

## Hugh Walpole

### THE PERFECT CLOSE

OLD Paul Thomlinson was eighty-nine years of age, and everyone in his circle watched him eagerly to see whether he would capture ninety. Once, and not so long ago, it had been hoped that he would reach one hundred, and his sister, Ada Mailey, had very confidently promised it. She was supposed to have been so completely in control that she could surely manage his age as well as everything else. But maybe, in this particular respect, she was not altogether whole-hearted, for, although the old man was not at all a trouble, it would quite certainly be easier for her when her brother was gone. He would leave her the house, a tidy bit of money, and all the odds and ends. Her son, Morgan, would also benefit.

Paul Thomlinson was a very nice, clean old gentleman; a faint, pale shell, but a shell with fire burning inside it. Behind the delicate, almost intangible, age-washed mask you could see the glow and feel the heat. He was no trouble at all. He slept and passed the day in his library, a big, wide-windowed room on the second floor, with books, seventeenth and eighteenth century for the most part, reaching to the ceiling, a fine portrait of his grandfather in a red tortoiseshell frame, an

atlas in old dark oak bound round with brass, a bright-green inkstand, and his dear old dog, Caesar. In his dark-red leather armchair he sat, a rug over his knees, and looked out to the garden, with the Cathedral towers, ancient, beneficent, and the colour of bird's-nest grey, looking over the old brick wall. He saw the swifts cutting the sky like messengers and, when the weather was warm and the windows open, he could smell the roses and the pinks.

He was very little trouble, but he did hold himself aloof. That was what his sister and her son Morgan felt. For, as Mrs. Mailey herself, a thin but friendly lady of seventy, said:

‘It’s as though he thought himself superior.’

But, then, his mother had thought *herself* superior. Paul and Ada’s father had been twice married, Paul the child of one mother, Ada of another. Paul’s mother had been remote, reserved, austere. Ada’s had been everybody’s friend. Ada herself was everybody’s friend, and when, after Mailey’s sudden death from heart-failure in a London restaurant, she had come with her baby boy to live in Polchester, she had known, in a lick of the thumb, everyone in Polchester worth knowing. Paul had been kind and generous. Ada had run the house and also, as it seemed to the world, her brother. But this last, as Ada had well known, was not the truth. She had never possessed, or even controlled, her brother. It had simply been that he had not wished to take the trouble to resist her about the unimportant things. So long as he had his books, his few friends, the

Cathedral music and his summer trip abroad he had made no fuss. And, oh yes, his dog! There had always been a dog. Of his interest in women, Ada knew nothing — perfect discretion, at any rate in Polchester, whatever his annual trip abroad may have included.

He had been a handsome man, brown-haired, straight-backed, with rather gentle and easily amused eyes and a most distinguished mouth. He wore elegant clothes, liking them coloured, a bright-blue tie, a buff-coloured waistcoat. He had the shining cleanliness of Venetian glass. Well, here he was, a very old man indeed, and quite suddenly, on a late autumn afternoon in his library, he knew that he was going to die.

The knowledge came to him as though a bird from heaven had flown in through the closed and heavily curtained windows and whispered in his ear. In the light given by the sharp-flamed fire and the sheltered electric glow, he almost fancied that he saw the bird.

‘Within an hour or two you’re going to die. Within an hour or two you’re going to die.’

He smiled to himself and laid on the little table at his side the volume of Dryden’s prose that he had been reading. So it had come at last! He had no pain — simply a quick access of weakness. It was as though he could see, through the glass-like shell of his body, the life force ebbing away. He knew that many old people had these alarms, and that, very often, they were false and meaningless scarings. But, this time, he had no doubt. He was in no way frightened. All his life, like

every other human being, he had speculated on death. A child is immortal, for, during childhood, death is an incredibility. Maturity makes it the only certainty. Paul had loved life so intensely that death had seemed to him, for many years, an almost unbearable shame. Very simple things had always pleased him — light and dark, colours and scents, food and drink, friendship. His deeper experiences, hospital work in France during the war, love, once, twice, thrice — these had made death more understandable. They had gone to the roots of experience. But why should he not be permitted to watch the sunlight, keep company with his books, walk with his dog, enjoy the blessed indulgence of sleep, for ever and ever? Of these he would never tire and indulging in them did no one any harm.

For a long time he had resented death. Then, as experience had gathered with the years, he had turned more to wonder as to how he would meet it when it came. He did not fear it. The only thing of which he was really afraid was long-continued physical pain. Once he had suffered acute arthritis in his left arm for a continuous six months and had realized, through that experience, how pain that never relaxes can do something to the spiritual side of man, something disgraceful and humiliating. If he knew that he was to die, would he be a coward? He often pictured to himself that familiar scene in the consulting-room, he seated, listening attentively to the surgeon's sentence of death. That sudden realization of death! What a fearful thing! To know that, within a

definite sum of months, you would be removed, extinct, forgotten!

Could he then summon a brave and philosophic serenity? He did hope so.

Then, as the years had passed and he had grown older and older, he had felt, without too much boastfulness, a sort of triumph. He was getting the better of that old devil, Death! Suppose he reached his century — what a snap of the fingers for that old humbug! He was proud of his birthdays and liked them solemnized. On his seventieth he had a great dinner party, with all his friends around him. On his ninetieth, he would have another! Now, this afternoon, he knew very certainly that he would never reach that ninetieth.

Of course, as age had advanced, his vitality had ebbed. This room had become his world, and a very agreeable world too. He slept a great deal, he had still a good appetite, his brain was as active as ever, and he was still able to feel his old energetic likes and dislikes of his fellow human beings. He liked his sister, for old times' sake, although he held the opinion that most men have about most women — that she had little sense of the important things in life. He detested his young nephew, Morgan. He had detested him from the first moment of seeing him, a baby, howling for something, screaming at sight of him. Young Morgan had all the qualities that his uncle most abhorred — he was conceited without reason, cocksure without knowledge, noisy and extravagant. Morgan patronized his old uncle, without

intending it of course, but that only made the patronage worse. He delivered his opinions on politics, the arts, love, religion, as though they were the only possible opinions. He had brains, and would make a good lawyer, but he was a horrible young man. Morgan and his uncle played chess together. Paul was an erratic player and Morgan usually defeated him. Paul hated the boy's supercilious pleasure at his victories, but Paul adored the game and, on every separate occasion, was certain that this time he would trounce the young devil.

And Morgan had a dog, a succession of dogs. Always the same kind of dog — barking, restless, selfish dogs, fox-terriers for the most part. He thought of Morgan's fox-terrier, Satan, the present one, and he motioned with his thin, blue-veined hand to his old Sealyham, Caesar, who, stretched near the fire, apparently sleeping, had nevertheless his eye closely fixed on his master. Caesar came slowly over to him and rested his head against his master's leg, sighing portentous satisfaction as he did so. Caesar, old as he was, could still put fear into the heart of young Satan. A grand fighter Caesar had always been!

So here then was Death, and it was neither terrifying nor humiliating. There was a strange agitation about his heart, as though all the forces there were engaged in a last battle together. His brain was extraordinarily lucid and clear. He seemed to possess a double vision, so that the dark plum-coloured curtains were almost transparent, and the black and white marble slabs of the fireplace

nearly revealed to him the active world moving behind them. Soon he would know — ah, very soon! — the shapes, sounds, and vigours of that second world.

The door opened. It was young Morgan.

‘ Like a game of chess, Uncle, before tea? ’

‘ Now,’ the old man thought, ‘ I’m within an hour or less of death. I should be at charity with all the world. But I dislike that young man as much as ever. Why does he speak as though he owns the world? And,’ he thought, ‘ if ever in all my life I wanted to beat him at chess, I want to beat him now.’

He was not a bad young man, Morgan. He thought himself irresistibly charming. He was thinking:

‘ Poor old boy — and aren’t I a hero to play a game with him? ’

He fetched, from a corner of the room, the chessmen. They were a beautiful set of dark-red agate and clear shining crystal. Very handsome they looked, set up there, with the firelight behind them.

‘ Red,’ said Morgan.

‘ Red it is,’ the old man answered.

Although he wished so eagerly to win, he found it difficult at first to concentrate — and chess demands absolute concentration. Why was it, he thought, that he disliked, almost bitterly, his nephew’s appearance? For he was a handsome young man, hair the colour of ripe corn, blue eyes, a taut, trained, athletic body? The mouth was supercilious, the hands too grasping. . . . Yes, yes.

That was the thing to do. Knight to Bishop Three and then, perhaps, if Morgan had not foreseen . . .

His thoughts were captured with the consciousness of the littleness of time that remained to him. Only an hour or two. . . . What did he wish to do? To win this game of chess. And Minna's dress . . . Before he moved his bishop, he said:

'There isn't a parcel for me downstairs, is there?'

'Didn't see anything. Your move, Uncle!'

Dear, *dear* Minna! Everyone thought her so plain, just a dry, ill-dressed, elderly virgin. But she had been always so very kind to him. There had been between them for so many years a most beautiful relationship. She and the dog Caesar were now everything to him. Yes, now that so many dear others were dead. His mind speculated yet further. Did death mean nothing? Would he, in another brief space of time, be aware of Nothing? Nothing! How appalling a word! But it seemed to him that God was more likely and, if God, why, then surely continuing experience.

'Your move, Uncle.'

With a mighty effort that seemed almost the most strenuous exercise he had ever commanded, he looked at the board. He saw with horror that he was in the greatest danger. Morgan's queen and bishop commanded a line threatening disastrously his king. Every piece of Morgan's — he had the red, sinister, dark, shadowed agate —

seemed to be stirring with menace. His own crystal pieces were, he felt, appealing to him for succour. Oh, he must win this game, he *must* win this, the last game of his life! He glanced at young Morgan's cocky, supercilious smile, at the superior, confident fashion of his seat, his back taut, his thighs spread.

'Take your time, Uncle. . . . Take your time. You're in a bit of a hole.'

Never before had the old man wanted anything so badly as to win this game. No, not when he had gone on his knees to Maria Bock in the restaurant in Heidelberg and implored her mercy; nor when, at the Wagner Festival in Munich, he had hoped that David Warrinder would be his friend.

His long, long past life came together in the effort that now he summoned. His brain, as fine as ever it was, bit into the board. He could feel his heart leap and die, leap and die. He castled, a thing that he should have done before. Young Morgan's knight leapt sideways with a little toss of his sunset-coloured head.

'I must attack,' Paul thought. He brought out his queen.

'Check,' said Morgan with exultation and, his arrogance blinding him, had not seen that the checking knight had fallen into the path of his uncle's bishop. With how quiet a gesture, but with what inner triumph, did Paul remove that knight.

'Damn!' said Morgan, 'I never saw it!'

And then Paul discovered his opportunity. By

moving that pawn, sending forward a bishop, offering that pawn as a sacrifice, he had a chance of a mate. Morgan's castled king was tied in — there was a chance . . . a chance. His brain reeled. If only Morgan were blind enough. He moved his pawn. Morgan threatened his king again. He sent his bishop forward. Morgan, intent on his own triumph, moved his knight. Paul offered his pawn. There was a pause and Morgan, almost sneeringly, took it.

'Checkmate,' said the old man.

Mate in a dozen moves! A really marvellous victory — and he would never play chess again!

'What about another?' said young Morgan, who simply hated to be beaten.

The old man looked at him maliciously.

'No. I'm going to rest on my victory. I was afraid you'd see through that move of mine.'

Morgan said: 'You won't work that on me a second time. Uncle Paul.'

'No. I don't believe I shall.'

'Come on, have another.'

'No. Allow me the satisfaction of telling everyone I've beaten you.'

'Well, you don't often. If it gives you any pleasure——'

What a baby the boy was! The old man felt a sudden affection for him.

'It's very nice of you to come and play with an old man like me.'

Morgan smiled.

'I am *fearfully busy*. But I can always find time for a game.'

‘What are you busy about?’

‘Work. You know, Uncle, I’m going to be a damned fine lawyer. I feel it in my bones.’

‘I expect you are. I hope you’ll be a damned fine man too. There are so many lawyers.’

It seemed to him fantastically that the shadow of a man was outlined against the wall. A long-faced, thin shadow, Death no doubt. A friendly fellow.

‘All right, Death. Make yourself comfortable. Give me another half-hour.’

He looked at his nephew and thought of his assured self-confidence. Not so had it been with him! Of all the things that he now regretted, the time wasted in placating his fellow human beings was the heaviest. Not that he wished that he had been bad-mannered. He rated courtesy very high. But, when younger, he had credited his companions with more wisdom, more knowledge of the world, than himself. He saw now that they had all been as stupid as he. He had been sensitive to their criticism, but now he realized that, when they criticized him, they were defending themselves. The distinguishing mark between people was kindness of heart, generosity of spirit, not wisdom. And so he thought again of Minna Prinsep.

‘Be a good boy, Morgan, and run down and see whether there isn’t a parcel for me.’

‘All right — if you really won’t play another game.’

The boy went out and the old man grinned at Death against the wall.

'I beat him at chess. That's grand.'

He felt quite wonderfully cheerful. The room, and the house behind it, seemed filled with all the fun they'd had — and especially the Christmas parties. Ada had been good about those parties and, even into his very last year, the music and the dancing, the supper, the mistletoe, the holly, had all been rich with goodwill and friendliness. On this very last Christmas, Minna had thought only for him.

'I think you ought to know,' she had said, 'that I never can thank you enough for all your goodness to me.' She had spoken in her dry, rather sarcastic voice that frightened some people. She was terribly poor and terribly brave. He thought that sometimes she did not have enough to eat. And then, a month ago, he had found her looking at a catalogue. There was a dress that she coveted.

'I'm no beauty, you know, but in *that* I might look quite attractive.'

She had sighed and put the dress catalogue away. And the other day he had written to London for it. If only it would arrive this afternoon!

'Do you think . . .?' he asked Death tentatively. But he knew that it was of no use to ask Death for anything. Death had his orders.

So he settled himself comfortably in his chair and considered, without any fear or discomfort, this ebbing of his vitality. He had always considered the two possibilities — death under anaesthetic or dope of some sort — and death with him-

self fully conscious. The second of these would be surely most dreadful — the struggle *not* to die, *not* to surrender.

On the contrary, the approach, as he was now experiencing it, was one of the most pleasant he had ever known. It was not only easy and practicable, but it seemed like a real going forward to some agreeable experience. Friends, in earlier days, had fetched him to take him away for the week-end.

‘Wait a minute,’ he had called, ‘I will be with you in a minute.’ So now.

‘Wait a minute, Death. I’m nearly ready.’

He noticed that Caesar had come very close to him and, once and again, shivered. Was he aware, as dogs are supposed to be aware, that Death was in the room? Never mind. The old dog would soon himself be gone. What a pleasant fancy that they might share together the Elysian fields!

The door opened.

‘There *is* a parcel!’ Morgan cried. ‘Here it is!’

‘Let’s see it.’ The old man raised his thin hand, almost like talc against the fire-light. ‘Give me those scissors. The large ones over by the window. . . . Here, you cut it. Open it for me.’

‘Why, it’s a dress!’

Morgan examined it.

‘Nice stuff — but pretty severe. Mother likes bright colours.’

‘I know she does. No, this is for someone else.’

'You dark horse! Giving dresses to the ladies!'

The boy was at his *most* irritating, for behind his sentences was plainly the conviction that he was the most enchanting of young men, tender with the aged, humorous about sex, wise about women. . . .

'Don't talk to me about ladies!' the old man snapped at him. 'Why, at your age, I knew already more than you'll ever know.' He winked at Death across the room, as much as to say:

'I know that in this last hour of mine I should be gentle, at peace with all men, unconscious of malice. . . . I'm afraid to the very last I shall be myself.'

It annoyed him to see Morgan fingering the dress.

'All right. . . . Leave it. There! on the table. . . .'

Then, as though to himself:

'I wonder if Minna Prinsep will look in!'

Morgan shouted with joy.

'Minna! Why, of course, how stupid! Old Minna! That's who the dress is for! Why didn't I think of it?'

'That's enough! That's enough! Leave me to myself now — that's a good boy — I'll have a nap before tea.'

He felt a tenderness to the boy again. After all, this child was at the beginning of life's experience, and he was at the end. How little, how very little he had to tell him! Be tolerant, realize yourself as a comic figure, expect no great things either

of yourself or others, physical love does not last but spiritual love may, accept the inevitable egotism of all humans save the saints, take joy in little things, do not grieve overmuch for sins of the body, but fight like the devil against meanesses of the spirit — oh, what use would any of this be to Morgan? An old man's platitudes, they would seem. No one ever learnt anything from the experience of others. He lay back, happy that he would never have to lay down the law about anything again.

He remembered his indignation once, when, at a party, someone had said:

'Constable! Milk-and-water English! Cows and mills and stormy skies! He might have been something of a painter if he hadn't been English!'

How Paul had exploded! How angry he had been, how his heart had hammered in his chest! Now, in retrospect, that scene was a little curl of grey smoke, a breath of air, a rolling beat of a vanishing drum! All angers, all tempestuous judgments, all dismays, betrayals, burning tears — all gone, all as though they had never been!

The door opened and Minna Prinsep stood there. He gazed at her. She seemed for a moment another shadow against the wall, like Death. And then, he was so rapturously delighted. Yes, although vitality was ebbing from him fast, he could still feel rapture of the spirit.

'Minna!'

Her ugly, rather twisted face, illuminated by the beautiful generous eyes, smiled.

'I looked in just to see how you were.'

'Oh, I'm all right.' He was growing weak. He motioned her rather feebly to his side. 'Come over here.'

She came across, moving in stiff awkward jerks her thin, angular body.

'Are you all right? You look rather tired.'

'Of course I am. I beat Morgan at chess this afternoon.'

'You didn't?'

'I did. And in a dozen moves too. Look here — I've got something for you.'

His hands, from which all strength seemed now to be departing, fingered about the tissue paper.

'You take it from the box.'

She lifted it out and held it up.

'Oh! . . . Oh!'

'It's for you. I sent for it from London. If it doesn't quite fit, you can have it altered here.'

'Oh, but it's lovely.' She held the stuff against her thin neck.

'Perfect. You — you darling.'

She let the dress drop, knelt down and kissed his forehead. He put his arm stiffly about her. They had forgotten the dress.

'Why do you do these things for me?'

Her voice broke. He thought she was going to cry.

'No one else in all my life has been good to me as you have. I've never loved anyone so much——'

'Nor have I. There *is* a love you know, Minna, deeper and deeper — not physical.'

‘Yes — ours will last for ever. It has made me believe in immortality.’

His happiness was complete. As he lay there, his hand against her side, the house was suddenly filled with sound. The Christmas party. He was moving down the stairs. In his nostrils was the scent of burning candle-wax, sugar icing, the cold woody chill of mistletoe berries, the hot crackle of holly. Beyond the window were carol singers, and someone was taking the parcels from the tree. . . .

He was hand in hand with Death, and Death’s grasp was warm and comforting.

‘Now this is perfect!’ he cried, and all the candles blazed and the coloured balls swung gallantly on the tree.

Minna looked up into his face and gave a cry.