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HER LUCK  
CHRISTINA STEAD

INTRODUCTION BY  
TIM PARKS

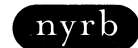
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## INTRODUCTION

"DON'T know what imagination is," says Letty Fox, "if not an unpruned, tangled kind of memory." Though the claim comes early on in this long book, and is made what's more by one of the flightiest narrators fiction has ever produced, nevertheless the reader will immediately take it as confirmation of what he has already suspected: flagrantly unpruned and tangled beyond any unraveling, the six-hundred-plus pages of *Letty Fox: Her Luck* are the seductive and savage reworking of an apparently inexhaustible memory, its author's as much as its narrator's.

One of the most exuberant and chameleonic novelists of her century, Christina Stead had much to remember by the time she came to this, her sixth novel. Born in a southern suburb of Sydney in 1902, her literary ambitions, left-wing politics, and difficult love life brought her first to London, then Paris, then New York. She had known success and failure, romance and rejection; she had worked for the Communist Party and collaborated, simultaneously, with corrupt financiers. But however complex and contradictory her career and relationships may have become, Stead's memories still tended to organize themselves around the two great stories that had shaped her life: the story of the bizarre Australian family she grew up in, and the story of the Jewish-American community she ultimately became part of. The first was a horror story with comic interludes, the second a romance with recurrent nightmares. The five novels before *Letty Fox*, all equally extravagant and daring, had kept the two stages of her life apart; they dealt with either the one story or the other. Published in 1946, after she had been resident in New York for nine years and when her literary

reputation at last seemed established, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* contrives to tangle them both.

Stead's early unhappiness is easily understood. The plain, big-boned daughter of a pretty mother who died when she was two, Christina soon found herself an unwanted extra in her father's second family. "My stepmother was kind to me," she later conceded of Ada Stead, "until her first child was born." Five more children would follow. From the beginning, Stead's writing would always convey a sense of life's exhausting and oppressive excess. "Living is too much for me," says Letty Fox, who is herself more than a handful for those around her. It is as if Stead were telling us that her own explosive vitality was no more than a necessary defense against the world's threatening profusion.

Self-taught biologist and pioneering socialist, a man of immense energy and greater vanity, Stead's handsome father contrived to complicate his adolescent daughter's isolation by making Christina his confidante in what had now become the epic struggle between himself and his wife. David Stead had made this second marriage at least partly for money. The couple had moved into an extravagant mansion immediately after the wedding. But when Ada's father died, her family was found to be as deeply in debt as it had previously appeared to be swimming in wealth. Reduced to poverty, obliged to make do with ramshackle accommodation, Ada sulked. The charismatic David found her dull. Christina, on the other hand, was intelligent beyond her years. How sad, however, as he never tired of reminding her, that she was also "a fat lazy lump."

On research trips to Malaysia and Paris, David Stead, a staunch supporter of women's rights and great believer in eugenics, wrote his daughter long letters sharing his enthusiasm for the superior and slender beauty of the women of those countries. Bulky Christina yearned to travel. When she was seventeen her father fell in love with a sixteen-year-old girl, Thistle Harris, and would eventually run off with this pretty junior. Again he made the ugly duckling of his brood his confidante. Twenty years later, from the distant fortress of Manhattan, the slighted daughter took her revenge. I know of no account of father and family more generously observed or more irremediably cruel than the autobiographical novel *The Man Who Loved Children*. Published in 1940, it remains Stead's

most frightening and ruthless work. At the height of her powers, she was thus able to begin *Letty Fox* with the worst of that old bitterness exorcised. She was ready to have fun.

The passage from family of origin to partner of election is the story at the core of *Letty Fox*. In that sense, albeit with a completely different milieu and a whole new gallery of characters, the novel takes over where *The Man Who Loved Children* left off. In the earlier work the heroine leaves home only in the final pages; here instead she is decidedly out of the fold and on the make. For Stead herself, as one learns from Hazel Rowley's biography,\* this period of young adulthood was marked by the most intense yearning and frustration. It was also the period in which the contradiction that shaped her novels, or rather that extended them beyond any immediately perceptible shape, first becomes apparent.

Stead's final school exams won her a scholarship to the university, but she was ineligible for an arts degree because she hadn't studied Latin. The daughter of a biologist and man of action isn't encouraged to grapple with fossil languages. She could have chosen a science course and had her higher education financed by the State, but decided against it, apparently because she had come to associate women in science with dowdy and frustrated spinsters. The Darwinist determinism she had learned from her father had apparently convinced Stead that in the struggle for survival, which was always a struggle to win the right mate, a science degree would not be a winning card for a woman. The more biology a girl knew, it seemed, the more she appreciated that it was not biology a girl needed to know.

This disturbing lesson was reinforced, in Stead's case, by the fiercest erotic longings, desires which, if only because they couldn't be talked about in the puritan society she grew up in, she often feared would drive her mad. Would a plain girl find a lover and husband? "Hunger of the stomach can be confessed," she later wrote in a note for the novel *For Love Alone*, "but not sexual hunger." In *Letty Fox*, Christina Stead would make it her business to be alarmingly frank about that hunger. From earliest adolescence, Letty lusts. "This fox was tearing at my vitals," she tells us.

\*Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Henry Holt, 1994).

Rowley remarks that "Stead liked the hint of bawdiness" in the title's combination of the words "fox" and "luck."

Unable to study the arts and unwilling to take up science, the nineteen-year-old Stead settled on teaching, making the long journey back and forth to training college in Sydney every day. Rising at dawn, she wrote down stories of great fantasy that nevertheless show an acute awareness of what was the most urgent reality of her life: she was a highly sexed young woman after her man, a caricature almost of the traditional gal.

But she was also a socialist and a radical. Here come the complications. At Sydney Girls High School Christina had been enthusiastic when a teacher told them about the Communist revolution in Russia. Throughout the First World War she was staunchly pacifist. These controversial positions were again things she had taken from her atheist but far from clear-headed father. As he saw it, you discovered the hard facts of the biological struggle, facts that in Europe were preparing the way for a book like *Mein Kampf*, but then paradoxically, idealistically, you used that knowledge, or said you were using it, not for your own personal fight, or even for that of your race, but to further the cause of mankind in a spirit of solidarity. David Stead, for example, had established which fish off the Australian coast were fit for human consumption, where and how they could be caught. It was an important contribution. It also made him, if only briefly, an important man, the sort of man a bright young girl might run away with.

There was an irony to this, of course: the altruism of the common cause had proved an efficient way for the individual male of the species to get what he wanted, a young woman. But would the same be true for the female? Attending a politicized evening course at Sydney University, a course whose object, according to one student, was nothing less than "the reform of the Universe," Christina Stead fell determinedly in love with the left-wing lecturer Keith Duncan. Alas, she was not in a position to offer him either what her father could offer Thistle Harris or what Thistle could offer her father. Perhaps it was at this point that Stead began to appreciate the hypocrisy and contradiction in her father's position. Certainly the comedy that everywhere galvanizes *Letty Fox* is the mismatch between the idealistic rhetoric of radicalism and

the biologically driven power game between men and women. Both Stead and Letty dream of the grand individual career, the generous altruistic gesture *and* traditional romantic love. Since such romance notoriously involves feminine submission, the combination proves arduous. What was required, it seemed, was an improbable stroke of luck.

Christina Stead failed to become a teacher. In the classroom she lost her voice; arriving at the school gates she panicked. Again the problem was the fear of a virginity prolonged into old age. School was a place where "a woman was not a woman." Bound over to teaching for five years to pay for her training, she had to struggle hard to escape without a heavy fine. She was lonely now. Keith Duncan and other radical friends had left for England and the wider world. They had travel scholarships. But for Stead there were no such handouts. She worked for two years as a secretary to save the money to follow Duncan. He wrote to encourage her, then to put her off. Would they ever become lovers? Every day she walked miles to save tram fares. A special and paradoxical kind of feminism was developing in Stead. She wasn't interested in rights and equality as ends in themselves, but in relation to the struggle to marry one's man.

Then, at last in England, aged twenty-five, Christina Stead did get what she would always consider her one great piece of luck in life: she met the man, that is, with whom she could combine both career and romance. It wasn't Keith Duncan. Duncan had led her on, but wouldn't commit himself. He wouldn't even take her to bed. It was Christina's new employer, ten years older than herself, who finally relieved his young secretary of her virginity. In a letter home announcing imminent marriage, Stead described him thus: "William James Blech is a German Jew of American upbringing, small, very loquacious, very astute in business and literary affairs and art, highly educated and original." Some years later, as a precautionary measure against arrest for fraudulent bankruptcy, William Blech changed his name to William Blake. It was a gesture typical of his innocent charm and considerable presumption.

Despite his new girlfriend's claims, Blech, like Stead's father, was entirely self-taught. Like her father he was a radical, indeed a Communist, though he worked for a decidedly shady banking

company. Like her father he had boundless energy and optimism. And like her father, unfortunately, he was married. He had a wife and daughter. Wedding bells were far from imminent.

Once again, then, Stead was an anomalous creature on the edge of a family that didn't quite know what to do with her. The second story of her life, the second great struggle had begun. Having gratefully given herself to this man, she must now persuade him to persuade his wife to agree to a divorce. Having abandoned one family, she would force her way into another. From this point on, Stead's staunch communism, her unquestioning support for Blech unceasing political endeavors, would be a crucial part of that struggle. Indeed, like Blech, Stead would go on supporting Stalinism and Soviet Russia long after everybody else had abandoned it. It was a loyalty and a stubbornness for which she paid dearly in terms of lost recognition.

I can think of no author for whom milieu is more important than for Christina Stead, no author who works harder to create the social settings of her novels and to convey the sense that character and background are inseparable. She appreciates the irony that although the individual struggles above all for himself, and although his primary experience is that of being alone, nevertheless he does not create or even possess that self, but is very largely a product of his own milieu.

No doubt this knowledge came from being so frequently forced to change milieu herself. Having met Blech in London, so soon after arrival from Sydney, she at once agreed to his moving her nearer to his wife and daughter in Paris. She loved it. In Paris, well dressed, speaking French, with a man by her side, she decided she was not so plain after all. Place and situation changes you. Over the next few years she lived in London again, then New York, Spain, Belgium, London, and—at last a few years of stability—New York.

She made copious notes on every community she came in contact with. She changed languages, accents. She wrote books set in Australia, England, France, the US; set in the lower class, the middle class, among expatriates. Each work was testimony to her own determination to adapt and survive, to fit in; or perhaps one

should rather say, to shine whatever the milieu, whatever society she chose to write about or style she chose to use. Her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, rediscovers and reproduces the Australia of her youth. Moving back and forth from London to Paris, her second, *The Beauties and Furies*, shows an intimate awareness of the Englishman and his relationship with France, but also a readiness to measure herself with Lawrence, Joyce, and the most innovative fiction of the century. *The House of All Nations* is entirely at home in the international banking community of northern Europe, while *The Man Who Loved Children* and *Letty Fox* are both written in a determinedly American idiom. Later in life, after a spell in Newcastle, Stead would produce a completely convincing novel of the English working classes: published in 1966, *Cotter's England* was a feat far beyond mere mimicry and suggests an extraordinary facility for penetrating an alien group psychology.

But in the decade that led up to the writing of *Letty Fox*, Stead was above all determined to fit in with Bill Blech's family, with the German mother, the expensively educated American daughter, the wife whom she must never meet, and, in short, with the whole Jewish-American community and its cosmopolitan traditions. It was here that her penetrative eye must go deepest. How else could she hope to win through, to arrive, if not at the altar, then at least at the registry office?

*Letty Fox*: *Her Luck* was the fruit of those long years of adaptation, an exuberant muddling of Stead's own girlhood memories with her meticulous observations of Blech's now adult daughter, Ruth Blech, who was a frequent visitor at the Stead/Blech ménage in New York. Ruth becomes the model, or one of the models, for Letty. She is given all the contradictions that formed the core of Stead's experience: the erotic charge, the romantic longings, the left-wing politics, the desire to be both beautiful and brilliant, to be admired and feared, to love with feminine faithfulness and submission and with masculine presumption and promiscuity. It's an explosive cocktail.

The relationships around Letty are likewise a retangling of those Stead knew best. So the heroine is given a father who, like Bill Blech, is a businessman radical, still married yet living with a mistress, who thus becomes, at least potentially, a portrait of Stead

herself. Then Bill Blech, of course, was not unlike Christina's father, David Stead, another radical who left his wife for a mistress. The book is a hall of mirrors as far as possible identifications are concerned. Certainly when it was published all of Blech's extended family would see themselves in it. The only character who was unrecognizable was Letty's father's mistress: cool, level-headed, beautiful, and practical, Persia was as different from Christina as her exotic name suggests.

Wasn't this blatant mixture of fiction and reality a risk for Stead? Couldn't it perhaps lead to a breakup with Bill, to whom she still wasn't married, particularly if his daughter was to be presented as wild and promiscuous and Bill as an ineffectual father who kept wife and mistress happy by lying to them both? Reading Rowley's biography one becomes aware of an unspoken pact between Stead and Blech, the deal that made their relationship possible: she would never disagree with him politically and he would never take offense at what she wrote in a novel. It is to Blech's immense credit, after all, that he was the first to appreciate Stead's talent. Discovering his secretary's ambitions, he had asked to see a manuscript and, an able writer himself, recognized at once that it was remarkable. Her genius, perhaps, would excuse his betrayal of his family. It must be given full reign. "Dear Bill said once to me," Stead recounted, "that he would like to be to me what G. H. Lewes was to George Eliot. . . . I was not very pleased, because G. E. was not a pretty girl."

Stead would also one day remark that she only felt truly "moral" when writing, and again that she had only "felt herself" when writing. Perhaps what she meant was that in this supposedly fictional space she was free not to adhere to certain ideals, not to be coherent, to tell a clashing truth or two. "Radicalism is the opium of the middle class," announces an incensed Letty. Stead is enjoying herself. What luck to be able to say such things! And if this was the only space where she could be herself, where she could say she loved a man but found him unforgivable, or alternately that she loved a man but yearned for other men, or again that she was deeply attracted to women, but found lesbianism abhorrent, then little wonder she made the novels long and furious. They would express all the wild life no orthodoxy could embrace.

"He had some wonderful vision of the future," Letty remarks of a black man who falls in love with her, "where no hate would exist, only love between peoples and races, this was fine enough, but I live too much in the here and now; this is my great weakness." It was Stead's strength as a novelist.

The here and now of *Letty Fox* is overwhelmingly New York. Stead is determined to demonstrate that she now has full command of Bill's world. It opens thus:

One hot night last spring, after waiting fruitlessly for a call from my then lover, with whom I had quarreled the same afternoon, and finding one of my black moods on me, I flung out of my lonely room on the ninth floor (unlucky number) in a hotel in lower Fifth Avenue and rushed into the streets of the Village, feeling bad.

Letty is always flinging out of rooms, rushing across streets. She is always full of energy and always on the edge of depression. Above all she always needs money. The long first paragraph finishes:

Beyond such petty expenses, I needed at least two hundred and fifty dollars for a new coat. My fur coat, got from my mother, and my dinner dress, got from my grandmother, were things of the past and things with a past, mere rags and too well known to all my friends. There was no end to what I needed.

Immediately we have the picture of Stead's America, a place where love and money cannot be separated, where relationships are talked about in terms of investments and cutting losses, where people enjoy the illusion that the marriage game can be managed, and evaded, like an income tax return. It is savvy, cynical, full of corrupt life. Above all, it is brutal, since America, as Stead sees it, is that place where the struggle of everyone against everyone else is most visible and the rhetoric of concern at its absolute thinnest.

Yet it is impossible not to appreciate the gusto with which Letty enters the fray. Wondering whether she should accept a job offer in return for sex, Letty tells us: "I do not even see a scandal in



this, for wide-awake women. In other times, society regarded us as cattle or handsome house slaves; the ability to sell ourselves in any way we like is a step towards freedom." Needless to say, Letty thinks of herself as a socialist. Later in the book the terms are reversed, but the principle is the same: "I had the feeling that he could have been bought," our heroine remarks of one reluctant lover, "if I had had a little more money."

Having given us, by way of introduction, a dozen sparkling pages on the twenty-three-year-old Letty's life in wartime Manhattan, Stead then goes back to reconstruct her narrator's childhood. It is here that the reader will first boggle at what Angela Carter referred to as Stead's "almost megalomaniac ambition." The "almost" was unnecessary. It is the sheer scope of the enterprise that is so extraordinary. Stead, an Australian, goes right back to the beginning of the century to reconstruct the rich New England family of Letty's maternal grandmother, the notorious Cissy Morgan, then the German-Jewish family of her paternal grandmother. Uncles, aunts, and cousins marry, divorce, and remarry. We have their foibles, ambitions, views on education, and endless improprieties. None of these are mere vignettes or anecdotes, but highly developed studies integrated in a series of interlocking stories that could well fill a book of their own. What they establish beyond all dispute is that Letty, like so many modern children, knows far too much far too young.

The satire is vast, fed constantly by the ancient struggle between the sexes and the modern American woman's delighted discovery of alimony. At great length we learn of the unhappily complex relationship between Letty's father, Solander, and her mother, Mathilde, then of his passion for the younger woman, Persia. Eagle-eyed, always excited, Letty wants to know what all this means. By the time her father leaves home, she and her younger sister, Jacky, have already learned how to present themselves as victims and make the most of being thought of as deprived. They know that compassion is a harbinger of gifts, hopefully cash.

The daughters are moved in with relatives; they are taken to England, to Paris; they write extremely long, witty, passionate letters in highly individual voices, seeking to impress their father or calm their mother. Slowly and with complete conviction, Stead

shows the two sisters becoming distinct as they react first to the overall situation and then to each other's response to it, seeking individuality through complementary or competitive behavior. We see character in the making.

Meantime, stories you thought must have ended start again. An uncle you imagined married and forgotten reappears with debts and a mistress. He tries to seduce a niece. A cousin is becoming a whore, or a saint. An aunt turns up with a child, but without a husband. The book smolders, flaring up where you thought it extinguished, smoking where you had seen no fire.

But where is the whole thing going? If every form of narrative representation is essentially a convention, a pact between writer and reader as to how experience can be talked about, then it is only natural that the finest authors should be uneasy with some aspect of that convention, eager to bend it closer to the grain of their own lives. What Stead most resisted in traditional narrative was any easy formulation of shape and direction, any neatness, "the neatly groomed little boy in sailor collar," she called it, speaking disparagingly of the fiction the publishers liked most. In contrast, the exuberance and manic extension of the world that she depicts in *Letty Fox* denies any possibility of order. The work is rich and capricious, its descriptions dense, vital, and highly particularized; its only overall drift is that of Letty's growing up.

Not surprisingly, then, it is with the depiction of Letty's adolescence and young womanhood that Stead achieves her most impressive effect in this book. For perhaps three hundred pages we have been given a dazzling social satire, a tragicomic picture of a modern society where, with all traditional hierarchy broken down, the only possible relationship between people, above all between men and women, is competition and conflict; it is the mirror image at a social level of the political war that is raging in Europe as Stead writes her story. Yet up to this point, the reader feels, the whole book, bar the opening dozen pages, might well have been written in third person; for Letty is retelling stories she has heard, or overheard, stories she understands only in the most superficial fashion. The precocious girl feels superior to these aunts and uncles with their incomprehensibly muddled lives. There is a consequent narrative distance. And, as with most satires, the reader too

feels a certain smug if uneasy detachment. There is something slightly grotesque about all these Morgans and Foxes with their in-terminable passions. Letty feels sure she will do better.

But the moment Letty too becomes subject to sexual desire, everything changes. It is as if a sane psychiatrist, chuckling over the antics of his lunatic patients, had himself suddenly gone mad. Suddenly passion, attachments, betrayals, marriage, and divorce are no laughing matter. Or they are, for there is still plenty of comedy, but the nature of the laughter has changed. It is full of pathos where before it was constantly on the edge of caricature. What had appeared to be an essentially political book is overtaken by existential concerns; the compassion Stead arouses now is not for the victims of poverty, the usual objects of public piety, but for those of desire:

Moods of blackness and suffering passed through me, of fierce, fierce intercourse such as no flesh could bear. I got up and the fever that raged through my body was intolerable. Yes, this is the love that nymphs knew on afternoons when Pan chased them, I thought, this is the meaning of all those stories. I thought I was passionate; now, I know what growing up is. I thought, if it is going to be like this, this suffering and madness, I will kill myself now, for in the difficulty of getting married nowadays and of getting a child, that cooling cold stone of a child which stands in the hot belly and makes a woman heavy and tired, forgetting all her cruel fervors, that thing that drags her to the doors of the death-house and away from the intolerable ardors of the sun, in this slow world for women, I cannot live; I will kill myself.

Letty does not kill herself. She goes out and finds another lover. And another. Sexual conquest brings with it a gust of energy. She studies hard, works hard, she goes to meetings to discuss socialism and reform, achieving the "cheerful feeling that a lot is wrong with the universe; and it's marvelous to be able to discuss it all over a Martini." Socialist militancy thus emerges as no more than a by-product of sexual happiness. Or as a way out of distress: ("Everyone forgot . . . my troubles, and we all began to discuss . . .

the African problem.") In one of the most powerful scenes in the book, Letty seduces her father's radical and philanthropic friend, Luke Adams, while the older man is selfishly trying to get her to take in a Hispanic orphan boy whom he himself, in a moment of weakness, had agreed to look after. Letty remarks: "One not only felt that, in love, this dangerous man consulted his own pleasure and had no morals, but with him, all altruism vanished like smoke."

As fully drawn as any character in literature, Stead's Letty is marvelously talented, bursting with energy and youthful optimism. What is to become of such vitality, the book wonders? And so does Letty. How is it not to be split? In her biography, Hazel Rowley feels that this is a question Stead could not answer. The blurb to the Virago edition of 1982 shows all the feminist publisher's uneasiness with the answer that, on the contrary, the novel very frankly offers, marriage: "Letty is a 'powerful portrayal,'" the blurb writer says, "of a woman who might have been independent, but chose otherwise."

But could she really have been independent? What Letty most profoundly learns from her promiscuity, from her growing fear of herself and of her appetite, is that marriage is not, as her profli-gate family had led her to believe, merely the legally regulated col-lision of sex and economics. Something else is going on in the long-term union of man and woman, something to which she is inexorably drawn:

I sometimes wondered at the infinite distance between the state of not being married . . . and the state of being married. . . . I couldn't figure it out, perhaps I was too young, anyway; but it savored to me of magic, and I felt very miserable that in this modern world something so primary, this first of all things to a woman, smacked so strongly of the tribal priest, the smoky cult, the tom-tom, the blood sacrifice, the hidden mystery. It didn't seem fair. We should have abolished all that with enlightenment.

It is in the novel's savoring, over so many pages, of Letty's growing belief, or obsession, right or wrong, that her energies must

be "husbanded," that *Letty Fox* becomes more than a brilliant satire. Watching a poor working girl give birth to her illegitimate child, she muses,

I wish I were a mother too. . . . Cornelis and all the men I had played round with seemed far away. This was the reality, and this was, truth to tell, what I, in my blind ignorant way, was fighting for, trying to make shift with one and all of them. But what chance has a smart, forward girl to be innocent or maternal? That's a dream.

How are we to take this? No doubt *Letty* is in earnest, but then she is perfectly capable of earnestly maintaining the opposite point of view on the next page. All the same, as the chapters accumulate and with them *Letty's* frustrations, we sense the growing seduction of that traditional dream, the pull of the marriage bond and maternity. Sooner or later *Letty* will succumb. In her case, it does not seem to be a question of choice.

The conclusion to *Letty Fox: Her Luck* is at once mockingly traditional and strikingly new: It is, I believe, one of the first novels to offer what we might call catharsis through exhaustion. Like many modern writers—Verga, Lawrence, Kafka, Faulkner, Beckett—Stead faced the problem: If our vision of the world is that it is perpetual struggle, if there is no state of harmony and propriety to which we can be returned after the disturbing events of our story (for however necessary she might have believed it was for herself, or her characters, Stead never viewed marriage as such a state), then how is a novel supposed to end? Where can it leave us? Her answer, like Thomas Bernhard's after her, is to bring characters and reader to such a state of plenitude, or weariness with events, that the thing simply has to stop.

*Letty* moves from job to job, man to man. She is getting nowhere. A fiancé goes off to be a war journalist, then writes to say he has married somebody else. Another suitor backs out during the crucial discussion with her parents. She goes on vacation for a "trial honeymoon" with the perfect American, Wicklow, it lasts five days. Men promise to leave their wives. Out of curiosity, she seduces the elderly professor her sister is in love with. But she is

getting tired of it. She throws some extraordinary tantrums. She is more and more manic, more frequently depressed. She is appalled by herself. Without a husband "a woman as strong as I am can also be strongly wickedly lazy, and forever."

But finally she, like her author, does get her one piece of luck. In the summer of 1945 she meets an old lover as tired of the game as she is herself, as tired as Europe then was with its interminable war. Everybody is quite quite worn out. Ring the wedding bells. It is not a Jane Austen ending. "Will this last?" *Letty* asks. And she muses: "It's a question of getting through life, which is quite a siege, with some self-respect. Before I was married I had none." At last pregnant, she concludes: "The principal thing is, I got a start in life; and it's from now on. I have a freight, I cast off, the journey has begun."

Are these closing words sardonic? Are they romantic? Or simply practical? Or has Stead somehow managed to make them all three? Rather than merely ambiguous, the novel contrives to go beyond any possible resolution. It constantly invites the act of dis-crimination, but only to repel it, to humiliate the critical faculty. At the end of the day *Letty* is both a romantic girl and a promiscuous opportunist, a happily married mother-to-be and a left-wing militant.

However we are meant to take them, *Letty's* final words must have echoed in their author's mind with increasing poignancy over the coming years. All too soon after the publication of the novel, Stead too would be embarking on a journey, casting off from New York's docks, but without her heroine's long-desired "freight." In the early days with Blech, Stead had twice aborted. While writing *Letty* she had suffered a miscarriage. Now, with the war in Europe over, the cold war had begun. America was no place for people of their political faith. She and Blech were under investigation by Hoover's FBI. They had heard that the heroine of Stead's latest novel was a young Communist.

It was hard now to find either work or publishers. Sliding into poverty, the couple moved back and forth between Belgium, Switzerland, England, and France. They were outcasts. Afflicted as ever by erotic yearnings, Stead sought to seduce Bill's friends, largely without result. She was humiliated. Critical acclaim had

brought little cash. *Letty* was banned in Australia. Blech wrote some historical novels which sold well in East Germany, but it was impossible to get the money out. When, twenty-six years after they had become lovers, the couple were finally able to marry, they were living in slum conditions and Stead was advertising for hack work in the local papers. She did not mention the ceremony in letters to friends.

Stead, Rowley tells us in her biography, "had a knack of arousing hostility." Even in the days of first love when Blech did everything for her, she was uneasy with the situation. She was too used to the battle of life. She needed to make the brutal gesture, to assume the extremist position. Certainly when her husband lay dying she was not kind to him. She was dismissive of his suffering. He wasn't really sick. Afterwards she regretted it. Living exclusively on steak and alcohol, she defended his political opinions, now far beyond the pale, with renewed vigor. But she couldn't work, she considered her life over: "My life was for that, wasn't it? To live with Bill. I didn't know that was it, but it was." Needless to say all this complicated her eventual admission to the literary canon. Novels as fine as those published by any contemporary Nobel—*A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, *Cotters' England*, *Miss Herbert*—were admired but not celebrated.

It is no surprise that Stead was a very poor essayist and even poorer public speaker, unless, that is, we are to take her novels themselves as vast inconclusive essays, *Letty Fox* as the speech of someone endlessly changing her mind. The problem was that Stead could never isolate any particular message she had to get across. She wanted to seduce, but also to provoke, or rather, to seduce through provocation. The best writing, she claimed, was driven by an "intelligent ferocity" that would be able to speak all the contradictions that could not be spoken in any essay, friendship, or political movement, all the experience that risked driving a person mad if it was left unsaid, and risked driving a reader mad when it was. We must love her, in short, for telling us things we do not want to hear.

In none of Stead's novels does this formula work quite as splendidly as in *Letty Fox*, if only because *Letty* herself is the incarnation of this drive. Never are her men, or the reader for that

matter, more enamoured of *Letty* than when she is unfaithful and bitchy. After her failed honeymoon with the ideal Wicklow, after her refusing even to talk to him on the return ride to New York, he nevertheless comes back to her: "I scolded Wicklow when he came to see me," she says. "He grinned, sat down on a stool, took off his hat, and remarked, 'You're more fascinating as a termagant, *Letty*, than as a sweet little wife.'"

As a writer, Stead is a termagant to whom one is always happy to return. I would advise a more comfortable seat than a stool. The gesture of removing the hat, do please note, is obligatory.

—TIM PARKS