

THE  
GIRLS of  
SLENDER  
MEANS  
MURIEL  
SPARK

'AN ENDURING GENIUS'  
GUARDIAN



PENGUIN ESSENTIALS

*The Girls of Slender Means*

Muriel Spark (1918–2006), DBE, CLit, was born and educated in Edinburgh. A poet and novelist, she was best known for her stories and her many successful novels, including *Memento Mori*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Driver's Seat*, *The Hothouse by the East River*, *Loitering with Intent*, *A Far Cry from Kensington*, *Symposium* and *The Finishing School*. She also wrote children's books; radio plays; a comedy (*Doctors of Philosophy*, first performed in London in 1962); biographies of nineteenth-century literary figures, including Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë; a volume of autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*; and in 2004 published *All the Poems of Muriel Spark*.

For her long career of literary achievement, Dame Muriel Spark won international praise and many awards, including the David Cohen British Literature Award, the T. S. Eliot Award, the *Observer* Short-Story Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Boccaccio Prize for European Literature, the Gold Pen Award, the first Enlightenment Award and the Italia Prize for dramatic radio. She was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France. She was given honorary doctorates of Letters from a number of universities, including London, Edinburgh and Oxford, and she was made the first Honorary Citizen of the historic Tuscan town of Civitella in Val di Chiana. Muriel Spark died in 2006.

Mike Willcox is a self-taught, multi-disciplinary artist. He was born in the United States of America in 1985, residing in Florida Keys for most of his life. He works as an illustrator and fine artist.



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# *The Girls of Slender Means*



Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions. The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wallpapers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room above room, exposed, as on a stage, with one wall missing; sometimes a lavatory chain would dangle over nothing from a fourth- or fifth-floor ceiling; most of all the staircases survived, like a new art-form, leading up and up to an unspecified destination that made unusual demands on the mind's eye. All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit.

There was absolutely no point in feeling depressed about the scene, it would have been like feeling depressed about the Grand Canyon or some event of the earth outside everybody's scope. People continued to exchange assurances of depressed feelings about the weather or the news, or the Albert

Memorial which had not been hit, not even shaken, by any bomb from first to last.

The May of Teck Club stood obliquely opposite the site of the Memorial, in one of a row of tall houses which had endured, but barely; some bombs had dropped nearby, and in a few back gardens, leaving the buildings cracked on the outside and shakily hinged within, but habitable for the time being. The shattered windows had been replaced with new glass rattling in loose frames. More recently, the bituminous black-out paint had been removed from landing and bathroom windows. Windows were important in that year of final reckoning; they told at a glance whether a house was inhabited or not; and in the course of the past years they had accumulated much meaning, having been the main danger-zone between domestic life and the war going on outside: everyone had said, when the sirens sounded, 'Mind the windows. Keep away from the windows. Watch out for the glass.'

The May of Teck Club had been three times window-shattered since 1940, but never directly hit. There the windows of the upper bedrooms overlooked the dip and rise of treetops in Kensington Gardens across the street, with the Albert Memorial to be seen by means of a slight craning and twist of the neck. These upper bedrooms looked down on the opposite pavement on the park side of the street, and on the tiny people who moved along in neat-looking singles and couples, pushing little prams loaded with pin-head babies and provisions, or carrying little dots of shopping bags.

Everyone carried a shopping bag in case they should be lucky enough to pass a shop that had a sudden stock of something off the rations.

From the lower-floor dormitories the people in the street looked larger, and the paths of the park were visible. All the nice people were poor, and few were nicer, as nice people come, than these girls at Kensington who glanced out of the windows in the early mornings to see what the day looked like, or gazed out on the green summer evenings, as if reflecting on the months ahead, on love and the relations of love. Their eyes gave out an eager-spirited light that resembled near-genius, but was youth merely. The first of the Rules of Constitution, drawn up at some remote and innocent Edwardian date, still applied more or less to them :

The May of Teck Club exists for the Pecuniary Convenience and Social Protection of Ladies of Slender Means below the age of Thirty Years, who are obliged to reside apart from their Families in order to follow an Occupation in London.

As they realized themselves in varying degrees, few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means.

\*

‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ said Jane Wright, the woman columnist.

At the other end of the telephone, the voice of Dorothy Markham, owner of the flourishing model agency, said, 'Darling, where have you been?' She spoke, by habit since her débutante days, with the utmost enthusiasm of tone.

'I've got something to tell you. Do you remember Nicholas Farringdon? Remember he used to come to the old May of Teck just after the war, he was an anarchist and poet sort of thing. A tall man with—'

'The one that got on to the roof to sleep out with Selina?'

'Yes, Nicholas Farringdon.'

'Oh rather. Has he turned up?'

'No, he's been martyred.'

'What-ed?'

'Martyred in Haiti. Killed. Remember he became a Brother—'

'But I've just been to Tahiti, it's marvellous, everyone's marvellous. Where did you hear it?'

'Haiti. There's a news paragraph just come over Reuters. I'm sure it's the same Nicholas Farringdon because it says a missionary, former poet. I nearly died. I knew him well, you know, in those days. I expect they'll hush it all up, about those days, if they want to make a martyr story.'

'How did it happen, is it gruesome?'

'Oh, I don't know, there's only a paragraph.'

'You'll have to find out more through your grapevine. I'm shattered. I've got heaps to tell you.'

\*

The Committee of Management wishes to express surprise at the Members' protest regarding the wall-paper chosen for the drawing room. The Committee wishes to point out that Members' residential fees do not meet the running expenses of the Club. The Committee regrets that the spirit of the May of Teck foundation has apparently so far deteriorated that such a protest has been made. The Committee refers Members to the terms of the Club's Foundation.

Joanna Childe was a daughter of a country rector. She had a good intelligence and strong obscure emotions. She was training to be a teacher of elocution and, while attending a school of drama, already had pupils of her own. Joanna Childe had been drawn to this profession by her good voice and love of poetry which she loved rather as it might be assumed a cat loves birds; poetry, especially the declamatory sort, excited and possessed her; she would pounce on the stuff, play with it quivering in her mind, and when she had got it by heart, she spoke it forth with devouring relish. Mostly, she indulged the habit while giving elocution lessons at the club where she was highly thought of for it. The vibrations of Joanna's elocution voice from her room or from the recreation room where she frequently rehearsed, were felt to add tone and style to the establishment when boy-friends called. Her taste in poetry became the accepted taste of the club. She had a deep feeling for certain passages in the authorized version of the Bible, besides the Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and had newly discovered Dylan

Thomas. She was not moved by the poetry of Eliot and Auden, except for the latter's lyric:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;

Joanna Childe was large, with light shiny hair, blue eyes and deep-pink cheeks. When she read the notice signed by Lady Julia Markham, chairwoman of the committee, she stood with the other young women round the green baize board and was given to murmur:

'He rageth, and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short.'

It was not known to many that this was a reference to the Devil, but it caused amusement. She had not intended it so. It was not usual for Joanna to quote anything for its aptitude, and at conversational pitch.

Joanna, who was now of age, would henceforth vote conservative in the elections, which at that time in the May of Teck Club was associated with a desirable order of life that none of the members was old enough to remember from direct experience. In principle they all approved of what the committee's notice stood for. And so Joanna was alarmed by the amused reaction to her quotation, the hearty laugh of understanding that those days were over when the members of anything whatsoever might not raise their voices against the drawing-room wallpaper. Principles regardless, everyone knew that the notice was plain damned funny. Lady Julia must be feeling pretty desperate.

'He rageth and again he rageth, because he knows his time is short.'

Little dark Judy Redwood who was a shorthand typist in the Ministry of Labour said, 'I've got a feeling that as members we're legally entitled to a say in the administration. I must ask Geoffrey.' This was the man Judy was engaged to. He was still in the forces, but had qualified as a solicitor before being called up. His sister, Anne Baberton, who stood with the notice-board group, said, 'Geoffrey would be the last person I would consult.' Anne Baberton said this to indicate that she knew Geoffrey better than Judy knew him; she said it to indicate affectionate scorn; she said it because it was the obvious thing for a nicely brought-up sister to say, since she was proud of him; and besides all this, there was an element of irritation in her words, 'Geoffrey would be the last person I would consult', for she knew there was no point in members taking up this question of the drawing-room wall-paper.

Anne trod out her cigarette-end contemptuously on the floor of the large entrance hall with its pink and grey Victorian tiles. This was pointed to by a thin middle-aged woman, one of the few older, if not exactly the earliest members. She said, 'One is not permitted to put cigarette-ends on the floor.' The words did not appear to impress themselves on the ears of the group, more than the ticking of the grandfather clock behind them. But Anne said, 'Isn't one permitted to spit on the floor, even?' 'One certainly isn't,' said the spinster. 'Oh, I thought one was,' said Anne.