

ROSE MACAULAY

Miss Anstruther's Letters

Miss Anstruther, whose life had been cut in two on the night of 10 May 1941, so that she now felt herself a ghost, without attachments or habitation, neither of which she any longer desired, sat alone in the bed-sitting-room she had taken, a small room, littered with the grimy, broken and useless objects which she had salvaged from the burnt-out ruin round the corner. It was one of the many burnt-out ruins of that wild night when high explosives and incendiaries had rained on London and the water had run short: it was now a gaunt and roofless tomb, a pile of ashes and rubble and burnt, smashed beams. Where the floors of twelve flats had been, there was empty space. Miss Anstruther had for the first few days climbed up to what had been her flat, on what had been the third floor, swarming up pendent fragments of beams and broken girders, searching and scrabbling among ashes and rubble, but not finding what she sought, only here a pot, there a pan, sheltered from destruction by an overhanging slant of ceiling. Her marmalade for May had been there, and a little sugar and tea; the demolition men got the sugar and tea, but did not care for marmalade, so Miss Anstruther got that. She did not know what else went into those bulging dungaree pockets, and did not really care, for she knew it would not be the thing she sought, for which even demolition men would have no use; the flames, which take anything, useless or not, had taken these, taken them and destroyed them like a ravaging mouse or an idiot child.

After a few days the police had stopped Miss Anstruther from climbing up to her flat any more, since the building was scheduled as dangerous. She did not much mind; she knew by then that what she looked for was gone for good. It was not among the massed debris on the basement floor, where piles of burnt, soaked and blackened fragments had fallen through four floors to lie in indistinguishable anonymity together. The tenant of the basement flat spent her days there, sorting and burrowing among the chaotic mass that had invaded her home from the dwellings of her co-tenants above. There were masses of paper, charred and black and damp, which had been books. Some- times the basement tenant would call out to Miss Anstruther, 'Here's a book. That'll be yours, Miss Anstruther'; for it was believed in Mortimer House that most of the books contained in it were Miss Anstruther's, Miss Anstruther being something of a bookworm. But none of the books were any use now, merely drifts of burnt pages. Most of the pages were loose and scattered about the rubbish-heaps; Miss Anstruther picked up one here and there and made out some words. 'Yes,' she would agree. 'Yes, that was one of mine.' The basement tenant, digging bravely away for her motoring trophies, said, 'Is it one you wrote?' 'I don't think so,' said Miss Anstruther. 'I don't think I can have . . .' She did not really know what she might not have written, in that burnt-out past when she had sat and written this and that on the

third floor, looking out on green gardens; but she did not think it could have been this, which was a page from Urquhart's translation of Rabelais. 'Have you lost all your own?' the basement tenant asked, thinking about her motoring cups, and how she must get at them before the demolition men did, for they were silver. 'Everything,' Miss Anstruther answered. 'Everything. They don't matter.' 'I hope you had no precious manuscripts,' said the kind tenant. 'Books you were writing, and that.' 'Yes,' said Miss Anstruther, digging about among the rubble heaps. 'Oh yes. They're gone. They don't matter. . .'

She went on digging till twilight came. She was grimed from head to foot; her only clothes were ruined; she stood knee-deep in drifts of burnt rubbish that had been carpets, beds, curtains, furniture, pictures, and books; the smoke that smouldered up from them made her cry and cough. What she looked for was not there; it was ashes, it was no more. She had not rescued it while she could, she had forgotten it, and now it was ashes. All but one torn, burnt corner of note-paper, which she picked up out of a battered saucepan belonging to the basement tenant. It was niggled over with close small writing, the only words left of the thousands of words in that hand that she looked for. She put it in her note-case and went on looking till dark; then she went back to her bed-sitting-room, which she filled each night with dirt and sorrow and a few blackened cups. She knew at last that it was no use to look any more, so she went to bed and lay open-eyed through the short summer nights. She hoped each night that there would be another raid, which should save her the trouble of going on living. But it seemed that the Luftwaffe had, for the moment, done; each morning came, the day broke, and, like a revenant, Miss Anstruther still haunted her ruins, where now the demolition men were at work, digging and sorting and pocketing as they worked.

'I watch them close,' said a policeman standing by. 'I always hope I'll catch them at it. But they sneak into dark corners and stuff their pockets before you can look round.'

'They didn't ought,' said the widow of the publican who had kept the little smashed pub on the corner, 'they didn't ought to let them have those big pockets, it's not right. Poor people like us, who've lost all we had, to have what's left taken off us by them... it's not right.'

The policeman agreed that it was not right, but they were that crafty, he couldn't catch them at it.

Each night, as Miss Anstruther lay awake in her strange, littered, unhomely room, she lived again the blazing night that had cut her life in two. It had begun like other nights, with the wailing siren followed by the crashing guns, the rushing hiss of incendiaries over London, and the whining, howling pitching of bombs out of the sky onto the fire-lit city. A wild, blazing hell of a night. Miss Anstruther, whom bombs made restless, had gone down once or twice to the street door to look at the glowing furnace of London and exchange comments with the caretaker on the ground floor and

with the two basement tenants, then she had sat on the stairs, listening to the demon noise. Crashes shook Mortimer House, which was tall and slim and Edwardian, and swayed like a reed in the wind to near bombing. Miss Anstruther understood that this was a good sign, a sign that Mortimer House, unlike the characters ascribed to clients by fortune-tellers, would bend but not break. So she was quite surprised and shocked when, after a series of three close-at-hand screams and crashes, the fourth exploded, a giant earthquake, against Mortimer House, and sent its whole front crashing down. Miss Anstruther, dazed and bruised from the hurtle of bricks and plaster flung at her head, and choked with dust, hurried down the stairs, which were still there. The wall on the street was a pile of smoking, rumbling rubble, the Gothic respectability of Mortimer House one with Nineveh and Tyre and with the little public across the street. The ground- floor flats, the hall and the street outside, were scrambled and beaten into a common devastation of smashed masonry and dust. The little caretaker was tugging at his large wife, who was struck unconscious and jammed to the knees in bricks. The basement tenant, who had rushed up with her stirrup pump, began to tug too, so did Miss Anstruther. Policemen pushed in through the mess, rescue men and a warden followed, all was in train for rescue, as Miss Anstruther had so often seen it in her ambulance-driving.

'What about the flats above?' they called. 'Anyone in them?' Only two of the flats above had been occupied, Miss Anstruther's at the back. Mrs. Cavendish's at the front. The rescuers rushed upstairs to investigate the fate of Mrs. Cavendish.

'Why the devil,' inquired the police, 'wasn't everyone down- stairs?' But the caretaker's wife, who had been downstairs, was unconscious and jammed, while Miss Anstruther, who had been upstairs, was neither.

They hauled out the caretaker's wife, and carried her to a waiting ambulance.

'Everyone out of the building!' shouted the police. 'Everyone out!'

Miss Anstruther asked why.

The police said there were to be no bloody whys, everyone out, the bloody gas pipe's burst and they're throwing down fire, the whole thing may go up in a bonfire before you can turn round.

A bonfire! Miss Anstruther thought, if that's so I must go up and save some things. She rushed up the stairs, while the rescue men were in Mrs. Cavendish's flat. Inside her own blasted and twisted door, her flat lay waiting for death. God, muttered Miss Anstruther, what shall I save? She caught up a suitcase, and furiously piled books into it - Herodotus, *Mathematical Magick*, some of the twenty volumes of *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, the eight little volumes of Walpole's letters, *Trivia*, *Curiosities of Literature*, the six volumes of Boswell, then, as the suitcase would not shut, she turned out

Boswell and substituted a china cow, a tiny walnut shell with tiny Mexicans behind glass, a box with a mechanical bird that jumped out and sang, and a fountain pen. No use bothering with the big books or the pictures. Slinging the suitcase across her back, she caught up her portable wireless set and her typewriter, loped downstairs, placed her salvage on the piled wreckage at what had been the street door, and started up the stairs again. As she reached the first floor, there was a burst and a hissing, a huge *pst-pst*, and a rush of flame leaped over Mortimer House as the burst gas caught and sprang to heaven, another fiery rose bursting into bloom to join that pandemonic red garden of night. Two rescue men, carrying Mrs. Cavendish downstairs, met Miss Anstruther and pushed her back.

'Clear out. Can't get up there again, it'll go up any minute.' It was at this moment that Miss Anstruther remembered the thing she wanted most, the thing she had forgotten while she gathered up things she wanted less.

She cried, 'I must go up again. I must get something out. There's time.'

'Not a bloody second,' one of them shouted at her, and pushed her back.

She fought him. 'Let me go, oh let me go. I tell you I'm going up once more.'

On the landing above, a wall of flame leaped crackling to the ceiling.

'Go up be damned. Want to go through that?'

They pulled her down with them to the ground floor. She ran out into the street, shouting for a ladder. Oh God, where are the fire engines? A hundred fires, the water given out in some places, engines helpless. Everywhere buildings burning, museums, churches, hospitals, great shops, houses, blocks of flats, north, south, east, west and centre. Such a raid never was. Miss Anstruther heeded none of it; with hell blazing and crashing round her, all she thought was, I must get my letters. Oh dear God, my letters. She pushed again into the inferno, but again she was dragged back. 'No one to go in there,' said the police, for all human life was by now extricated. No one to go in, and Miss Anstruther's flat left to be consumed in the spreading storm of fire, which was to leave no wrack behind. Everything was doomed - furniture, books, pictures, china, clothes, manuscripts, silver, everything: all she thought of was the desk crammed with letters that should have been the first thing she saved. What had she saved instead? Her wireless, her typewriter, a suitcase full of books; looking round, she saw that all three had gone from where she had put them down. Perhaps they were in the safe keeping of the police, more likely in the wholly unsafe keeping of some rescue-squad man or private looter. Miss Anstruther cared little. She sat down on the wreckage of the road, sick and shaking, wholly bereft.

The bombers departed, their job well done. Dawn came, dim and ashy, in a pall of smoke. The little burial garden was like a garden in a Vesuvian village, grey in its ash coat. The air choked with fine drifts of cinders. Mortimer House still burned, for no

one had put it out. A grimy warden with a note-book asked Miss Anstruther, have you anywhere to go?

'No,' she said, 'I shall stay here.'

'Better go to a rest centre,' said the warden, wearily doing his job, not caring where anyone went, wondering what had happened in North Ealing, where he lived.

Miss Anstruther stayed, watching the red ruin smouldering low. Sometime, she thought, it will be cool enough to go into. There followed the haunted, desperate days of search which found nothing. Since silver and furniture had been wholly consumed, what hope for letters? There was no charred sliver of the old locked rosewood desk which had held them. The burning words were burnt, the lines, running small and close and neat down the page, difficult to decipher, with the o's and a's never closed at the top, had run into a flaming void and would never be deciphered more. Miss Anstruther tried to recall them, as she sat in the alien room; shutting her eyes, she tried to see again the phrases that, once you had made them out, lit the page like stars. There had been many hundreds of letters, spread over twenty-two years. Last year their writer had died; the letters were all that Miss Anstruther had left of him; she had not yet re-read them; she had been waiting till she could do so without the devastation of unendurable weeping. They had lain there, a solace waiting for her when she could take it. Had she taken it, she could have recalled them better now. As it was, her memory held disjointed phrases, could not piece them together. Light of my eyes. You are the sun and the moon and the stars to me. When I think of you life becomes music, poetry, beauty, and I am more than myself. It is what lovers have found in all the ages, and no one has ever found before. The sun flickering through the beeches on your hair. And so on. As each phrase came back to her, it jabbed at her heart like a twisting bayonet. He would run over a list of places they had seen together, in the secret stolen travels of twenty years. The balcony where they dined at the Foix inn, leaning over the green river, eating trout just caught in it. The little wild strawberries at Andorra la Vieja, the mountain pass that ran down to it from Ax, the winding road down into Seo d'Urgel and Spain. Lerida, Zaragoza, little mountain-towns in the Pyrenees, Jaca, Saint Jean Pied-du-Port, the little harbour of Collioure, with its painted boats, morning coffee out of red cups at Villefranche, tramping about France in a hot July; truffles in the *place* at Perigueux, the stream that rushed steeply down the village street at Florac, the frogs croaking in the hills about it, the gorges of the Tarn, Rodez with its spacious place and plane trees, the little walled town of Cordes with the inn courtyard a jumble of sculptures, altar-pieces from churches, and ornaments from châteaux; Lisieux, with ancient crazy-floored inn, huge four-poster and preposterous little saint (before the grandiose white temple in her honour had arisen on the hill outside the town), villages in the Haute-Savoie, jumbled among mountain rocks over brawling streams, the motor bus over the Alps down into Susa and Italy. Walking over the Amberley downs, along the Dorset coast from Corfe to

Lyme on two hot May days, with a night at Chideock between, sauntering in Buckinghamshire beech-woods, boating off Bucklers Hard, climbing Dunkery Beacon to Porlock, driving on a June afternoon over Kirkdale pass. . . Baedeker starred places because we ought to see them, he wrote, I star them because we saw them together, and those stars light them up for ever ... Of this kind had been many of the letters that had been for the last year all Miss Anstruther had left, except memory, of two-and-twenty years. There had been other letters about books, books he was reading, books she was writing; others about plans, politics, health, the weather, himself, herself, anything. I could have saved them, she kept thinking; I had the chance; but I saved a typewriter and a wireless set and some books and a walnut shell and a china cow, and even they are gone. So she would cry and cry, till tears blunted at last for the time the sharp edge of grief, leaving only a dull lassitude, an end of being. Sometimes she would take out and look at the charred corner of paper which was now all she had of her lover; all that was legible of it was a line and a half of close small writing, the o's and a's open at the top. It had been written twenty-one years ago, and it said, 'Leave it at that. I know now that you don't care twopence; if you did you would' . . . The words, each time she looked at them, seemed to darken and obliterate a little more of the twenty years that had followed them, the years of the letters and the starred places and all they had had together. You don't care twopence, he seemed to say still; if you had cared twopence, you would have saved my letters, not your wireless and your typewriter and your china cow, least of all those little walnut Mexicans, which you know I never liked. Leave it at that.

Oh, if instead of these words she had found light of my eyes, or I think of the balcony at Foix, she thought she could have gone on living. As it is, thought Miss Anstruther, as it is I can't. Oh my darling, I did care twopence, I did.

So each night she cried herself to sleep, and woke to drag through another empty summer's day.

Later, she took another flat. Life assembled itself about her again; kind friends gave her books; she bought another type-writer, another wireless set, and ruined herself with getting necessary furniture, for which she would get no financial help until after the war. She noticed little of all this that she did, and saw no real reason for doing any of it. She was alone with a past devoured by fire and a charred scrap of paper which said you don't care twopence, and then a blank, a great interruption, an end. She had failed in caring once, twenty years ago, and failed again now, and the twenty years between were a drift of grey ashes that once were fire, and she a drifting ghost too. She had to leave it at that.