

February 16, 1946: page 30

## *Mr. Waugh Plays Tigers*

**L**OOKING UP MOMENTARILY from our crystal ball, we predict that "Brideshead Revisited," by Evelyn Waugh, will set sales records and arouse more comment—critical and otherwise—than any book in many a day.

After four weary war years, during which enthusiasm has died, to be replaced by cold discomfort and ennui, *Captain Charles Ryder* is ordered to a new camp with his company. It is not until he arrives that he learns his destination, Brideshead—at the sound of whose very name "an immense silence followed, full of sweet and natural and long-forgotten sounds." It is here that his laughter has rung with that of his best friend; it is here that his love has died. For a moment, his theme is memory, and he possesses nothing but the past.

*Ryder* had been up at Oxford when he met *Sebastian Flyte*. *Ryder*, with his conventional background, warmed to this golden youth who threw up in his window one night, and sent roses of apology next day. *Sebastian* was beautiful, drunken, and Catholic. He seemed doomed, perhaps by his family, which he jealously kept from *Ryder*. He drank—not as a youthful zealot, but as a youthful drunkard. He believed in the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass because they seemed "a lovely idea." Pettish, peevish, spoiled young lord, with a fear of his destiny—an inevitable reversion to his mother's faith—he loved only *Ryder*. *Sebastian* wanted to bury a crock of gold in every place where he'd been happy and then, when he was old and ugly and miserable, dig it up and remember.

*Sebastian* took *Charles* finally to Brideshead in one of the loveliest summers England had known. The war had passed, and there could not be another.

*Lady Brideshead*, whose husband had remained abroad after the war with a companionable mistress, thrust her son even further from her by well-intentioned sanctimony. Her influence turned to *Ryder*. "We must make a Catholic out of Charles," she said. Dominating the entire first half of the story, *Sebastian* abruptly takes leave for Europe, and finally keeps his rendezvous as a drunken lay-brother in a monastery in North Africa.

Perhaps *Sebastian* was only the forerunner of *Ryder's* love for *Julia Flyte*, his sister. *Ryder* meets her years later, after they both have married unhappily, on a ship returning to England from America. *Julia* has married an ambitious politician. *Ryder*, now a successful architectural painter, has married a

*"BRIDESHEAD"*

giddy socialite. He has tried to escape both the bonds of matrimony and of conventional painting by isolating himself in Latin America. The precepts of her religion recede from *Julia's* mind in the face of their love, and *Ryder*, the agnostic, needs her transcending faith.

The divorce machinery for both *Ryder* and *Julia* is in process when *Lord Brideshead* returns to England to die. *Brideshead* has scoffed at Catholicism all his life; has lived in sin for years with his Italian mistress, *Cara*; ejects the priest who is brought too hastily to administer the last sacrament. But when the end is really near, *Julia* fetches the priest, and *Lord Brideshead* accepts at last the tenets of the church.

It is then that *Julia* realizes that she cannot go against her God. However it may hurt *Ryder*, she cannot marry him or be with him—then or ever again. He cannot see through and through her, "into those dark places where his own eyes sought in vain to guide him."

"Perhaps," he says, "all our loves are merely hints and symbols; a hill of many invisible crests; doors that open as in a dream to reveal only a further stretch of carpet and another door . . . perhaps you and I are types, and this sadness . . . springs from disappointment, each straining through and beyond the other, snatching a glimpse now and then of the shadow which turns the corner always a pace or two ahead of us. I hope your heart may break, *Julia*; but I do understand . . ."

Now, as *Captain Ryder* looks about him, he sees the fountain full of cigarette ends and orange peel. The chapel adjoining the house is closed, the drawing rooms bare of all but military office furniture, the colonnade is cracking. The new world will be made, he thinks, for people like his aide, *Subaltern Hooper*. That world is extroverted, young.

Evelyn Waugh's own conversion to Roman Catholicism, no doubt, inspired this book. Like T. S. Eliot, whom he quotes at length, Waugh offers "*Brideshead*," as Eliot did "*The Waste Land*" to Catholicism.

The little pictures that creep in between are subtly and beautifully written. That there is a homosexual love between *Ryder* and *Sebastian Flyte* is only hinted, but it is reasonably safe to assume its presence. The love passes on finally to *Julia*, who looks like *Sebastian*. But "*Brideshead Revisited*" ends on a note of ineffable sadness. At one point in the story, a character says to *Ryder*, "I cannot understand this keen zest to be well-bred . . . those paintings of yours, *Ryder*, simple, creamy, English charm, playing tigers" Mr. Waugh has taken the tiger by the tail in one of the best novels of this or any other season.

*Virginia Clough*