

MURIEL SPARK

1918-

When she was an adolescent, Muriel Camberg composed torrid love letters that she signed with men's names and concealed around the house in the hope of giving her mother a good shock. This fictional gesture forecasts the witty impersonation characteristic of Spark's later writing in novels and short stories that frequently deal with blackmail, literary espionage, and the mysterious interconnections between illusion and reality.

Muriel Camberg was brought up in a prosperous Edinburgh neighborhood by a Presbyterian mother and a Jewish father. After attending James Gillespie's School for Girls, she traveled to South Africa, where she married S. O. Spark and gave birth to a son. The marriage ended quickly and several years later Spark returned to Great Britain, where she worked for the Political Intelligence Department until the end of World War II. Then she supported herself as a freelance writer and editor, publishing several books collaboratively with Derek Stanford, including lives of the Brontes and of Mary Shelley. After converting to Catholicism at the age of thirty-six, Spark completed her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957). Her subsequent stories and novels, set for the most part in England or in Africa, often unmask the hypocrisies of professional Catholics even as they dramatize the dilemmas of authentic spiritual conversions. It was, however, the grotesque comedy of *Memento Mori* (1959) that established Spark's reputation. Later novels—*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), and *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), in particular—turn her irony toward the delusions and deceits of communities of women. In *The Black Madonna*, she slyly satirizes not only the spiritual bankruptcy of characters who congratulate themselves on their moral correctness but also the mythologizing of a so-called maternal instinct.

The Black Madonna

When the Black Madonna was installed in the Church of the Sacred Heart the Bishop himself came to consecrate it. His long purple train was upheld by the two curliest of the choir. The day was favored suddenly with thin October sunlight as he crossed the courtyard from the presbytery¹ to the church, as the procession followed him chanting the Litany of the Saints: five priests in vestments of white heavy silk interwoven with glinting threads, four lay officials with straight red robes, then the confraternities and the tangled columns of the Mothers' Union.

The new town of Whitney Clay had a large proportion of Roman Catholics, especially among the nurses at the new hospital; and at the paper mills, too, there were many Catholics, drawn inland from Liverpool by the new housing estate; likewise, with the canning factories.

The Black Madonna had been given to the church by a recent convert. It was carved out of bog oak.

"They found the wood in the bog. Had been there hundreds of years. They sent for the sculptor right away by phone. He went over to Ireland and carved it there and then. You see, he had to do it while it was still wet."

"Looks a bit like contemporary art."

1. The house of the parish priest.

"Nah, that's not contemporary art, it's old-fashioned. If you'd ever seen contemporary work you *know* it was old-fashioned."

"Looks like contemp—"

"It's old-fashioned. Else how'd it get sanctioned to be put up?"

"It's not so nice as the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes.² That lifts you up."

Everyone got used, eventually, to the Black Madonna with her square hands and straight carved draperies. There was a movement to dress it up in vestments, or at least a lace veil.

"She looks a bit gloomy, Father, don't you think?"

"No," said the priest, "I think it looks fine. If you start dressing it up in cloth you'll spoil the line."

Sometimes people came from London especially to see the Black Madonna, and these were not Catholics; they were, said the priest, probably no religion at all, poor souls, though gifted with faculties. They came, as if to a museum, to see the line of the Black Madonna which must not be spoiled by vestments.

The new town of Whitney Clay had swallowed up the old village. One or two cottages with double dormer windows, an inn called "The Tyger," a Methodist chapel and three small shops represented the village; the three small shops were already threatened by the Council;³ the Methodists were fighting to keep their chapel. Only the double dormer cottages and the inn were protected by the Nation and so had to be suffered by the Town Planning Committee.

The town was laid out like geometry in squares, arcs (to allow for the by-pass) and isosceles triangles, breaking off, at one point, to skirt the old village which, from the aerial view, looked like a merry doodle on the page.

Manders Road was one side of a parallelogram of green-bordered streets. It was named after one of the founders of the canning concern, Manders' Figs in Syrup, and it comprised a row of shops and a long high block of flats named Cripps House after the late Sir Stafford Cripps who had laid the foundation stone. In flat twenty-two on the fifth floor of Cripps House lived Raymond and Lou Parker. Raymond Parker was a foreman at the motor works, and was on the management committee. He had been married for fifteen years to Lou, who was thirty-seven at the time that the miraculous powers of the Black Madonna came to be talked of.

Of the twenty-five couples who live in Cripps House five were Catholics. All, except Raymond and Lou Parker, had children. A sixth family had recently been moved by the Council into one of the six-roomed houses because of the seven children besides the grandfather.

Raymond and Lou were counted lucky to have obtained their three-roomed flat although they had no children. People with children had priority; but their name had been on the waiting list for years, and some said Raymond had a pull with one of the Councilors who was a director of the motor works.

The Parkers were among the few tenants of Cripps House who owned a motor car. They did not, like most of their neighbors, have a television receiver, for being childless they had been able to afford to expand themselves in

2. A town in France that is the site of one of the most famous shrines of the Virgin Mary, associated with miracu-

lous cures

3. Local authority, which is responsible for housing.

the way of taste, so that their habits differed slightly and their amusements considerably, from those of their neighbors. The Parkers went to the pictures only when *The Observer*⁴ had praised the film; they considered television not their sort of thing; they adhered to their religion; they voted Labour; they believed that the twentieth century was the best so far; they assented to the doctrine of original sin;⁵ they frequently applied the word "Victorian" to ideas and people they did not like—for instance, when a local Town Councilor resigned his office Raymond said, "He had to go. He's Victorian. And far too young for the job"; and Lou said Jane Austen's⁶ books were too Victorian; and anyone who opposed the abolition of capital punishment was Victorian. Raymond took the *Reader's Digest*, a magazine called *Motoring* and *The Catholic Herald*. Lou took *The Queen*, *Woman's Own* and *Life*. Their daily paper was *The News Chronicle*. They read two books apiece each week. Raymond preferred travel books; Lou liked novels.

For the first five years of their married life they had been worried about not having children. Both had submitted themselves to medical tests as a result of which Lou had a course of injections. These were unsuccessful. It had been a special disappointment since both came from large sprawling Catholic families. None of their married brothers and sisters had less than three children. One of Lou's sisters, now widowed, had eight; they sent her a pound a week.

Their flat in Cripps House had three rooms and a kitchen. All round them their neighbors were saving up to buy houses. A council flat, once obtained, was a mere platform in space to further the progress of the rocket. This ambition was not shared by Raymond and Lou; they were not only content, they were delighted, with these civic chambers, and indeed took something of an aristocratic view of them, not without a self-conscious feeling of being free, in this particular, from the prejudices of that middle class to which they as good as belonged. "One day," said Lou, "it will be the thing to live in a council flat."

They were eclectic as to their friends. Here, it is true, they differed slightly from each other. Raymond was for inviting the Ackleys to meet the Farrells. Mr. Ackley was an accountant at the Electricity Board. Mr. and Mrs. Farrell were respectively a sorter at Manders' Figs in Syrup and an usherette at the Odeon.

"After all," argued Raymond, "they're all Catholics."

"Ah well," said Lou, "but now, their interests are different. The Farrells wouldn't know what the Ackleys were talking about. The Ackleys like politics. The Farrells like to tell jokes. I'm not a snob, only sensible."

"Oh, please yourself." For no-one could call Lou a snob, and everyone knew she was sensible.

Their choice of acquaintance was wide by reason of their active church membership:⁷ that is to say, they were members of various guilds and confraternities. Raymond was a sidesman,⁷ and he also organized the weekly football lottery in aid of the Church Decoration Fund. Lou felt rather out of things when the Mothers' Union met and had special Masses, for the Mothers' Union was the only group she did not qualify for. Having been a nurse before her marriage she was, however, a member of the Nurses' Guild.

4. A liberal national paper.

5. The doctrine that all human beings, as a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve from divine grace, are born in a state of sin.

6. English novelist (1775–1817), whose writings do not fall into the Victorian period (1837–1903).

7. Elected assistant to a parish churchwarden.

Thus, most of their Catholic friends came from different departments of life. Others, connected with the motor works where Raymond was a foreman, were of different social grades to which Lou was more alive than Raymond. He let her have her way, as a rule, when it came to a question of which would mix with which.

A dozen Jamaicans were taken on at the motor works. Two came into Raymond's department. He invited them to the flat one evening to have coffee. They were unmarried, very polite and black. The quiet one was called Henry Pierce and the talkative one, Oxford St. John. Lou, to Raymond's surprise and pleasure, decided that all their acquaintance, from top to bottom, must meet Henry and Oxford. All along he had known she was not a snob, only sensible, but he had rather feared she would consider the mixing of their new black and their old white friends not sensible.

"I'm glad you like Henry and Oxford," he said. "I'm glad we're able to introduce them to so many people." For the dark pair had, within a month, spent nine evenings at Cripps House; they had met accountants, teachers, packers and sorters. Only Tina Farrell, the usherette, had not seemed to understand the quality of these occasions: "Quite nice chaps, them darkies, when you get to know them."

"You mean Jamaicans," said Lou. "Why shouldn't they be nice? They're no different from anyone else."

"Yes, yes, that's what I mean," said Tina.

"We're all equal," stated Lou. "Don't forget there are black Bishops."

"Jesus, I never said we were the equal of a Bishop," Tina said, very bewildered.

"Well, don't call them darkies."

Sometimes, on summer Sunday afternoons Raymond and Lou took their friends for a run in their car, ending up at a riverside road-house. The first time they turned up with Oxford and Henry they felt defiant; but there were no objections, there was no trouble at all. Soon the dark pair ceased to be a novelty. Oxford St. John took up with a pretty red-haired bookkeeper, and Henry Pierce, missing his companion, spent more of his time at the Parkers' flat.⁸ Lou and Raymond had planned to spend their two weeks' summer holiday in London. "Poor Henry," said Lou. "He'll miss us."

Once you brought him out he was not so quiet as you thought at first. Henry was twenty-four, desirous of knowledge in all fields, shining very much in eyes, skin, teeth, which made him seem all the more eager. He called out the maternal in Lou, and to some extent the avuncular in Raymond. Lou used to love him when he read out lines from his favorite poems which he had copied into an exercise book.

*Haste thee, nymph, and bring with thee
Jest and youthful jollity,
Sport that⁹ . . .*

Lou would interrupt: "You should say jest, jollity—not yest, yollity."

"Jest," he said carefully. "And laughter holding both his sides," he continued. "Laughter—hear that, Lou? —laughter. That's what the human race was made for. Those folks that go round gloomy, Lou, they . . ."

8. Apartment.

9. Slightly misquoted from Milton's *L'Allegro* (1631).

Lou loved this talk. Raymond puffed his pipe benignly. After Henry had gone Raymond would say what a pity it was such an intelligent young fellow had lapsed. For Henry had been brought up in a Roman Catholic mission. He had, however, abandoned religion. He was fond of saying, "The superstition of today is the science of yesterday."

"I can't allow," Raymond would say, "that the Catholic Faith is superstition. I can't allow that."

"He'll return to the Church one day"—this was Lou's contribution, whether Henry was present or not. If she said it in front of Henry he would give her an angry look. These were the only occasions when Henry lost his cheerfulness and grew quiet again.

Raymond and Lou prayed for Henry, that he might regain his faith. Lou said her rosary¹ three times a week before the Black Madonna.

"He'll miss us when we go on our holidays."

Raymond telephoned to the hotel in London. "Have you a single room for a young gentleman accompanying Mr. and Mrs. Parker?" He added, "a colored gentleman." To his pleasure a room was available, and to his relief there was no objection to Henry's color.

They enjoyed their London holiday, but it was somewhat marred by a visit to that widowed sister of Lou's to whom she allowed a pound a week towards the rearing of her eight children. Lou had not seen her sister Elizabeth for nine years.

They went to her one day towards the end of their holiday. Henry sat at the back of the car beside a large suitcase stuffed with old clothes for Elizabeth. Raymond at the wheel kept saying, "Poor Elizabeth—eight kids," which irritated Lou, though she kept her peace.

Outside the underground² station at Victoria Park, where they stopped to ask the way, Lou felt a strange sense of panic. Elizabeth lived in a very downward quarter of Bethnal Green,³ and in the past nine years since she had seen her Lou's memory of the shabby ground-floor rooms with their peeling walls and bare boards, had made a kinder nest for itself. Sending off the postal order to her sister each week she had gradually come to picture the habitation at Bethnal Green in an almost monastic light; it would be bare but well-scrubbed, spotless, and shining with Brasso and holy poverty. The floor boards gleamed. Elizabeth was gray-haired, lined, but neat. The children well behaved, sitting down betimes to their broth in two rows along an almost refectory table. It was not till they had reached Victoria Park that Lou felt the full force of the fact that everything would be different from what she had imagined. "It may have gone down since I was last there," she said to Raymond who had never visited Elizabeth before.

"What's gone down?"

"Poor Elizabeth's place."

Lou had not taken much notice of Elizabeth's dull little monthly letters, almost illiterate, for Elizabeth, as she herself always said, was not much of a scholar. "James is at another job I hope that's the finish of the bother I had my blood pressure there was a Health visitor very nice. Also the assistance they sent my Dinner all the time and for the kids at home they call it meals on

1. A series of Catholic prayers, which are often counted with the help of a string of special beads.

2. Subway.

3. Factory district in London's East End.

Wheels. I pray to the Almighty that James is well out of his bother he never lets on at sixteen their all the same never open his mouth but Gods eyes are not shut. Thanks for P.O.⁴ you will be rewarded your affect sister Elizabeth.”

Lou tried to piece together in her mind the gist of nine years' such letters. James was the eldest; she supposed he had been in trouble.

“I ought to have asked Elizabeth about young James,” said Lou. “She wrote to me last year that he was in a bother, there was talk of him being sent away, but I didn't take it in at the time, I was busy.”

“You can't take everything on your shoulders,” said Raymond. “You do very well by Elizabeth.” They had pulled up outside the house where Elizabeth lived on the ground floor. Lou looked at the chipped paint, the dirty windows and torn gray-white curtains and was reminded with startling clarity of her hopeless childhood in Liverpool from which, miraculously, hope had lifted her, and had come true, for the nuns had got her that job; and she had trained as a nurse among white-painted beds, and white shining walls, and tiles, hot water everywhere and Dettol without stint. When she had first married she had wanted all white-painted furniture that you could wash and liberate from germs; but Raymond had been for oak, he did not understand the pleasure of hygiene and new enamel paint, for his upbringing had been orderly, he had been accustomed to a lounge suite and autumn tints in the front room all his life. And now Lou stood and looked at the outside of Elizabeth's place and felt she had gone right back.

On the way back to the hotel Lou chattered with relief that it was over. “Poor Elizabeth, she hasn't had much of a chance. I liked little Francis, what did you think of little Francis, Ray?”

Raymond did not like being called Ray, but he made no objection for he knew that Lou had been under a strain. Elizabeth had not been very pleasant. She had expressed admiration for Lou's hat, bag, gloves and shoes which were all navy blue, but she had used an accusing tone. The house had been smelly and dirty. “I'll show you round,” Elizabeth had said in a tone of mock refinement, and they were forced to push through a dark narrow passage behind her skinny form till they came to the big room where the children slept. A row of old iron beds each with a tumble of dark blanket rugs, no sheets. Raymond was indignant at the sight and hoped that Lou was not feeling upset. He knew very well Elizabeth had a decent living income from a number of public sources, and was simply a slut, one of those who would not help themselves.

“Ever thought of taking a job, Elizabeth?” he had said, and immediately realized his stupidity. But Elizabeth took her advantage. “What d'you mean? *I'm* not going to leave my kids in no nursery. *I'm* not going to send them to no home. What kids need these days is a good home life and that's what they get.” And she added, “God's eyes are not shut,” in a tone which was meant for him, Raymond, to get at him for doing well in life.

Raymond distributed half-crowns to the younger children and deposited on the table half-crowns for those who were out playing in the street.

“Goin' already?” said Elizabeth in her tone of reproach. But she kept eyeing Henry with interest, and the reproachful tone was more or less a routine affair.

“You from the States?” Elizabeth said to Henry.

4. Postal orders

Henry sat on the edge of his sticky chair and answered, no, from Jamaica, while Raymond winked at him to cheer him.

"During the war there was a lot of boys like you from the States," Elizabeth said, giving him a sideways look.

Henry held out his hand to the second youngest child, a girl of seven, and said, "Come talk to me."

The child said nothing, only dipped into the box of sweets which Lou had brought.

"Come talk," said Henry.

Elizabeth laughed. "If she does talk you'll be sorry you ever asked. She's got a tongue in her head, that one. You should hear her cheeking up to the teachers." Elizabeth's bones jerked with laughter among her loose clothes. There was a lopsided double bed in the corner, and beside it a table cluttered with mugs, tins, a comb and brush, a number of hair curlers, a framed photograph of the Sacred Heart, and also Raymond noticed what he thought erroneously to be a box of contraceptives. He decided to say nothing to Lou about this; he was quite sure she must have observed other things which he had not; possibly things of a more distressing nature.

Lou's chatter on the way back to the hotel had a touch of hysteria. "Raymond, dear," she said in her most chirpy west-end⁵ voice. "I simply *had* to give the poor dear *all* my next week's housekeeping money. We shall have to starve, darling, when we get home. That's *simply* what we shall have to do."

"O.K.," said Raymond.

"I ask you," Lou shrieked, "what else could I do, what *could* I do?"

"Nothing at all," said Raymond, "but what you've done."

"My own *sister*, my dear," said Lou; "and did you see the way she had her hair bleached?—All streaky, and she used to have a lovely head of hair."

"I wonder if she tries to raise herself?" said Raymond. "With all those children she could surely get better accommodation if only she—"

"That sort," said Henry, leaning forward from the back of the car, "never moves. It's the slum mentality, man. Take some folks I've seen back home—"

"There's no comparison," Lou snapped suddenly, "this is quite a different case."

Raymond glanced at her in surprise; Henry sat back, offended. Lou was thinking wildly, what a cheek *him* talking like a snob. At least Elizabeth's white.

Their prayers for the return of faith to Henry Pierce were so far answered in that he took a tubercular turn which was followed by a religious one. He was sent off to a sanatorium in Wales with a promise from Lou and Raymond to visit him before Christmas. Meantime, they applied themselves to Our Lady for the restoration of Henry's health.

Oxford St. John, whose love affair with the red-haired girl had come to grief, now frequented their flat, but he could never quite replace Henry in their affections. Oxford was older and less refined than Henry. He would stand in front of the glass in their kitchen and tell himself, "Man, you just a big black bugger." He kept referring to himself as black, which of course he was, Lou thought, but it was not the thing to say. He stood in the doorway with his arms

5. Toney, i.e., characteristic of London's fashionable West End.

and smile thrown wide: "I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem."⁶ And once, when Raymond was out, Oxford brought the conversation round to that question of being black *all over*, which made Lou very uncomfortable and she kept looking at the clock and dropped stitches in her knitting.

Three times a week when she went to the black Our Lady with her rosary to ask for the health of Henry Pierce, she asked also that Oxford St. John would get another job in another town, for she did not like to make objections, telling her feelings to Raymond; there were no objections to make that you could put your finger on. She could not very well complain that Oxford was common; Raymond despised snobbery, and so did she, it was a very delicate question. She was amazed when, within three weeks, Oxford announced that he was thinking of looking for a job in Manchester.

Lou said to Raymond "Do you know, there's something *in* what they say about the bog oak statue in the church."

"There may be," said Raymond. "People say so."

Lou could not tell him how she had petitioned the removal of Oxford St. John. But when she got a letter from Henry Pierce to say he was improving, she told Raymond, "You see, we asked for Henry to get back the Faith, and so he did. Now we ask for his recovery and he's improving."

"He's having good treatment at the sanatorium," Raymond said. But he added, "Of course we'll have to keep up the prayers." He himself, though not a rosary man, knelt before the Black Madonna every Saturday evening after Benediction to pray for Henry Pierce.

Whenever they saw Oxford he was talking of leaving Whitney Clay. Raymond said, "He's making a big mistake going to Manchester. A big place can be very lonely. I hope he'll change his mind."

"He won't," said Lou, so impressed was she now by the powers of the Black Madonna. She was good and tired of Oxford St. John with his feet up on her cushions, and calling himself a nigger.

"We'll miss him," said Raymond, "he's such a cheery big soul."

"We will," said Lou. She was reading the parish magazine, which she seldom did, although she was one of the voluntary workers who sent them out, addressing hundreds of wrappers every month. She had vaguely noticed, in previous numbers, various references to the Black Madonna, how she had granted this or that favor. Lou had heard that people sometimes came from neighboring parishes to pray at the Church of the Sacred Heart because of the statue. Some said they came from all over England, but whether this was to admire the art-work or to pray, Lou was not sure. She gave her attention to the article in the parish magazine:

While not wishing to make excessive claims . . . many prayers answered and requests granted to the Faithful in an exceptional way . . . two remarkable cures effected, but medical evidence is, of course, still in reserve, a certain lapse of time being necessary to ascertain permanency of cure. The first of these cases was a child of twelve suffering from leukemia. . . . The second . . . While not desiring to create a *cultus* where none is due, we must remember it is always our duty to honor Our Blessed Lady, the dispenser of all graces, to whom we owe . . .

Another aspect of the information received by the Father Rector concerning our "Black Madonna" is one pertaining to childless couples of which three cases have come to his notice. In each case the couple claim to have offered constant devotion to the "Black Madonna" and in two of the cases specific requests were made for the favor of a child. In *all* cases the prayers were answered. The proud parents.... It should be the loving duty of every parishioner to make a special thanksgiving.... The Father Rector will be grateful for any further information....

"Look, Raymond," said Lou. "Read this."

They decided to put in for a baby to the Black Madonna.

The following Saturday, when they drove to the church for Benediction Lou jangled her rosary. Raymond pulled up outside the church. "Look here, Lou," he said, "do you want a baby in any case?"—for he partly thought she was only putting the Black Madonna to the test—"Do you want a child, after all these years?"

This was a new thought to Lou. She considered her neat flat and tidy routine, the entertaining with her good coffee cups, the weekly papers and the library books, the tastes which they would not have been able to cultivate had they had a family of children. She thought of her nice young looks which everyone envied, and her freedom of movement.

"Perhaps we should try," she said. "God won't give us a child if we aren't meant to have one."

"We have to make some decisions for ourselves," he said. "And to tell you the truth if *you* don't want a child, *I* don't."

"There's no harm in praying for one," she said.

"You have to be careful what you pray for," he said. "You mustn't tempt Providence."

She thought of her relatives, and Raymond's, all married with children. She thought of her sister Elizabeth with her eight, and remembered that one who checked up to the teachers, so pretty and sulky and shabby, and she remembered the fat baby Francis sucking his dummy⁷ and clutching Elizabeth's bony neck.

"I don't see why I shouldn't have a baby," said Lou.

Oxford St. John departed at the end of the month. He promised to write, but they were not surprised when weeks passed and they had no word. "I don't suppose we shall ever hear from him again," said Lou. Raymond thought he detected satisfaction in her voice, and would have thought she was getting snobbish as women do as they get older, losing sight of their ideals, had she not gone on to speak of Henry Pierce. Henry had written to say he was nearly cured, but had been advised to return to the West Indies.

"We must go and see him," said Lou. "We promised. What about the Sunday after next?"

"O.K.," said Raymond.

It was the Saturday before that Sunday when Lou had her first sick turn. She struggled out of bed to attend Benediction, but had to leave suddenly during the service and was sick behind the church in the presbytery yard. Raymond took her home, though she protested against cutting out her rosary to the Black Madonna.

"After only six weeks!" she said, and she could hardly tell whether her sickness was due to excitement or nature. "Only six weeks ago," she said—and her voice had a touch of its old Liverpool—"did we go to that Black Madonna and the prayer's answered, see."

Raymond looked at her in awe as he held the bowl for her sickness. "Are you sure?" he said.

She was well enough next day to go to visit Henry in the sanatorium. He was fatter and, she thought, a little coarser: and tough in his manner, as if once having been nearly disembodied he was not going to let it happen again. He was leaving the country very soon. He promised to come and see them before he left. Lou barely skimmed through his next letter before handing it over to Raymond.

Their visitors, now, were ordinary white ones. "Not so colorful," Raymond said, "as Henry and Oxford were." Then he looked embarrassed lest he should seem to be making a joke about the word colored.

"Do you miss the niggers?" said Tina Farrell, and Lou forgot to correct her. Lou gave up most of her church work in order to sew and knit for the baby. Raymond gave up the *Reader's Digest*. He applied for promotion and got it; he became a departmental manager. The flat was now a waiting-room for next summer, after the baby was born, when they would put down the money for a house. They hoped for one of the new houses on a building site on the outskirts of the town.

"We shall need a garden," Lou explained to her friends. "I'll join the Mothers' Union," she thought. Meantime the spare bedroom was turned into a nursery. Raymond made a cot, regardless that some of the neighbors complained of the hammering. Lou prepared a cradle, trimmed it with frills. She wrote to her relatives; she wrote to Elizabeth, sent her five pounds, and gave notice that there would be no further weekly payments, seeing that they would now need every penny.

"She doesn't require it anyway," said Raymond. "The Welfare State looks after people like Elizabeth." And he told Lou about the contraceptives he thought he had seen on the table by the double bed. Lou became very excited about this. "How did you know they were contraceptives? What did they look like? Why didn't you tell me before? What a cheek, calling herself a Catholic, do you think she has a man, then?"

Raymond was sorry he had mentioned the subject.

"Don't worry, dear, don't upset yourself, dear."

"And she told me she goes to Mass every Sunday, and all the kids go excepting James. No wonder he's got into trouble with an example like that. I might have known, with her peroxide hair. A pound a week I've been sending up to now, that's fifty-two pounds a year. I would never have done it, calling herself a Catholic with birth control by her bedside."

"Don't upset yourself, dear."

Lou prayed to the Black Madonna three times a week for a safe delivery and a healthy child. She gave her story to the Father Rector who announced it in the next parish magazine. "Another case has come to light of the kindly favor of our 'Black Madonna' towards a childless couple..." Lou recited her rosary before the statue until it was difficult for her to kneel, and, when she stood, could not see her feet. The Mother of God with her black bog-oaken drapery, her high black cheekbones and square hands looked more virginal than ever to Lou as she stood counting her beads in front of her stomach.

She said to Raymond, "If it's a girl we must have Mary as one of the names. But not the first name, it's too ordinary."

"Please yourself, dear," said Raymond. The doctor had told him it might be a difficult birth.

"Thomas, if it's a boy," she said, "after my uncle. But if it's a girl I'd like something fancy for a first name."

He thought, Lou's slipping, she didn't used to say that word, fancy.

"What about Dawn?" she said. "I like the sound of Dawn. Then Mary for a second name. Dawn Mary Parker, it sounds sweet."

"Dawn! That's not a Christian name," he said. Then he told her, "Just as you please, dear."

"Or Thomas Parker," she said.

She had decided to go into the maternity wing of the hospital like everyone else. But near the time she let Raymond change her mind, since he kept saying, "At your age, dear, it might be more difficult than for the younger women. Better book a private ward, we'll manage the expense."

In fact, it was a very easy birth, a girl. Raymond was allowed in to see Lou in the late afternoon. She was half asleep. "The nurse will take you to see the baby in the nursery ward," she told him. "She's lovely, but terribly red."

"They're always red at birth," said Raymond.

He met the nurse in the corridor. "Any chance of seeing the baby? My wife said . . ."

She looked flustered. "I'll get the Sister," she said.

"Oh, I don't want to give any trouble, only my wife said—"

"That's all right. Wait here, Mr. Parker."

The Sister appeared, a tall grave woman. Raymond thought her to be short-sighted for she seemed to look at him fairly closely before she bade him follow her.

The baby was round and very red, with dark curly hair.

"Fancy her having hair. I thought they were born bald," said Raymond.

"They sometimes have hair at birth," said the Sister.

"She's very red in color." Raymond began comparing his child with those in the other cots. "Far more so than the others."

"Oh, that will wear off."

Next day he found Lou in a half-stupor. She had been given a strong sedative following an attack of screaming hysteria. He sat by her bed, bewildered. Presently a nurse beckoned him from the door. "Will you have a word with the Matron?"

"Your wife is upset about her baby," said the matron. "You see, the color. She's a beautiful baby, perfect. It's a question of the color."

"I noticed the baby was red," said Raymond, "but the nurse said—"

"Oh, the red will go. It changes, you know. But the baby will certainly be brown, if not indeed black, as indeed we think she will be. A beautiful healthy child."

"Black?" said Raymond.

"Yes, indeed we think so, indeed I must say, certainly so," said the matron. "We did not expect your wife to take it so badly when we told her. We've had plenty of dark babies here, but most of their mothers expect it."

"There must be a mix-up. You must have mixed up the babies," said Raymond.

"There's no question of mix-up," said the matron sharply. "We'll soon settle that. We've had some of *that* before."

"But neither of us are dark," said Raymond. "You've seen my wife. You see me—"

"That's something you must work out for yourselves. I'd have a word with the doctor if I were you. But whatever conclusion you come to, please don't upset your wife at this stage. She has already refused to feed the child, says it isn't hers, which is ridiculous."

"Was it Oxford St. John?" said Raymond.

"Raymond, the doctor told you not to come here upsetting me. I'm feeling terrible."

"Was it Oxford St. John?"

"Clear out of here, you swine, saying things like that."

He demanded to be taken to see the baby, as he had done every day for a week. The nurses were gathered round it, neglecting the squalling whites in the other cots for the sight of their darling black. She was indeed quite black, with a woolly crop and tiny negroid nostrils. She had been baptized that morning, thought not in her parents' presence. One of the nurses had stood as godmother.

The nurses dispersed in a flurry as Raymond approached. He looked hard at the baby. It looked back with its black button eyes. He saw the nametab round its neck, "Dawn Mary Parker."

He got hold of a nurse in the corridor. "Look here, you just take that name Parker off that child's neck. The name's not Parker, it isn't my child."

The nurse said, "Get away, we're busy."

"There's just a *chance*," said the doctor to Raymond, "that if there's ever been black blood in your family or your wife's, it's coming out now. It's a very long chance. I've never known it happen in my experience, but I've heard of cases, I could read them up."

"There's nothing like that in my family," said Raymond. He thought of Lou, the obscure Liverpool antecedents. The parents had died before he had met Lou.

"It could be several generations back," said the doctor.

Raymond went home, avoiding the neighbors who would stop him to inquire after Lou. He rather regretted smashing up the cot in his first fury. That was something low coming out in him. But again, when he thought of the tiny black hands of the baby with their pink fingernails he did not regret smashing the cot.

He was successful in tracing the whereabouts of Oxford St. John. Even before he heard the result of Oxford's blood test he said to Lou, "Write and ask your relations if there's been any black blood in the family."

"Write and ask *yours*," she said.

She refused to look at the black baby. The nurses fussed round it all day, and come to report its progress to Lou.

"Pull yourself together, Mrs. Parker, she's a lovely child."

"You must care for your infant," said the priest.

"You don't know what I'm suffering," Lou said.

"In the name of God," said the priest, "if you're a Catholic Christian you've got to expect to suffer."

"I can't go against my nature," said Lou. "I can't be expected to—"

Raymond said to her one day in the following week, "The blood tests are all right, the doctor says."

"What do you mean, all right?"

"Oxford's blood and the baby's don't tally, and—"

"Oh, shut up," she said. "The baby's black and your blood tests can't make it white."

"No," he said. He had fallen out with his mother, through his inquiries whether there had been colored blood in his family. "The doctor says," he said, "that these black mixtures sometimes occur in seaport towns. It might have been generations back."

"One thing," said Lou. "I'm not going to take that child back to the flat."

"You'll have to," he said.

Elizabeth wrote her a letter which Raymond intercepted:

"Dear Lou Raymond is asking if we have any blacks in the family well thats funny you have a colored God is not asleep. There was that Flinn cousin Tommy at Liverpool he was very dark they put it down to the past a nigro off a ship that would be before our late Mothers Time God rest her soul she would turn in her grave you shoud have kept up your bit to me whats a pound a Week to you. It was on our fathers side the color and Mary Flinn you remember at the dairy was dark remember her hare was like nigro hare it must be back in the olden days the nigro some ansester but it is only nature. I thank the almighty it has missed my kids and your hubby must think it was that nigro you was showing off when you came to my place. I wish you all the best as a widow with kids you shoud send my money as per usual you affec sister Elizabeth."

"I gather from Elizabeth," said Raymond to Lou, "that there *was* some element of color in your family. Of course, you couldn't be expected to know about it. I do think, though, that some kind of record should be kept."

"Oh, shut *up*," said Lou. "The baby's black and nothing can make it white."

Two days before Lou left the hospital she had a visitor, although she had given instructions that no-one except Raymond should be let in to see her. This lapse she attributed to the nasty curiosity of the nurses, for it was Henry Pierce come to say goodbye before embarkation. He stayed less than five minutes.

"Why, Mrs. Parker, your visitor didn't stay long," said the nurse.

"No, I soon got rid of him. I thought I made it clear to you that I didn't want to see anyone. You shouldn't have let him in."

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Parker, but the young gentleman looked so upset when we told him so. He said he was going abroad and it was his last chance, he might never see you again. He said, 'How's the baby?' and we said, 'Tip-top.'"

"I know what's in your mind," said Lou. "But it isn't true. I've got the blood tests."

"Oh, Mrs. Parker, I wouldn't suggest for a minute . . ."

"She must have went with one of they niggers that used to come."

Lou could never be sure if that was what she heard from the doorways and landings as she climbed the stairs of Cripps House, the neighbors hushing their conversation as she approached.

"I can't take to the child. Try as I do, I simply can't even like it."

"Nor me," said Raymond. "Mind you, if it was anyone else's child I would

think it was all right. It's just the thought of it being mine, and people thinking it isn't."

"That's just it," she said.

One of Raymond's colleagues had asked him that day how his friends Oxford and Henry were getting on. Raymond had to look twice before he decided that the question was innocent. But one never knew. . . . Already Lou and Raymond had approached the adoption society. It was now only a matter of waiting for word.

"If that child was mine," said Tina Farrell, "I'd never part with her. I wish we could afford to adopt another. She's the loveliest little darkie in the world."

"You wouldn't think so," said Lou, "if she really was yours. Imagine it for yourself, waking up to find you've had a black baby that everyone thinks has a nigger for its father."

"It *would* be a shock," Tina said, and tittered.

"We've got the blood test," said Lou quickly.

Raymond got a transfer to London. They got word about the adoption very soon.

"We've done the right thing," said Lou. "Even the priest had to agree with that, considering how strongly we felt against keeping the child."

"Oh, he said it was a good thing?"

"No, not a *good* thing. In fact he said it would have been a good thing if we could have kept the baby. But failing that, we did the *right* thing. Apparently, there's a difference."

1960

DORIS LESSING

1919-

Doris Lessing has had a remarkably productive and influential career, a career which continues to show signs of developing through yet another of the shifts in fictional technique that have marked its several stages. Her autobiographical tetralogy *Children of Violence* (1952-69) was praised for its social realism in depicting the growth of a heroine, Martha Quest, who comes to terms with her own identity by confronting the racism of Africa and the class stratifications of England. When Lessing published *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a number of feminists took the novel's analysis of female socialization to be, in Lessing's words, "a useful weapon in the sex war." But, in a preface (1971), the author warned that the book was really about the threat of compartmentalization in the intellectual and moral climate of the mid-twentieth century. While the issues of female identity and aging were at the center of *The Summer before the Dark* (1973), Lessing also published two moral fables: both *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975) move from realistic portrayals of psychological and cultural entropy to speculative allegories that seek to explain the causes and effects of the illness she associates with the modern world. In her most recent books, those fantasies have transformed themselves into science-fiction novels in which Lessing envisions other life forms on alternative worlds.

Lessing was born Doris Tayler in Kermanshah, which is in what is now Iran. Her father had gone to work in the Imperial Bank of Persia after he had been wounded in World War I and married his nurse. But, when his daughter was five, he moved