

GASH

by

Charlotte O'Leary

CHARACTERS

MARGARET: *nurse, working class, mother of six, 40*

JOHN: *husband of Margaret, 45*

AGNES: *daughter of Margaret, working class, 14*

FLOSSIE: *nurse, working class, rather dotty, 22*

MATRON: *middle class, brusque, late 40s*

DR HAIGHTON: *upper class, dresser (medical student), weasel-like, mid-twenties*

DR EDWARDS: *upper class, domineering, highly regarded surgeon, 50*

ACT [1]

SCENE [1]

1846, SOUTHWARK, LONDON. A FRONT ROOM OF A TINY RUN DOWN HOUSE IN NURSES' ACCOMMODATION, ST THOMAS' HOSPITAL. JOHN IS SLUMPED IN AN ARMCHAIR. A SMALL CHILD IS HUGGING HIM. MARGARET LETS HERSELF THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR. SHE HAS ON A NURSES' APRON, IS TIRED BUT TAKES A MOMENT TO BE CHEERED AT THE SIGHT OF HER HUSBAND ASLEEP WITH THEIR CHILD. SHE SITS.

MARGARET: Oh blessed relief...I'll take a moment, just a minute, then straight on with tea.

KICKS OFF HER SHOES. LIES BACK IN HER CHAIR AND LOOKS AROUND.

MARGARET: There are blasted rats droppings again. We shall have to get a cat. But with our luck we'd end up with a cat scared of rats and we'd end up with yet another mouth to feed. You know we just need a cat to eat the Mummy rat, then I'm sure the rest of the family would soon starve.

SHE GETS UP AND STARTS TO TIDY UP THE CHILDREN'S CLOTHES AND TOYS. THEY HAVE VERY LITTLE BUT WHAT THEY DO HAVE IS STREWN ACROSS THE ROOM.

MARGARET: I asked Matron again. She said she'd never heard such folly, apparently I am not capable, don't have enough experience. She puts me at the same level as Flossie. I'm sure they gossip behind my back. I am more than capable of being a Sister - I am more than capable of being a Matron.

MARGARET BATTERS CUSHIONS TOGETHER CAUSING CLOUDS OF DUST.

MARGARET: 'Folly', what sort of word is that. It's rude that's what it is. She means to say I am foolish and have no sense. Reminded me of dear

Ethel, do you remember? Every time I hid up on the roof in Highgate she'd sing that Elizabeth Blackwell rhyme to me?

"Margaret Ann! Your request is mere folly,
the leads are too high,
for those who can't fly,
if I let you go there,
I suppose your next prayer,
will be for a hop to the chimney top!".

We used to hide up on the parapet of that house. Used to get up as high as I possibly could. I hid all my books up there and would go there to escape and read and read.

SHE LOOKS AT HER HUSBAND, A MOMENT, SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT. SHE TOUCHES HIS FOREHEAD AND THEN THE REST OF HIS FACE. SHE TAKES HIS WRIST TO TAKE HIS PULSE, THEN TRIES PRESSING ON THE SIDE OF HIS NECK. SHE TOUCHES HIM ALL OVER, UP HIS ARMS, HIS LEGS. HE DOES NOT MOVE. SHE TAKES HER CHILD AND TRIES TO PULL HIM AWAY FROM HIS FATHER, HE CLINGS ON.

MARGARET: John! John. Don't leave me. Please don't leave me. Please don't leave us. What will we do? John?

SHE TRIES TO GIVE HIM MOUTH TO MOUTH, COVERING HER FACE EACH TIME HER HUSBAND EXHALES THE BREATH. IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE. THE FINAL ATTEMPT TO BREATH LIFE INTO HER HUSBAND RESULTS IN A KISS AS MARGARET SAYS GOODBYE TO HIM.

AGNES, HER ELDEST DAUGHTER COMES IN, SHE IS IN HER NIGHTIE, CLUTCHING A TEDDY BEAR.

AGNES: Mummy, I can't sleep.

MARGARET TRIES TO USHER HER AWAY.

AGNES: Mummy can I have hot milk?

MARGARET: There is no more milk! You'll have to wait.

AGNES: But I can't sleep.

MARGARET: Go to Elspeth, tell her Mummy needs her urgently.

AGNES: Why do you need her?

MARGARET: Go! Now!

AGNES: Will she give me milk?

MARGARET: Just go!

AGNES LEAVES, CLUTCHING THE TEDDY BEAR. MARGARET TRIES TO REMOVE THE SMALLEST CHILD FROM HER HUSBAND BUT STILL THE CHILD CLINGS ON. MARGARET GIVES UP AND SITS AT HER HUSBAND'S FEET.

MARGARET: Father said the higher up you were, the more important you were. I took it literally, and used to try to climb up on the chimney pots.

SHE STROKES HIS FEET.

MARGARET: Tell me about the view from the chimney pots.

ACT [1] SCENE [2]

MARGARET AND FLOSSIE ARE IN THE OPERATING THEATRE. MARGARET IS OBSESSIVELY CLEANING THE SAME SPOT. EVENTUALLY FLOSSIE STOPS AND WATCHES HER.

FLOSSIE: If you're going to keep cleaning the same spot you're never going to get anywhere. You need to move on.

MARGARET CONTINUES TO POLISH THE

SAME SPOT.

FLOSSIE: Do you want me to help?

MARGARET: No.

FLOSSIE: Only if you only clean that spot, and not any of the other many, many spots there are in this theatre, then I'll have to clean them all by myself. That will take me ages.

MARGARET MOVES ALONG A BIT.

MARGARET: Better?

FLOSSIE POLISHES THE MIRROR AT THE BACK OF THE THEATRE WITH THE NORMAL RAGS.

MARGARET: Properly!

FLOSSIE: This is properly.

MARGARET: Never wipe down a mirror with a cloth, it smears.

FLOSSIE: But a cloth gets it clean.

MARGARET: Do it properly!

FLOSSIE: I am doing it right! Oh crikey look now it is smearing. What do I do?

MARGARET CONTINUES CLEANING, IGNORES FLOSSIE.

FLOSSIE: Why won't you help me?

MARGARET: (exasperated) One day you will have to manage on your own. (Beat) Look, take the vinegar and pour it in the rag.

MARGARET DOES IT ALL FOR FLOSSIE.

MARGARET: Then take a piece of newspaper, screw it up, wipe it down.

MATRON ENTERS. STOPS WHEN SHE SEES MARGARET.

MATRON: You are not at the funeral?

MARGARET: Someone has to ensure everything runs smoothly.

MATRON: You should be at the funeral.

MARGARET: Will you dock my pay?

MATRON: For personal matters yes.

MARGARET: Then I am unable to attend.

FLOSSIE SQUEALS. SHE FISHES SEVERAL BLACK ARMBANDS OUT OF HER POCKET. SHE HANDS THEM TO MATRON AND MARGARET. MATRON TUTS AND REFUSES IT, MARGARET LOOKS MORTIFIED.

MARGARET: Is that so I don't forget I am in mourning? Just in case I should think my husband is alive then I look at my arm and go "oh yes of course, he's dead".

FLOSSIE: I thought maybe it was a nice touch. You're supposed to wear black. Maybe you haven't got any black?

MARGARET: I've got plenty of black thank you! I'm waiting for the right time to wear it.

FLOSSIE PUTS TWO ARM BANDS BACK IN HER POCKET, THEN PUTS HERS DEFIANTLY ON HER ARM.

MARGARET TAKES A DOCTOR'S LEATHER BOX FROM THE CUPBOARD, OPENS IT AND STARTS TO LAY OUT ALL THE MEDICAL IMPLEMENTS. SHE DOES IT SLOWLY AND PURPOSEFULLY, ENSURING MATRON CAN HEAR SHE KNOWS ALL THE NAMES.

MARGARET: Sharp Scalpel, Catlin, Cheselden's Gorget, Lithorite, Tri Point Piercer -

MATRON: There is no good causing a fuss, I still cannot offer you the job of Sister.

MARGARET: *(Loudly)* Bistoury Cache

MATRON: You can try again in a year.

MARGARET: *(Louder)* Teale's Gorget

MATRON: Margaret, dear, status isn't always a good thing.

MARGARET: There is more to life than having status.

MATRON: If money is a cause for concern, then there are ways and means around it.

MARGARET: Oh do tell?

MATRON: Many women are chars in the evening, I hear they need people overnight at Guy's, they always look for women.

MARGARET: They are always looking for women because the poor women they employ drop from exhaustion. I have six children, I can't be over here all day and over there all night. Cranial Drill.

MATRON: Many women do and cope.

MARGARET: Many women are not freshly widowed; Fluted Probe

FLOSSIE: Margaret why not marry a surgeon?

MARGARET: I beg your pardon?

FLOSSIE: Marry a surgeon! Find yourself a nice medical student, one of the dressers. I have my eye on the delicious Dr Haighton. If they're good they'll earn loads of money, it barely takes a year, and then they keep you. I intend to be kept.

MARGARET: Urethral Probe; Flossie are you actually serious?

FLOSSIE: What?

MARGARET: I am beyond forty. I have six children. I live in nurses' accommodation which I now can't

afford, I have debt up to my ears and a face that carries every wrinkle from the past forty years. I cannot, and moreso, will not, marry a man purely for his money. I cannot wait a year! I don't have a year!

DR HAIGHTON COMES BREEZING IN.

DR HAIGHTON: Good morning ladies!

FLOSSIE GRINS, BLUSHES, MARGARET FUMES. DR HAIGHTON SPIES THE BLACK ARMBAND ON FLOSSIE.

DR HAIGHTON: Whose passing did I miss?

FLOSSIE: Margaret just lost her poor husband.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh how very careless of you.

FLOSSIE: She's worried about how to keep her family. I said to her, why don't you find a nice young medical student who will one day be a famous surgeon?

SHE MAKES A VERY DARING ATTEMPT TO BRUSH HER HAND OVER HIS; KNOWING FULL WELL WHAT SHE'S DOING HE PULLS HIS HAND AWAY SO HE CAN ADDRESS AND MOCK MARGARET.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh she's too old to marry! Who would want her. Men want someone young, someone who can bear their children. Margaret dear, have you thought about the oldest profession in the world?

MARGARET: I beg your pardon!

DR HAIGHTON: I hear it has some degree of nobleness to it.

FLOSSIE: A noble profession - that sounds good Margaret.

MARGARET: He suggests I become a woman of the night.

FLOSSIE: Oh dear me! Wait - what?

MARGARET: A woman of the night. One who works the streets. A prostitute!

FLOSSIE: Oh!

MARGARET IS STEAMING, THROWS DOWN HER CLOTH READY FOR BATTLE. DR HAIGHTON HAS SAT ON THE OPERATING TABLE, CROSSED HIS LEGS, IS VERY OBVIOUSLY BOUNCING HIS TOP LEG UP AND DOWN SO SHE CAN SEE HIS SHOES.

MARGARET: Where did you get those?

DR HAIGHTON: Get what dear Margaret?

MARGARET: The shoes...where did you get those?

DR HAIGHTON: Oh, the porter was selling them. He had a pile of clothes, old, tatty, bric-a-brac. One of the nurses apparently has been kicked out of their accommodation, no payment of rent.

MARGARET: Give me the shoes.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh don't be silly, I've paid tuppence for these, I shall need my wear from them

MARGARET: Give me the shoes!

DR HAIGHTON: But then what would I wear on my feet?

MARGARET: You have plenty of shoes, give me those shoes!

DR HAIGHTON STARTS TO WALK ROUND THE OPERATING TABLE, CHASED BY MARGARET. IT'S LIKE THE PLAYGROUND.

DR HAIGHTON: But what would keep my little tootsies warm!

MARGARET: Give me - I beg you - give me the shoes!

DR HAIGHTON: Oh, no, look at the time, must dash. Got important well paid doctoring duties to do.

DR HAIGHTON EXITS.

MATRON: Margaret, I know today is a bad day but you must not speak to the doctors like that

MARGARET: He's only a medical student -

MATRON: You do not speak to a man like that.

MARGARET: He's a medical student, a dresser. Flossie, how can you?

FLOSSIE: He is a good man.

MARGARET: (beat) They were my husband's shoes.

FLOSSIE, SHOCKED, KNOCKS THE MIRROR OFF THE WALL, MARGARET TRIES TO CATCH IT BUT IT LANDS ON THE FLOOR.

MARGARET: Flossie! A broken mirror is no use to anyone.

FLOSSIE: It's only a little break, in the corner, hardly anything at all. See, if I put it back up no one will even notice.

MARGARET TAKES THE MIRROR AND HOLDS IT MOURNFULLY IN HER HANDS, INSPECTING IT. FLOSSIE LEAVES HER ON HER OWN.

MARGARET: Once a mirror is cracked it is no use to no man. It is ruined forever. It's only use is to cut people with its shards of glass. It must be thrown away with caution, and replaced.

ACT [1]

SCENE [3]

MARGARET, ALONE IN THE OPERATING THEATRE, BOLTS THE DOOR. THIS IS HER TIME. SHE HAS WITH HER A SACK OF OLD CLOTHES. SHE TAKES THEM OUT AND LAYS THEM ONE BY ONE ON THE OPERATING TABLE. ALL THE CLOTHES ARE BLACK - LONG SKIRT, JACKET, BLOUSE, APRON, STOCKINGS.

SHE SLOWLY TAKES OFF HER OWN CLOTHES, LONG BROWN CORD SKIRT, WHITE BLOUSE THAT IS ALMOST THREADBARE, APRON THAT IS COVERED IN BLOOD STAINS AND THE STRAPS ARE

FRAYED AND KNOTTED FROM YEARS OF USE. SHE STANDS IN THE THEATRE IN LONG SILK BLOOMERS AND A SILK VEST, ONCE THEY WERE NEW, NOW THEY ARE OLD AND TATTY. SHE TAKES A MOMENT TO SAY GOODBYE TO HER CLOTHES, HOLDS UP THE SKIRT AND SWINGS AROUND WITH IT, ALMOST DANCING IN THE THEATRE WITH IT AS IT FLOWS AROUND, DUST OCCASIONALLY PUFFING OFF IT. THEN SUDDENLY SHE SHOVES IT ALL INTO HER SACK.

SHE DRESSES IN THE BLACK CLOTHES, SOLEMN, SERIOUS. THE CLOTHES ARE TOO BIG AND NEED SOME ADJUSTING, SHE FIXES IT WITH A COMBINATION OF SAFETY PINS AND QUICK STITCHING. SHE IS DRESSED FORMALLY, THERE IS NOTHING FEMININE ABOUT THE CLOTHES, THE SKIRT IS PRACTICAL AND HAS NO SWISH. THE JACKET IS TIGHT FITTING WITH HIGH COLLAR. MARGARET WILL WEAR MOURNING CLOTHES FOR THE REST OF THE PLAY.

SHE GOES TO THE SMALL, NOW CRACKED, MIRROR AT THE BACK OF THE THEATRE, LOOKS AT HER REFLECTION, CHECKS HERSELF, IT'S ALL PERFECT. SHE STANDS UPRIGHT. IT'S TIME.

ACT [1]

SCENE [4]

IN THE WOMEN'S WARD. THE FEMALE PATIENTS ARE ALL SAT BOLT UPRIGHT IN BED IN COMPLETE SILENCE.

DR EDWARDS IS STRIDING AROUND THE WARD, SURROUNDED BY A HUDDLE OF DRESSERS: JUNIOR MEDICAL STUDENTS WHO ASSIST HIM IN OPERATIONS. HE IS WEARING A BOTTLE-GREEN OVERCOAT AND MATCHING GREEN WELLINGTON BOOTS. AS HE APPROACHES PATIENTS THEY LOOK TERRIFIED.

MARGARET HOVERS BEHIND THE GROUP WHO ARE BUSY LAUGHING AT DR EDWARDS' JOKES WHILE SHE NERVOUSLY TRIES TO BUTT IN. DR HAIGHTON DOES WHAT HE CAN TO BLOCK HER.

THE GROUP STOP AT ELIZABETH RAIGAN, A WOMAN LYING IN BED, FEVERISH, OBVIOUSLY VERY UNWELL.

DR EDWARDS: The patient was admitted three days ago with a compound fracture of the tibia and fibula, and an extensive wound of the integuments. She was struck by a heavy carriage just outside here. It rolled onto her leg and she lost a considerable amount of blood. For the past three days she has been dosed with castor oil and wine and had her leg put on a pillow.

HE PULLS BACK THE BANDAGE, ALL THE DRESSERS COVER THEIR FACES WITH THE SMELL AND THE HORROR, ONLY MARGARET IS UNFAZED. DR EDWARDS HAS NOTED THIS.

DR EDWARDS: Her wound now has an offensive smell, and we have opted to amputate. Does anyone know why she will now lose the leg?

DR HAIGHTON: To avoid gangrene.

DR EDWARDS: Good. What else?

DR HAIGHTON: To hasten recovery.

DR EDWARDS: That much is obvious. What else?

DR HAIGHTON: She has, another ill?

DR EDWARDS SPIES MARGARET.

DR EDWARDS: No. Maybe we should ask a nurse.

MARGARET: Sir?

DR EDWARDS: Why is it necessary to amputate?

THE DRESSERS PART, EXCITED THAT A

NURSE IS ABOUT TO BE MAULED.

MARGARET: Why is it necessary to amputate, or why has it got to the point where it is necessary to amputate?

DR EDWARDS: Bravo.

MARGARET: She was not nursed properly. The wound should have been covered in lint soaked in nitric acid and had a poultice laid over it.

MATRON HAS TAKEN A KEEN INTEREST IN HER NURSE WHO IS FACING UP TO THE SURGEON, AND IS UTTERLY MORTIFIED.

DR EDWARDS: Why did she not?

MARGARET: Because, Sir, as a nurse it is sometimes impossible to provide true nursing.

MATRON: I am sure you'll find that is not the case.

MARGARET: Often nurses do not nurse at all, they just clean and are nursemaid to the dressers.

DR EDWARDS: Well that is a bold opinion.

DR HAIGHTON: Bold but true, all medical matters should be left to the doctors and surgeons.

MATRON: I am sure that she received nursing that was deemed adequate.

MARGARET: Sir, I should wish to be a surgeon one day myself, I wondered - I would very much like to know - if I may sit in on this amputation.

DR EDWARDS: Operations are for medical students only.

MARGARET: I have no money for fees but as I already work here it would not be too much of an effort

MATRON: Margaret this is preposterous.

DR EDWARDS: Oh how quaint! Sister - Sister Margaret?

MARGARET: Nurse Margaret.

DR EDWARDS: Nurse! *Nurse* Margaret. You are aware operations have blood and gore and pus and bodily fluids of a hundred varieties?

MARGARET: I am a mother. I have experienced the blood and gore and pus and bodily fluids of six children. I am sure I have experienced more than a hundred varieties from each.

MATRON: Nurse Margaret come away please.

DR EDWARDS: No leave her be. The education you'll require is expensive, long, there are numerous obstacles, the idea - although valuable - is impossible.

DR HAIGHTON: Why a woman would be apt to faint with the first cut with the Catlin knife!

MARGARET: Sharp scalpel.

DR HAIGHTON: What!

MARGARET: You cut first with a sharp scalpel, then a Catlin. The scalpel is for skin, the Catlin for flesh. Basic.

DR EDWARDS: You do at least know your weapons. It can be a bloody battle in the theatre and many do not survive the brutal horrors. As with war, you are aware a woman's place is not fighting on the front line?

MARGARET: It is only a hospital rule about women not being allowed in the theatre for operations. It is not law -

MATRON: Dr Edwards I am very sorry for the behaviour of my nurse

DR EDWARDS: And what if a woman was to be a success in the theatre, they would not talk about me, or my greatness, they would only talk about the fact a woman tried to succeed me

MARGARET: Not succeed you Sir, work with you -

DR EDWARDS: Work with me! With me? No other dresser has

every dared insinuated they wish to work with me. They work for me. Under me. Never next to or above me. You've already exposed Dr Haighton's lack of knowledge here and look how crestfallen is he.

DR HAIGHTON LOOKS AS IF HE'D HAPPILY KILL MARGARET. DR EDWARDS GOES TO WALK OFF.

DR EDWARDS: You would only be furnishing me with a stick with which to break my head.

MARGARET: Sir, I do believe that medicine is a broad field. It deals with men, women, children, of all classes, with no thought to age. Therefore it should be possible for both men and women to co-operate to succeed in all departments.

DR EDWARDS TAKES A MOMENT TO CONSIDER AN ANSWER.

DR EDWARDS: Tell me, why do you wear black?

MARGARET: I am in mourning for my husband.

DR EDWARDS: Then a woman whose mind is occupied while she mourns the loss of the head of the household, should not dare step into my operating theatre. I should find her thoughts are elsewhere and she amputates the patient's head instead.

MARGARET: Sir!

DR EDWARDS STRIDES OFF, LEAVING MARGARET.

MATRON: Margaret! You put your career as a nurse in jeopardy if you show me up like that again. You do not talk to the surgeons do you understand me?

MARGARET: Yes Matron. I assure you, as a nurse, I will not talk to the surgeons in such a way again.