surlily. He ground the grains of sugar against the walls of his cup. Then he seemed to repent of his gruffness; he pondered for a moment.

"I met old Burke at the club – asked me to bring one of you to dinner; Robin's back, on leave," he said.

He drank up his tea. Some drops fell on his little pointed beard. He took out his large silk handkerchief and wiped his chin impatiently. Eleanor, sitting on her low chair, saw a curious look first on Milly's face, then on Delia's. She had an impression of hostility between them. But they said nothing. They went on eating and drinking until the Colonel took up his cup, saw there was nothing in it and put it down firmly with a little chink. The ceremony of tea-drinking was over.

"Now, my boy, take yourself off and get on with your prep," he said to Martin.

Martin withdrew the hand that was stretched towards a plate.

"Cut along," said the Colonel imperiously. Martin got up and went, drawing his hand reluctantly along the chairs and tables as if to delay his passage. He slammed the door rather sharply behind him. The Colonel rose and stood upright among them in his tightly buttoned frock coat.

"And I must be off too," he said. But he paused a moment, as if there was nothing particular for him to be off to. He stood there very erect among them, as if he wished to give some order, but could not at the moment think of any order to give. Then he recollected.

"I wish one of you would remember," he said, addressing his daughters impartially, "to write to Edward... Tell him to write to Mama."

"Yes," said Eleanor.

He moved towards the door. But he stopped.

"And let me know when Mama wants to see me," he remarked. Then he paused and pinched his youngest daughter by the ear.

"Grubby little ruffian," he said, pointing to the green stain on her pinafore. She covered it with her hand. At the door he paused again.

"Don't forget," he said, fumbling with the handle, "don't forget to write to Edward." At last he had turned the handle and was gone.

THEY WERE SILENT. There was something strained in the atmosphere, Eleanor felt. She took one of the little books that she had dropped on the table and laid it open on her knee. But she did not look at it. Her glance fixed itself rather absent-mindedly upon the farther room. The trees were coming out in the back garden; there were little leaves – little ear-shaped leaves on the bushes. The sun was shining fitfully – it was going in and it was going out, lighting up now this, now—

"Eleanor," Rose interrupted. She held herself in a way that was oddly like her father's.

"Eleanor," she repeated in a low voice, for her sister was not attending.

"Well?" said Eleanor, looking at her.

"I want to go to Lamley's," said Rose.

She looked the image of her father, standing there with her hands behind her back.

"It's too late for Lamley's," said Eleanor.

"They don't shut till seven," said Rose.

"Then ask Martin to go with you," said Eleanor.

The little girl moved off slowly towards the door. Eleanor took up her account books again.

"But you're not to go alone, Rose – you're not to go alone," she said, looking up over them as Rose reached the door. Nodding her head in silence, Rose disappeared.

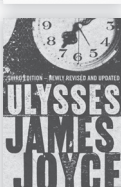
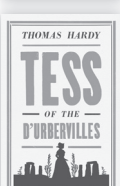
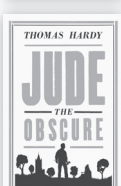
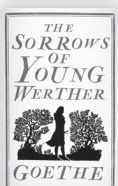
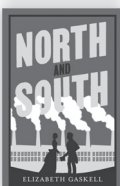
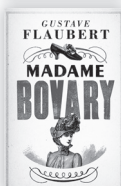
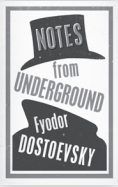
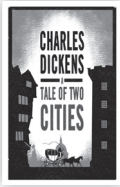
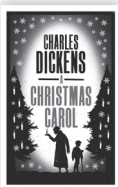
SHE WENT UPSTAIRS. She paused outside her mother's bedroom and snuffed the sour-sweet smell that seemed to hang about the jugs, the tumblers, the covered bowls on the table outside the door. Up she went again, and stopped outside the schoolroom door. She did not want to go in, for she had quarrelled with Martin. They had quarrelled first about Erridge

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