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The affair that wrecked the marriage of Kingsley Amis

By ZACHARY LEADER

Kingsley Amis is almost as famous for his womanising as for his brilliantly witty novels. But a new biography, drawing on hundreds of previously unseen letters, as well as interviews with his closest friends and relatives, brings to life the true extent of his addiction to sex - and the terrible price paid by those who loved him.

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Here, in our exclusive adaptation, we see how it destroyed his first marriage:

Kingsley Amis and his wife Hilly were on holiday in Yugoslavia and had stopped at a country hotel with a tree-shaded garden. They drank a pitcher of slivovitz, ate a good lunch, swam and sprawled in the sun. While her husband lay sleeping, Hilly took out her lipstick and wrote on his back: 'One fat Englishman. I f*** anything.'

It was the summer of 1963 and their 15-year marriage was under enormous strain. Amis, a celebrated literary figure by now, relentlessly pursued pleasure, determined to sleep with every woman he fancied, drink as many drinks as he could, go to all the parties he could.

Once, Hilly had nearly left him after finding letters from a new girlfriend. As Amis told his best friend, the poet Philip Larkin, she had 'initiated the most strenuous and painful row we have ever had'. Reluctantly, he had agreed to her ultimatum that he must mend his ways.

'Trouble is it's so hard to give all that up, habit of years and all that, and such bloody good fun too. Especially just after finding the most splendid busty redhead in an ideal location. But being walked out on by H, the sure-fire consequence of any further discovery, is a rather unwelcome prospect too.

'You can't have it both ways, you see. Got to make up your mind which you want and stick to it.'

He didn't, of course. His philandering soon started again, but he always came back to Hilly. In fact her affairs - begun as a reaction to his - rocked the marriage most.

More than once she fell in love with other men and was tempted to leave. One of her greatest passions was for the political columnist Henry Fairlie, coiner of the phrase 'the establishment'.

By all accounts, including those of ex-lovers and cuckolded partners, Fairlie was a man of great charm. He was also spectacularly irresponsible and a serious drinker. 'Henry was a very good lover,' reported a former girlfriend, 'if you managed to get hold of him in the morning.'

Mavis Nicholson, a friend of the Amises, recalls a besotted Hilly mooning about the house, singing: 'He's a tramp but I love him.' She told Amis she adored Fairlie and raised the possibility of divorce. Amis was shocked and alarmed.

He had no problem with her having an affair but could not tolerate her leaving him. There was a difference, he wrote miserably to Philip Larkin, between 'having one's wife f***ed' and 'having her

taken away from you, plus your children'.

He won her back, but the problems remained. Another friend, the historian Robert Conquest, deduced that 'what Hilly *really* minds, I always think, is K's unromantic attitude to her. "You are looking sweet and marvellous" is better than "What about a screw, old tart?" I always feel.'

In the end, Hilly's forbearance and her loyalty, her decision to stick by him, did her no good. He was the one who left.

At the 1962 Cheltenham literary festival, Amis met the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard. She was the author of three successful novels, charming, funny and extremely good-looking, with high cheekbones, waist-length blonde hair and long, shapely legs.

Decidedly upper middle-class, she could also be imperious and haughty - often, she now explains, out of shyness.

She was on her second unhappy marriage, with a string of affairs behind her, mostly with married men, including the writers Laurie Lee, Arthur Koestler, Cecil Day-Lewis and Kenneth Tynan.

Romantic love had always been 'the most important thing in the world' for her, 'the most desirable, the most important of human emotions'. Yet she had long thought of herself as 'incapable of sustaining, inspiring or receiving it'. Her life was as much in need of change as Amis's was.

They sat next to each other at a dinner, after which Hilly went to bed exhausted. Amis, however, wanted a nightcap and Jane 'didn't feel I could leave him to drink alone so I stayed up with him'.

They talked all night, or what was left of it, 'about our work, our lives, our marriages and each other'. Amis made it clear that there were problems in his marriage. He praised Jane's beauty. 'When he kissed me,' she recalled, 'I felt as though I could fly.' She was already acting like a woman in love.

Back in London, he rang her and they arranged to meet at a pub near Leicester Square. There, she said, he went straight to the point: 'Before we even have a drink I have to tell you something.' He'd booked a room in a nearby hotel.

'He knew it was presumptuous, but he'd done it anyway, and he needed to know at once. If I didn't want to spend the night with him he must cancel the room or it wouldn't be fair on the hotel.'

Jane admired Amis's frankness. 'It somehow simplified everything. I rather respected him for doing it.' She also thought he 'was genuinely worried about upsetting the hotel'. So she said yes.

How Amis fell for Jane, more than simply wanting to sleep with her, was a puzzle to his friends. To some, she seemed mannered, actressy, posh; it was hard to imagine her at ease in a pub.

But he did. He fell madly for her, almost as much as she did for him. 'Never been so knocked over by love,' he said.

The class element was part of her appeal - 'a duchess makes a thrilling screw,' as Robert Conquest put it, 'but I wouldn't have thought that it'd last.' Larkin thought the attraction was that she was a novelist: 'He always had ideas about marrying - or what have you - a writer,' he said.

Love letters

A series of extraordinary love letters went back and forth between the two of them, written between weekly assignations in London, in hotel rooms and flats lent by friends. They were filled with happiness, optimism, gentleness, willingness to try new things, confidence.

'What I value,' Jane wrote to Amis in one of her earliest letters, is 'the possibility of loving somebody who loves me'. He had 'touched something - through our mutual attraction, through gentleness, and general liking for my sex'.

Though later in life she would conclude that Amis never really liked women, merely wanting to sleep with them, at the time she would not have been alone in thinking that he did.

She urged him to cut down his drinking, a main source, she reckoned, of all his unhappiness and anxieties. 'If I were living with you we would stop drinking brandy and not drink spirits much at all, and we would try and design life around your writing more.'

Amis responded: 'My morale continues to be reasonably high. Being loved by you makes it harder for me to worry about myself. And I'm taking a lot more water with my whisky now. These two things are connected.'

His feelings for her were ecstatic. 'You get more beautiful all the time,' he wrote. 'I can't stop thinking about you. Every other woman I see reminds me of you - to her disadvantage. I love and enjoy everything about you. Not just sexual friends any more - though that too. I admire and trust you.'

Even his sex drive, previously insatiable and pretty much indiscriminate, had been brought under control. 'My lack of interest in other women is beginning to get me down rather,' he told her, a confession he immediately qualified.

'The *real* reason is, I think - leaving out those funny old ideas about being faithful etc - that I know it wouldn't be nearly as good. When you've had champagne and orange juice, a glass of South African red isn't so appealing.'

Hilly suspected from the start that something had gone on between Amis and Jane at Cheltenham, but when she discovered a love letter from Jane in Amis's jacket pocket, she was alarmed as well as angry.

'This was quite different,' she recalled. 'I didn't know Jane. She wasn't a friend. The others were sort of friends and we remained friends afterwards somehow.'

When in the past Hilly discovered Amis's affairs, he was contrite and promised to reform. Now he was defiant. Not only would he go on seeing Jane, but he was taking her on holiday to Spain.

At the same time, he claimed to have no wish to break up the marriage. He and Hilly and the family had arranged to spend the next year abroad, in Majorca, home of his new friend and hero, the poet Robert Graves whose exotic way of living Amis admired. He insisted to both his wife and his mistress that this scheme should go ahead as planned.

A puzzlingly passive Jane accepted his decree. She hadn't expected him to leave his wife and family. 'I thought I could settle for seeing Kingsley for two weeks a year for the rest of my life. I really believed that. Three times a year was better than nothing, and I'd had nothing for a long time.'

Hilly, by contrast, protested vehemently. The couple's rows grew more heated but neither quite knew what they wanted.

Hilly's unhappiness was not only with the threat Jane posed to her marriage, but with the marriage itself, which at some level she may have been trying to escape.

It was the same for Amis. 'Never doubt that I love your mother,' he told his sons, Martin and Philip, 'Never doubt that we will always be together.'

But some part of him must have wanted out of the marriage, or he would not have made it so difficult for Hilly to patch things up, rubbing her nose in the new affair, insisting openly on going on holiday with his lover.

It was during this period that Hilly scrawled that abusive message on his sleeping body, a sign of how bad their relations now were.

Amis was shaken by her anger but also determined. He told Jane: 'I am not going to be bullied or blackmailed or coaxed into accepting any kind of future that doesn't feature you prominently.'

Amis duly went on holiday with Jane, never to return to his family. His son Martin, then nearly 15, remembered his father's departure from their home in Cambridge.

'I know a scuttle when I see one, and my father definitely scuttled down that gravel drive on the day he left the house. He was carrying a suitcase. A taxi waited. He was en route from one reality to another; that taxi was part of a tunnel to a different world.' The next day, driving to school, Martin's mother 'told me matter-of-factly that she and my father were going to separate. She asked me if I understood, and I think I said I did.'

He was told the separation was final. Presumably this decision was Hilly's alone, one she came to after Amis left for his holiday with Jane.

But she was in two minds. She hoped he would come back 'because the children missed him so much, and I did, too. But in a way I was grateful he had gone because we had got into a rut of unfaithfulness.'

She went off to Majorca with the children 'in a terrible state'. Amis was also in turmoil when he returned from his holiday with Jane. 'Perhaps I should have gone rushing off after them,' he once said, 'but I was very wrapped up with Jane and I didn't.'

The fact was, as one of Amis's friends put it, 'he took the line of least resistance. He'd hoped to return to the bosom of his family but he had another bosom to return to, Jane's.

'With her, he anticipated, there would be warmth and uncomplicated acceptance. There would be no rows to be gone through, no difficult reconciliations.'

His choice was aided by the wonderful-time he and Jane had away together. They worked, made love, ate Jane's meals, and became increasingly infatuated with each other.

They'd write in the mornings and go to the beach in the afternoons, where Jane bathed and Amis had a dip.

The centrality of work to the holiday was an important factor in its success, as it was in the success of the relationship in general.

At the end of the day, over a drink, they got into the habit of reading aloud to each other what they'd written, commenting on it. 'We learned to criticise each other's work', Jane said, a habit she called 'the most enjoyable and enduring part of our relationship'.

The holiday over, the idyll continued as they moved in together in London. 'They were dotty about each other as far as I could see,' Jane's brother Colin remembered. 'It was truly a happy time for both of them.'

Amis's shock and sadness that Hilly had taken the children gave way partly to anger. His attitude was, as Jane remembers it, 'the hell with Hilly', though she does not remember his ever talking against her. 'He never disparaged her, never.'

Jane felt no guilt about the breakup of Amis's marriage. 'When I met him it was in turmoil with mutual recriminations and infidelity'. She felt that Amis and Hilly had made each other unhappy and that was that.

She knew that being with her made him very much happier. He even eased up on the drinking, though his old friend Mavis Nicholson warned Jane that this was unlikely to last.

Emotionally exhausted

Meanwhile, in Majorca, Hilly was struggling. She was physically and emotionally exhausted and spoke no Spanish. The boys were homesick for their father: Martin recalled walking every morning with Philip to their villa's iron gates, waiting for the postman to bring Amis's occasional notes and postcards.

Philip recalls Hilly as 'very cut up', often too depressed to get out of bed. 'I couldn't believe what had happened,' she remembered. 'I thought, how have I managed to get into this situation?'

Then, as summer turned to autumn, the house grew cold. It had no heaters and the central fireplace took forever to warm up one room. By mid-November, as Philip puts it, 'it was all too much for her and she wanted a break.' The boys woke up to be told she was sending them back to London, to visit their father.

When they arrived - at midnight because their plane was delayed - Amis opened the door in his striped pyjamas, 'rearing back from us,' as Martin recalled, 'in histrionic consternation.' The telegram Hilly sent announcing their visit hadn't arrived.

'It wasn't just that he was surprised to see us. He was horrified to see us. We had busted him *in flagrante delicto*.' Amis's opening words to the boys were: 'You know I'm not alone.'

Martin describes Jane looming behind Amis 'in her white towel bathrobe, with her waist-long fair hair, tall, serious, worldly, already busying herself, cooking eggs and bacon, finding sheets, blankets, for the beds in the spare room.

'It would have been an impossible heresy for me to admit any woman was more beautiful than my mother. But I could tell at once that Jane, while also being beautiful, was certainly more *experienced*. I acknowledged the appeal of that with simple resignation and I did not feel disloyal.'

Philip's first impression of Jane was that she was 'obviously someone who didn't like children'. She watched the boys warily, while they watched her, she says. 'We were all trying to conceal our shock - they hadn't known I'd be there, and we'd had no warning of their arrival.'

There then followed a week of what Jane calls 'grandiose treats' (mostly visits to the cinema) and 'long and often tearful sessions spent by the boys alone with their father'.

Martin remembers Amis being 'outwardly calm, unusually quiet voiced' during these sessions, patiently taking 'whatever we threw at him', including, 'incredibly', Philip calling him 'a c**t'. Of the explanations Amis offered for why he left their mother, Martin recalls only 'a derisory ramble about China tea - how Dad liked it, and Mum never remembered to buy it, and now here he was, awash with Earl Grey.'

This explanation is revealing, combining as it does an implicit complaint against Hilly about disorderliness, and lack of due respect, with a desire to move upmarket.

Their mother came back to London to set up home with the boys and their sister Sally in a house Amis paid for. Hilly remembers him coming round and suggesting he should move in. 'So he kept me dangling a bit.'

She remained ambivalent: 'I didn't know whether I'd want that again.'

It was a horrible time for her. One night, after a drunken dinner with Sybil Burton, recently left by her actor husband Richard for another glamorous Elizabeth (the film star, Elizabeth Taylor), Hilly spoke on the phone to Mavis Nicholson.

Mavis was alarmed by how Hilly sounded: despairing, slurred, repetitious. 'We're all disposable, darling,' she kept saying, an assertion of Sybil Burton's over dinner.

Mavis tried to buck her up - she mustn't talk like that, it wasn't true - but Hilly hung up. When Mavis phoned back half an hour later, she got Sally, who was hysterical. She couldn't wake Hilly up.

Mavis telephoned Amis immediately. It was late, Jane was asleep or away, and Amis had been drinking. Half cut, he was reluctant to go round but he eventually relented. When he arrived he discovered Hilly had taken an overdose of sleeping pills - an accidental one, she later claimed, or a half-accidental one.

An ambulance took her to hospital, and, after several hours, she was declared out of danger. When she came to, Amis stood over her bed and screamed at her for what she'd done.

Martin's memory of this episode is of his mother's return from hospital: 'She lay in a curtained room. I looked in and could see the bedside light and its pink lampshade. Someone, an adult, barred my entry.

'Her recovery was swift and total. When she talked to me about it afterwards she said she had been depressed because she was still in love with my father.'

Eventually, Hilly got onto a more even keel. She wrote to Larkin: 'Things were *very nasty* for a couple of years for me but they have got much better and I think everyone is better off.'

Her feelings about Amis and Jane were on the surface accepting: 'I think K is really much better off with someone like Jane - he can really be king; she is really very queenly.

'Anyway, I'm really glad I had those years with him because I can't imagine anyone else teaching me so much and making me laugh as much and parts of it were wonderful.'

She must have assumed that the relationship, and the pain it had caused her, was now over for good. She was wrong.

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