

# Lyn

## *A Novella*

David Wheldon

Ariel, unfamiliar with his surroundings, stood at the door of the flat-roofed red-brick building that comprised the headquarters of Rowner and Brockhurst, academic publishers and printers. It was not a prepossessing building; it had taken some bomb-damage early on in the war, particularly to the western elevation, whose foot was now thickly covered in willow-herb. Some of the western windows were boarded. The meagre Portland stone frontage was pock-marked by shrapnel. The print-shop had received a direct hit during a full-moon night-raid; the building had fortunately been unoccupied. Printing was now carried out in railway-arches and in re-located Nissen huts. The adjacent business was a ruin, largely; the northern end alone remained. This was two storeyed; it had been used as a station for breeding small laboratory animals; rats, mice and guinea-pigs; the elaborate animal-house roof still stood in place with its northern light — shattered by blast — to prevent direct sunlight from impinging on the cages below. Amongst wild buddleia bushes stood the faded company name-board, *Still-Life*. Of all this Ariel was ignorant at the moment of his first encounter with Lyn Masters and he didn't know that her name was Lyn Masters when first he saw her. One side of the double-door suddenly opened and she emerged into the sunlight. She looked round herself, the pock-marked stonework behind her; she closed the door, saw Ariel, and, making no acknowledgement of his presence, she raised her face dismissively, skirted a bomb-crater and walked down the weedy concrete drive to Silverthorne Lane. In the near distance a small railway locomotive was shunting tarpaulin-shrouded wagons. The slam of heavy levers came from a tall signal-box. There was a smell of coal, tar and heavy industry.

Ariel was quite astonished that a publisher with the fine reputation of Rowner and Brockhurst should have such modest (and even decayed) premises. Well, I suppose an academic press has no direct need to impress: the final publication is its best advertisement, and Rowner and Brockhurst were certainly well thought of. A lot of damage had been inflicted on this area during the war. The publisher's headquarters had something of the appearance of a battered and beaten animal. These thoughts ran through his mind.

Ariel followed the progress of the young woman with his eyes. She has been described as an amazon, but Ariel was not sure he would agree. She was tall, with broad shoulders, a long neck and a rather high-held head: she was too slim, though, too narrow-hipped to be an amazon. Her clothes were somewhat mannish; a finely-woven tweed jacket of a German cut — surely unpopular after the war — and a hound's-tooth pattern, wide black trousers and black, laced office shoes. She turned the corner at the company gates and was gone.

Ariel entered the premises of Rowner and Brockhurst and stood in the foyer, which was wider and deeper than he had imagined. Rowner and Brockhurst's was evidently one of those buildings which are discovered to be much larger within than you would suppose from an external inspection: this surprised Ariel. And, too, the foyer

was expensively fitted with panelling and glazed bookshelves on which stood leather-bound copies of Rowner and Brockhurst's journals from the firm's inception in 1921. There was an unmanned reception desk defending the building's interior; its counter was of a single piece of beautifully grained mahogany. On the wall behind the desk a synchronous master-clock in a glazed ebony-veneered case gave out a satisfying *clunk* every thirty seconds, the swing of its implacable pendulum hypnotic. On the wall to the side of the reception desk were about thirty or so framed monochrome photographs of Rowner and Brockhurst's staff from executives to cleaners in a spurious show of democracy. Only one photograph stood out, though, to Ariel's eye. It was, unlike all the rest, full length; it was of the young woman who had just left. Her stance was slightly pugilistic, with her right leg carried a little forward, her hands made into fists; her jacket was buttoned by its central button: she wore a stiffly collared shirt and a dark neckerchief. The background, against which she was standing as though in high-relief, was misty and questionable; perhaps a War Department fence of barbed wire on concrete and steel posts. Her face was commanding, though, as if she were calculating some struggle ahead. Ariel stepped closer. He had seen chess-players look thus. Her hair — fair, fine ringlets — was cut short. Her cheekbones were wide and dominant. Ariel looked at the writing beneath: *Lyn Masters, MA (London), Grammarian and Syntactician*. So! Rowner and Brockhurst's titles had always been praised for the unvarying quality of their grammar and language construction. And here was the person responsible for carrying on the tradition.

'Am I able to help you?' asked the receptionist, who had returned silently to her station. She had seen him staring at the photograph of Lyn Masters, his face a few inches from it. She had the ghost of a smile on her face. The floor on the other side of the reception desk was raised, so that the receptionist appeared somewhat taller than the visitor. She was dressed in a neat, navy-blue suit with narrow lapels.

'I have come to see Miss Forder,' Ariel said. 'Speculatively. I have no appointment; I tried to phone earlier but the number was engaged.'

'Most of Miss Forder's work is done over the telephone,' said the receptionist. 'I'll see if she is available.' She reached for the handset: 'ah, no. A half day. She will be in tomorrow: and she's free at eleven. I'm sure she will see you.'

'That would be fine,' said Ariel. 'I'm staying at my aunt's for a few days: I hope to see a number of university people.'

'Ah! You must be Mr Ariel. Of Alma Vale.'

'That's right: my aunt's residence.' Ariel paused. 'Those I represent considered a number of publishing houses, and Rowner and Brockhurst — yourselves — stood ahead of the field because of your titles' English. There is an erudite brevity which you almost take for granted until you pick up a rival publication. Then you take it for granted no more. The language is nothing short of beautiful. I can say that personally: there's a polymathic mind at work to make abstruse subjects so clear and so accessible.'

She smiled. 'Ah. Miss Masters. Our Grammarian. She's noted for the clarity of her English construction. She does little translation herself, but she checks translations at a glance. She has a command of every major European language. She reads German in the Sütterlin and writes that style in a free hand.'

'A remarkable person.'

The receptionist glanced towards Lyn Masters' photograph. 'I think so, too. She's taken an early lunch. She probably won't mind your disturbing her. She's habitually in the private bar of the *Agricultural Hotel*. There's a flight of steps at the side of the building. She often takes her papers there during the afternoon, particularly when she's checking the proof-readers' work. She's particular in that.'

‘But if it’s a private bar I won’t be allowed in.’

The receptionist smiled. ‘Oh, I think so. You are a personable young man, and that’s an important criterion. Ask the waiter to obtain you an invitation. Miss Masters will almost certainly grant you one. She’s very inquisitive. She will wish to know all about you. And she will, I am sure, be very pleased to hear your favourable opinion of the house-style — for which she is largely responsible. It’s mostly unappreciated; as she says herself; “a labour of love: you have to have an understanding of the poetry of grammar in order to appreciate it on the palate of the mind. How rare that is.” I know her: all the editors-in-chief rely on her.’ The receptionist looked at me candidly. ‘The editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Synaesthesiology*, Dr Simmonds, was in here last week to discuss an updated cover-format for his journal. “I’ll see if I can locate Miss Masters for you,” I said. “Fine. To me Rowner and Brockhurst is Miss Masters.”’ The receptionist continued to study me, her manner thoughtful. ‘I can’t exaggerate her importance.’ She put the tips of her eight fingers on the mahogany surface of the counter, her thumbs touching each other. ‘Of course, not everyone would get so much as a negative reply, let alone an invitation. People seem to spend hours waiting for her, both at the *Agricultural Hotel* and here: generally speaking the longer they wait the slimmer their chances of meeting her, but there’s something about you that will arouse her interest — of that I am sure. I don’t know quite what: it’s not to be put into words. I’m intuitive. There are certain rare people who, after a kind of swift appraisal, she will see. I’d guess that you were one of those.’ The receptionist stood in silence for a full minute to judge by the resonant sound of the master-clock behind her, her expression meaningful and at the same time elusive: Ariel had seen the same expression on the face of a young woman physician as she had carefully listened to his heart: the expression of a woman professional, but very feminine; a gaze filled with an unspeaking candour. Ariel remembered that medical examination intimately: he had been sixteen and the doctor’s manner had been anything but perfunctory — she had lingered over his heart with her stethoscope, her slim left hand resting on his bare right shoulder, her face held directly in front of his: he recalled marvelling at the intelligence of her large, grey eyes, so different from a man’s. Ariel remembered everything about that day: the room in the school clinic, the tall windows, the slanting sunlight across the linoleum floor, the rounded corners of walls, floor and ceiling, even the Tobin ventilators. “You don’t get out of breath with exercise?” “No, Doctor Flynt. I enjoy cross-country running.” “Do you? So do I. I enjoy the solitariness. How the mind can think! Perhaps we’ll come across each other on Bleadon Hill or Wavering Down.” She had folded away her stethoscope and had looked at him. “The occasional missed beat. We must keep an eye on that. Not to worry: it means little if you can run some distance. How many miles?” “Last Monday I ran eleven.” She had not seemed pressed for time and they had conversed about his studies. “I’ll order an electrocardiogram. Put your shirt back on,” she had said, as though to conclude the consultation.

Ariel’s reverie faded.

‘Thank you,’ said Ariel, looking into the receptionist’s eyes. ‘That’s kind of you.’ She gave Ariel a look as if to say *I don’t miss much*.

The *Agricultural Hotel* was the licensed premises associated with the cattle market, though the cattle market itself had been relocated: the paving and the pens remained, weeds growing profusely in the site. A bomb crater was half-filled with water. The railway sidings seemed rusting and disused. Behind the cattle market was a fellmonger’s premises; piles of sheepskins were being weathered. The air was malodorous.

The hotel was a tall, Italianate, yellow-brick building of some ornateness with

high, commanding windows surmounted by stone lintels: its tall chimneys stood against the racing sky. Ariel entered the side entrance, up a narrow flight of worn stone stairs, to an inset door which bore the sign *private bar*. Ariel opened the door and stood in the passage beyond. There was the low murmur of voices from the lower bar. A waiter passed; he held an empty pewter tray to his stomach.

‘Excuse me.’

‘Yes?’ the waiter’s eyebrows shot up interrogatively.

‘Is Miss Masters here?’

‘Yes.’ His expression was mysterious.

‘Would you ask her if I might join her?’

‘I’ll need to know something about you before I interrupt her.’ He looked Ariel up and down and shook his head slightly. ‘Your name, sir.’

‘Mr Ariel. The receptionist at Rowner and Brockhurst advised me to come here.’

He looked at me closely. ‘The receptionist at Rowner and Brockhurst? That’s a good enough recommendation.’ He paused. ‘Otherwise I wouldn’t interrupt her under any circumstances. She values her privacy. But, for you, I’ll approach her.’ He opened the half-glazed door of the private bar and let himself in. In the space of that brief glance Ariel had a vision of a tall, unornamented, rather comfortless room with a stained ceiling and a slate fireplace above which was an old photograph of the hotel itself, with the law-courts behind it. Ariel could see Lyn Masters; she sat solitarily in a wing chair; she was reading and correcting a foolscap typescript, it seemed, though the distance was such that this was no more than a conjecture. She had been the sole person in the room. The waiter approached her. She looked up. Then the pneumatic closer on the door sighed and the door closed with a click. However, the glazing in the door was etched, and Ariel could obtain an imperfect view of Lyn Masters. He brought his face very close to the glass; his eye was almost touching the surface; in between the tiny *fleurs de lys* and stars with which the glass was patterned he could see her more clearly; “what a fine, intelligent face she has!” thought Ariel to himself: “I could look at her for hours.” He sighed: she was so close and yet so far away, in a world of her own thought. For some reason he was very drawn to her, and he could not think why. But then he had always been drawn to Rowner and Brockhurst’s titles even if they were not in his direct field of interest; he just liked reading them, immersing himself in their fluid language. Until he had seen Miss Masters, though, he had really never thought of the reason why these journals should give him so much pleasure: but now he knew: it was the very construction of the language of their house style — an expertise, a lightness of hand: an effortless salience of thought. So Ariel leaned forward with his face touching the glass, peering between the etched patterns at Miss Masters, the beginnings of a fascination in his enraptness, even though the woman’s outline was become more obscured as Ariel’s breath steamed the glass. Perhaps we see everything through obscured glass, he said to himself, and imagine that we see clearly. By now Lyn Master’s image was thoroughly steamed by his breath. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the glass free of his breath’s condensation, and then applied his eye once more. As he did so he slowly sensed a presence at his side; he drew back from the glass and turned — the waiter had left the room by another door, and had now reappeared. He had evidently been standing next to Ariel for some time, watching his fascinated viewing of Miss Masters. ‘If you’ll wait a moment. Miss Masters says that she wishes to finish some work she has to do: then she’ll come for you. She is checking the typescript of an abstract and she says she wishes to finish it in one session for the sake of continuity of thought. One reason why she brings her work here, Mr Ariel, is that this avoids interruption: she does not like being interrupted and I am surprised that she listened to your request. Don’t go in by

yourself; it's not allowed and you'll be—' He smiled. 'Please don't stare through the spaces between the etchings on the glass; it invades privacy, and Miss Masters will not like that. She is a very private person, and there are many layers to her character which I don't myself understand.' He looked at Ariel with a professionally neutral expression. 'Well, if you just wait there, on that settle.' He indicated this piece of furniture with the flat of his hand; then he left, walking towards the interior of the hotel, towards the kitchens, apparently, to judge by the noise of plates being scraped.

So Ariel sat on the settle; it was probably the most uncomfortable seat Ariel had ever occupied, and the back-rest was oddly contoured and so was stressful to the natural curve of the spine; he leaned back to avoid this discomfort and he was suddenly afflicted with the most terrible pain in the back of both his thighs. Ariel cried aloud. He stood, rubbing himself. He looked down; then he understood. The seat of the settle was made of two transverse wooden boards; the rear one had become loose: pressure on the uncomfortable backrest of the settle pushed these two boards together, painfully trapping any soft part of the anatomy between. It was very painful, and exquisite in its total unexpectedness; Ariel did not wish to repeat the experience under any circumstance, even if it had been a sound punishment for invading a woman's privacy. So he remained standing. He paced up and down the unusually fine carpet of the corridor: it was deep red with a black Greek key pattern on a lighter red border. Ariel looked at his watch: time was passing. He rubbed the backs of his thighs. Then, unable to hold back any longer, he pressed his face to the glazing of the door and stared between the etched patterns as though seized by a kind of hunger, one which he had never experienced before. Lyn Masters was standing up — she was holding her attaché case — no doubt she was going to walk towards the door to let him in: but this was not the case: she had her back to him, and was taking a pace away. He cautiously opened the door marked *private bar*. The room was empty apart from Lyn Masters, who was in the act of leaving by a second, smaller door (covered in ancient green baize) in the opposite wall. Ariel walked swiftly towards this door, which was sighing shut on its pneumatic closer. 'Please — Miss Masters!' Ariel opened the door, the pneumatic closer resisting him. Ariel, feeling the beginnings of distress, ran his hand over the green baize of the door, pushing his fingers into rents in the ancient, faded cloth. There was a further passage beyond this door, low and dark; Lyn Masters was halfway down it: a window at the far end turned her into a dark silhouette with an irregular shadow along the polished linoleum floor; he could hear the regular click of her heels. The corridor seemed to diminish in height as it receded: this exaggeration of perspective made Lyn Masters appear very tall, almost a giantess, in fact, with very long legs and a long neck; it seemed as if she might bang her head against the ceiling.

'Miss Masters! Please excuse me!'

She stopped walking and turned round, shading her eye with her right hand.

'What is it?' Her voice was angry. She moved her attaché case from one hand to another. There was an impatience in her manner. Standing stock-still she waited for Ariel to catch up with her.

Ariel stood before her.

'Well?' she asked. 'Can't I even go for a piss in peace? Am I not even allowed to do that? Why am I always followed about? Someone else yesterday: you today: probably someone else again tomorrow.' She glared at him. 'I am never left alone: always there are interruptions. I am never given any privacy.' She stared at Ariel. 'Perhaps that's a part of the human condition: you never seem to get enough of what you need.' Her stare was not hostile, though, only challenging. 'And you seem to get far more than enough of that which you do not want.'

'I'm so sorry,' Ariel said. Now that he was close to the woman, the corridor seemed to have regained its natural perspective; the image of the window at the further end was the same size as that of the window of the nearer; this must have emphasised the illusion of Lyn Masters' increase in height.

'Well, now that you have arrived, wait there. I'll be back in a moment.' She opened a narrow door on which was a sign saying *Women*, and entered what seemed to be a bright void. The door closed behind her. The unseen room beyond was apparently vast and echoic; Ariel heard the sound of Lyn Masters voiding her urine. Then the flush. Then the sound of running water and the washing of hands. Then the sound of a roller-towel. He looked down at the floor and saw a narrow slip of paper. He knelt down and picked this up — it had five lines of writing on it but this corridor was poorly lit and the paper was too dark to read. He placed it in his breast-pocket. Then the door opened. 'Are you the fellow who was waiting for me in the corridor?' she asked, her voice as challenging as her stare.

'Yes: Ariel.'

'Who sent you?'

Ariel looked at her enquiring face. 'Sent me? I know no-one here. I haven't been sent,' he said. 'I came of my own volition.'

'Truly?' she asked in some astonishment.

'Yes, truly,' said Ariel, holding out his hands in a way that was at the same time placatory and affirming.

'I can hardly believe you,' she said.

'It's perfectly true: I've admired you through the pages of scientific journals for some long time. I had no idea who you were, though. And then I saw you, and your photograph. So, speaking honestly, it's not so much my being sent as my being sent for,' said Ariel. 'Indirectly you requested me.'

'That's an odd way of parsing events,' said Lyn, regarding Ariel with something close to affection. 'It's quite unique. I think one day you'll be of the greatest assistance to me.'

'I have been requested: that's how I see it,' said Ariel. For the first time Ariel noticed that her eyes were of different colours; her left was blue while her right was sea-green. 'That's the truth of the matter. I was compelled to follow you.' He looked at her with some earnestness.

'I know a thing or two about compulsions,' said Lyn: 'I understand you.' She laid a long, elegant hand on his forearm.

'I am being as sincere as I know how to be,' said Ariel, lifting his shoulders.

'So you didn't know that you were interrupting me?'

'I had no idea that you were engrossed in your work. The receptionist suggested that I ought to try to see you here.'

'Oh,' said Lyn Masters, folding her arms. 'Then it wasn't quite of your own volition that you wished to see me,' she said.

'I believe it was,' insisted Ariel, speaking somewhat hurriedly. 'The thought was entirely mine, but the receptionist told me how my idea might be best carried out. She was very helpful.'

'She *is* helpful; I tend to trust her judgements. It's useful having someone whose integrity of thought can be relied upon.' Lyn suddenly frowned, not on account of Ariel, apparently, but because of some perturbation of her own train of thought. 'I don't mind what you wish to see me about,' she said, apparently changing the subject, as a chess-player suddenly changing her strategy on seeing her opponent's weakness, though the tone of her voice remained the same as before. 'The only question that

matters is: do I wish to see you?’ She looked back at Ariel as she walked. Ariel had been watching her so intently that he had not noticed they had left the *Agricultural Hotel*, and were entering Mermine Lane. This narrow street — previously unknown to him — had been the subject of heavy bombing because of its nearness to the dock basin: the walls of the ancient buildings were cracked and were shored up by heavy timbers which crossed the lane. There were still people living here, though, next to a square shot-tower; the cries of babies and the shouts of older children filled the air. A group of scruffy children ran between and through bombed buildings, directly underneath large signs that read: *Unsafe masonry: keep off*. Someone was whistling the air of *j’attendrai*, rather sweetly and feelingly, in fact, paying attention to the emotions of the tune. The sound echoed in the ruins. Fireplaces hung in the faces of the interior brick walls, the rooms they had heated long gone. ‘You may accompany me if you wish. I shall only be ten minutes, a quarter of an hour.’ Lyn Masters’ voice sounded urgent. ‘Yes, come with me.’

Suddenly she turned into an even narrower lane which took an uneven course between high walls in the shadow of a vast bonded-warehouse of blue brick. They walked — her pace quickening as though in anticipation — a further quarter of a mile. Then she crossed a pile of rubble and shattered masonry through which a narrow path had been cut and turned up a stone flight of steps. At the top was a landing with three narrow doors. Lyn Masters opened one of these, her hands trembling, unable to get inside the building fast enough. ‘Wait out here. Don’t come in under any circumstances.’ She gave him her attaché case. ‘Hold this for me. Quickly.’ She was already removing her leather gloves. Then she entered the building, closing the door behind her.

*[This is a preview: the full novella is approximately 32,000 words]*