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POOR

THINGS

EPISODES FROM
THE EARLY LIFE

of

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BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Poor Things might just imprint itself on the Scottish imagination of the 1990s as indelibly as *Lanark* influenced the 1980s ... the voyage is a teasing delight - and at times very moving ... Can a man "make" a feminist? It is the final riddle of a mesmerizing mind game in which not even the heroine, and certainly not the author, can be trusted. Only Gray's readers can provide the answer - and they are lucky, lucky things indeed! - **Scotsman**. 'If Gray had been content either to create a female Frankenstein or to give a new zest to the legend of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde *Poor Things* might have been a funny and original tale. ... But he has loaded his novel with false historical references and larded it with his own gruesome drawings. ... These are the ravings of second-rate characters in a second-rate novel!' - **Sunday Telegraph**. 'Not since Harry Harrison's *The Channel Tunnel, Hurrah!* has a work of light fiction amused me as much as Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*. Gray, like Harrison, uses science fiction to resurrect England's Empire at its most spacious and gracious. Unlike Harrison he satirizes those wealthy Victorian eccentrics who, not knowing how lucky they were, invented The Emancipated Woman and, through her, The British Labour Party - a gang of weirdos who kept hugging and dropping the woolly socialism of their founders until Margaret Thatcher made them drop it for ever. The heroine of *Poor Things* is an oversexed blend of Eleanor Marx, Annie Besant and Alice in Wonderland. She meets her match in Harry Astley, the best type of English Conservative whose habitual reserve hides a warm heart and formidable intelligence. She is suitably punished for rejecting him by marriage to the spineless working-class Liberal who tells the story. A whole gallery of believably grotesque foreigners - Scottish, Russian, American and French - assist in her downfall, but my favourite character is Mrs Dinwiddie. This lightly sketched portrait of a faithful family servant stands comparison with old Nanny Hawkins in *Brideshead Revisited*!' - **Private Nose**. 'Although it is pointless to accuse a novelist of getting his facts wrong, it is hard to see why General Blessington (who supported home rule for Ireland and the Transvaal) is presented as the worst of British Imperialists. This and similar inauthenticities makes *Poor Things* yet another exercise in Victorian pastiche, a fictional genre which deserves to be neglected for a century or two.' **The Times Literary Implement**. 'Was Bella Victoria really ... a bizarre scheme hatched to get her away from her ... 'Those who, like me, ... ht, and not just because ... int, it is at least as witty ... on and *The Island of Dr.* ... ics of sexual behaviour, ... greatly deal more than ... **Spectator**. 'Gray's ... xt excitement. It is a ... good value too?' - **The Independent**.

erratum

The etching on page 187 does not portray Professor Jean Martin Charcot, but Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac.

... Glasgow, a surgical genius used human remains to create ... reads in part the opening paragraph of the Editor's introduction to *Poor Things*, the ... in question being the Scots novelist Alasdair Gray. And so begins the most erudite, inventive and entertaining novel I have read this year. Bella's innocence is a source of great fun and high drama, yet it also provides Gray with the opportunity to make powerful moral points. 'You need not believe this ...' This phrase echoes around the entire edifice, for in the novel every assertion is contradicted, every argument challenged. Fact and fiction, history and literature are stitched together and animated in that 'Frankenstein method' known as post-modernism. Thus Gray remains true to his own fictional tradition, while employing the devices of older and (frankly) more accessible ones, to write this dazzling book. - **Harpers and Queens**. 'Gray is a notorious scribbler, doodler, all-round maker-upper and social anarchist ... It comes hard on those of us who have experienced the responsibility and loneliness of office to hear from people of Gray's ilk that generosity, benevolence and ordinary commonsense are missing from the political process?' - **The Glasgow Herald**. 'Alasdair Gray is a true original, a twentieth-century William Blake who designs and illustrates his own strange fictions. *Poor Things* ... In this playful but profoundly serious novel, the alchemic effects of love and invention are the only consolation for us, 'poor things', helpless in the flow of historical fact.' - **The Observer**. 'The feeble state of English literary criticism has been demonstrated yet again. I refer to the recent kow-towing of London book reviews before the most recent product of that intellectual hooligan, Alasdair Gray.' - **The Skibereen Eagle**.



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1

Making Me

LIKE MOST FARM WORKERS IN THOSE DAYS my mother distrusted banks. When death drew near she told me her life-savings were in a tin trunk under the bed and muttered, "Take it and count it."

I did, and the sum was more than I had expected. She said, "Make something of yourself with it."

I told her I would make myself a doctor, and her mouth twisted in the sceptical grimace she made at all queer suggestions. A moment later she whispered fiercely, "Don't pay a penny toward the burial. If Scraffles puts me in a pauper's grave then Hell mend him! Promise you'll keep all my money to yourself."

Scraffles was the local nickname for my father and for a disease that afflicts badly fed poultry. Scraffles did pay for her burial but told me, "I leave the stone to you."

Twelve years passed before I could afford a proper monument, and by then nobody remembered the position of the grave.

At university my clothes and manners announced my farm-servant origins, and as I would let nobody sneer at me on that account I was usually alone outside the lecture theatres and examination hall. At the end of the first term a professor called me to his room and said, "Mr. McCandless, in a just world I could predict a brilliant future for you, but not in this one, unless you make some changes. You may

become a greater surgeon than Hunter, a finer obstetrician than Simpson, a better healer than Lister, but unless you acquire a touch of smooth lordliness or easy-going humour no patient will trust you, other doctors will shun you. Don't scorn a polite appearance because many fools, snobs and scoundrels have that. If you cannot afford a good coat from a good tailor, search for one that fits you among forfeited pledges in the better pawnshops. Sleep with your trousers neatly folded between two boards under your mattress. If you cannot change your linen every day at least contrive to attach a freshly starched collar to your shirt. Attend conversaciones and smoking-concerts arranged by the class you are studying to join—you will not find us a bad set of people, and will gradually fit in by a process of instinctive imitation."

I told him my money could pay for no more than my fees, books, instruments and keep.

"I *knew* that was your trouble!" cried he triumphantly. "But our senate handles bequests for deserving cases like yours. Most of the grants go to divinity students but why should science be excluded? I think we can arrange to give you at least the price of a new suit, if you approach us in the right way and I put in a word. What do you say? Shall we attempt it?"

Had he said—"I think you are entitled to a bursary, this is how to apply, and I will be your referee"—had he said that I could have thanked him; but he lolled back in his chair, hands clasped on bulging waistcoat, simpering up at me (for I had not been invited to sit) with such a sweet coy smug smile that I pocketed my fists to avoid punching his teeth. Instead I told him I came from a part of Galloway where folk disliked begging for charity, but since he had a high opinion of my talents we could arrange to profit us both. I suggested he lend me a hundred pounds, for which I would repay seven and a half per cent on the anniversary of the loan until my fifth year as general practitioner or third as professional consultant, when I would refund the original lump and add a twenty pound bonus. He gaped, so I added swiftly, "Of course I will be

bankrupt if I fail to graduate, or get struck early off the Register, but I think I am a safe investment. What do you think? Shall we try it?"

"You are joking?" he murmured, staring at me hard, his lips twitching with the beginnings of a smile he wanted me to imitate. Being too angry to grin at the joke I shrugged, said good-bye and left.

There was perhaps a connection between this interview and an envelope addressed in an unknown hand which came through the post a week later. It contained a five-pound banknote, most of which I spent on a second-hand microscope, the rest on shirts and collars. I could now dress less like a ploughman and more like an indigent bookseller. My fellow students thought this an improvement, for they started greeting me cheerily and telling me the current gossip, though I had no news for them. Godwin Baxter was the only one I talked with as an equal because (I still believe) we were the two most intelligent and least social people attached to the Glasgow medical faculty.



2

Making
Godwin Baxter

I KNEW HIM BY SIGHT FOR THREE TERMS before we exchanged a word.

A private workspace had been made in a corner of the dissecting-room by taking a door off a cupboard and installing a bench. Baxter usually sat there, preparing and examining slide sections and making rapid notes, and here his big face, stout body and thick limbs gave him a dwarfish look. Sometimes he ran out to raid the tank of disinfectant where brains were heaped like cauliflowers, and as he passed other people you saw he was a whole head taller than most, but he kept as far from others as possible, being desperately shy. Despite the ogreish body he had the wide hopeful eyes, snub nose and mournful mouth of an anxious infant, with a brow corrugated by three deep permanent wrinkles. In the morning his coarse brown hair was oiled and combed flat on each side of a centre parting, but as the day wore on spiky tufts of it rose behind his ears, and by mid afternoon his scalp was as shaggy as a bear's pelt. His clothes were of expensive grey cloth, quietly fashionable and beautifully tailored to make his odd figure appear as conventional as possible, yet I felt he would look more natural in the baggy pants and turban of a pantomime Turk.

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This was the only son of Colin Baxter, the first medical man to be knighted by Queen Victoria. Sir Colin's portrait hung beside the portrait of John Hunter in our examination hall: a clean-shaven, sharp-faced, thin-lipped man who looked nothing like his son. "Sir Colin's lack of interest in female beauty was legendary," one of the gossips told me, "but his offspring proves he had a peculiar appetite for female ugliness." It was said that Godwin's father got him late in life by a domestic servant, but (unlike my father) gave his son his own surname, a private education and a small fortune. Nothing definite was known of Godwin's mother. Some said she was in a lunatic asylum, others that Sir Colin kept her as his maidservant in black dress, white cap and apron, silently passing plates round the dining-table when he entertained colleagues and the wives of colleagues. The great surgeon died a year before Godwin enrolled as a student. He was a brilliant student apart from hospital work, where his strange appearance and voice frightened patients and offended the staff, so he did not graduate but continued as a research assistant. Nobody knew or was much interested in his line of research. He was allowed to come and go as he pleased because he paid his fees regularly, inconvenienced nobody, and had a famous father. Most thought him a scientific dabbler, but I also heard that he gave unpaid help to a clinic attached to an east-end iron foundry, and treated scorched limbs and fractured spines uncommonly well.

In my second year I attended a public debate on a theme that interested me, though not by its novelty: does life mainly evolve through small gradual changes, or through big catastrophic ones? In those days that theme was supposed to be religious as well as scientific, so the principal speakers swerved from fanatical solemnity to facetious jocularly, and changed the ground of their argument whenever it gave them the slightest advantage over their opponents. From the floor of the hall I stated factual grounds on which we could all agree, and on which we could build a structure of new ideas. I chose my words carefully and was heard at first in silence, then a widespread

murmuring began that swelled into bursts of laughter. Next day an acquaintance told me, "I'm sorry we laughed McCandless, but to hear you steadily quoting Comte and Huxley and Haeckel in your broad Border dialect was like hearing the Queen opening Parliament in the voice of a Cockney costermonger."

While speaking I did not know what so greatly amused folk and glanced curiously over my clothing to see if it was unfastened. The laughter grew deafening. However, I finished what I had to say then walked out through an audience that not only guffawed but started to clap and stamp. As I reached the door a piercing sound brought me to a stop and struck silence into everyone else. Godwin Baxter was speaking from the gallery. In a shrill drawl (yet every word was distinct) he demonstrated how each of the platform speakers had used arguments that undermined all they aimed to prove. He ended by saying "— And those on the platform are the chosen few! The response to the last speaker's sensible argument shows the mental quality of the mass." I said, "Thank you, Baxter," and left.

A fortnight later I was taking a Sunday stroll along the Cathkin Braes when I saw what seemed a two-year-old child with a tiny puppy approaching from the Cambuslang side. As it neared I recognized Baxter accompanied by a huge Newfoundland dog. We stopped to exchange a few words, found we enjoyed long tramps, and without discussing the matter turned sideways and descended to the river, returning to Glasgow by the quiet path on the Rutherglen bank. A day earlier we had been the only members of the medical faculty to attend a lecture by Clerk Maxwell, and both thought it odd that students who must one day diagnose diseases of the eye cared nothing for the physical nature of light. Godwin said, "Medicine is as much an art as a science, but our science should be as broadly based as possible. Clerk Maxwell and Sir William Thomson are discovering the living quick of what illuminates our brains and thrills along our nerves. The medical faculty overestimate morbid anatomy."

"But you spend days in the dissecting-room."

"I am refining on some of Sir Colin's techniques."

"Sir Colin?"

"My famous progenitor."

"Did you never call him father?"

"I never heard him called anything but Sir Colin. Morbid anatomy is essential to training and research, but leads many doctors into thinking that life is an agitation in something essentially dead. They treat patients' bodies as if the minds, the *lives* were of no account. The smooth bedside manner we cultivate is seldom more than a cheap anaesthetic to make our patients as passive as the corpses we train upon. But a portrait painter does not learn his art by scraping layers of varnish from a Rembrandt, then slicing off the impasto, dissolving the ground and finally separating the fibres of the canvas."

"I agree," said I, "that medicine is as much an art as a science. But surely we come to the art in our fourth year when we enter the hospitals?"

"Nonsense!" said Baxter abruptly. "The public hospitals are places where doctors learn how to get money off the rich by practising on the poor. That is why poor people dread and hate them, and why those with a good income are operated upon privately, or in their own homes. Sir Colin had nothing to do with hospitals. He operated in our town house in winter, our country house in summer. I often assisted him. He was a true artist—he boiled his instruments and sterilized his theatre when hospital boards were ignoring aseptic medicine or denouncing it as a fraud. No surgeons in the public eye dared admit that their filthy scalpels and blood-caked frock-coats had killed scores of patients a year, so went on using them. They drove poor Semmelweis mad, he committed suicide through trying to broadcast the truth. Sir Colin was more discreet than Semmelweis. He kept unorthodox discoveries to himself."

"Please remember," I told him, "that our hospitals have been improved since then."

"They have indeed—thanks to good nursing. Our nurses are now the truest practitioners of the healing art. If every

Scottish, Welsh and English doctor and surgeon dropped suddenly dead, eighty per cent of those admitted to our hospitals would recover if the nursing continued."

I remembered that Baxter was barred from hospital practice outside the poorest sort of charity clinic, which explained his bitterness toward the profession. However, before parting we arranged to go a walk on the following Sunday.

Our Sunday walks became a habit, though we still ignored each other in the dissecting-room, and avoided strolls through busy places. We both shrank from being stared at by others, and any companion of Baxter also became an object of curiosity. We were often quiet together as I could not help wincing sometimes at the sound of his voice. When this happened he would smile and fall silent. Half an hour might pass before I could prod him into saying more but I always did prod him. His voice was repulsive but his words highly interesting. One day I put plugs of cotton-wool in my ears before meeting him and found this let me listen with hardly any pain at all. I heard of his queer education on an autumn afternoon when we nearly lost our way in a network of small paths through the woods between Campsie and Torrance.

I had introduced the topic by speaking of my own childhood. Said he with a sigh, "I entered the world through Sir Colin's dealings with a nurse many years before Miss Nightingale made nursing the good part of British medicine. At that time a conscientious surgeon had to train his own nursing staff. Sir Colin trained one to be his anaesthetist, and worked so closely with her that they managed to produce me, before she died. I have no memory of her. There is nothing she owned in our houses. Sir Colin never spoke of her except once in my teens, when he said she was the cleverest, most teachable woman he knew. That must have attracted him, for he had no interest in female beauty. He had very little interest in *people*, except as surgical cases. As I was educated at home, and saw no other families, and never played with other

children, I was twelve before I learned exactly what mothers do. I knew the difference between doctors and nurses, and thought mothers an inferior kind of nurse who specialized in small people. I thought I had never needed one because I was big from the start."

"But surely you read the *begat* chapter in Genesis?"

"No. Sir Colin taught me himself, you see, and only taught what interested him. He was a severe rationalist. Poetry, fiction, history, philosophy and the Bible struck him as nonsense — 'unprovable blethers', he called them."

"What did he teach you?"

"Mathematics, anatomy and chemistry. Each morning and evening he recorded my temperature and pulse, took samples of my blood and urine, then analysed them. By the age of six I was doing these things for myself. Because of a chemical imbalance my system needs alternating doses of iodine and sugar. I have to monitor their effect with great exactness."

"But did you never ask him where you originally came from?"

"Yes, and he answered by bringing out diagrams, models, morbid specimens and giving me another lesson on how I was made. I enjoyed these lessons. They taught me to admire my internal organization. This preserved my self-respect when I learned how most people feel about my appearance."

"A sad childhood — worse than mine."

"I disagree. Nobody was cruel to me and I got all the animal warmth and affection I needed from Sir Colin's dogs. He always had several of them."

"I discovered procreation by watching cocks and hens. Did your father's dogs never pup?"

"They were dogs — not bitches. Sir Colin waited till my early teens before teaching me exactly how and why the female body differs from the male. As usual he taught me through diagrams, models and morbid specimens, but said he would arrange a practical experiment with a healthy, living specimen if curiosity inclined me that way. It did not."