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The menage a trois that saved Kingsley Amis from despair

By ZACHARY LEADER

The novelist Kingsley Amis presented himself to the world as a fearlessly abrasive and self-assured figure, but a new biography reveals what a fearful and tormented man he really was. Here, in the last part of our exclusive adaptation, we see how he finally found peace in his private life - in the most unexpected manner.

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From childhood onwards, Kingsley Amis suffered from night terrors and screaming fits, which he partly attributed to a wrong answer he gave when he was 'eight, nine or ten'.

His parents had been invited out for the evening and his father asked: "Do you need a babysitter?" Amis's reply was "No".

Left on his own that night he remembered 'the feeling that someone was going to climb in the window and murder me'.

From this moment on, he said, he was frightened of the dark, of being alone, of being shut up and cut off from help.

These anxieties haunted him for the rest of his life. He hated lifts, aeroplanes (he flew only once) and Tube travel - indeed, travel of any kind.

Above all, he needed constant companionship. So when his second wife, novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, walked out on him after 15 years together, it was a paralysing blow.

It is hard to say precisely when the marriage began to founder but one thing is certain - his drinking was a crucial factor. He had promised Jane he would cut back on alcohol. Instead, he indulged more than ever.

They were living in a grand, 20-room Georgian mansion with three acres of grounds in Barnet on the outskirts of London. They had moved there at Jane's instigation, though, as it turned out, they could barely afford it.

Jane tried to economise, but in areas that mattered to Amis, he allowed no stinting. She risked, as she recalled, "really quite bad scenes if I tried to get him to spend less money on drink or cabs or whatever".

He also had wholly traditional notions of the female domestic sphere. The sole responsibilities he assumed were laying the fire, mixing and serving drinks, and entertaining guests at the high-spirited house parties they held every weekend.

Even though she had a literary career of her own to pursue, he expected Jane to deal with shopping, cleaning, cooking, budgeting household expenses and educating the children, although he did so less in the manner of a stern patriarch than of an inconsiderate teenager.

She had had high hopes of their relationship when it began, and she genuinely loved him. But, worried about money, worn out with running the house, in the midst of the menopause and not having time to write herself, her morale slumped to rock bottom.

According to Jane, Amis often got through the equivalent of a bottle of whisky a day. The once handsome young man was thickening in the jowls and around the waist, his face growing ever more florid.

More disturbingly, he began suffering from twitching muscles, hallucinations and, as his friend, the historian Robert Conquest, noticed, 'the increasingly common experience of not remembering how he got home'.

Jane reports that several times he was unable to distinguish between real and imagined happenings and at one point argued with her for a whole day about the guest list of the previous evening's dinner party, an event which had never taken place.

The drink made him less patient with and considerate of others. When made uneasy or frightened he lashed out, accusing Jane of selfishness and inconsiderateness.

He saw her, as he told his best friend, the poet Philip Larkin, as the kind of person "totally wrapped up in themselves and unable to tolerate the slightest competition or opposition and having to have their own way in everything all the time".

A friend observed: "Jane got on Kingsley's nerves in a thousand little ways. He didn't pick quarrels with her but he didn't go to any elaborate pretence of warmth and affection. He showed her the conventional signs of his affection, but he wouldn't mask his irritation."

For her part, she tried to deal with the anxieties and fears that beset him. The depth and intensity of them were brought home to her at a weekend party given by the philanthropist Drue Heinz at her country house in Berkshire.

Amis drank an enormous amount and Jane had to help him upstairs to their room at the far end of a wing.

When they finally found it, Amis had a sudden attack of what psychologists call depersonalisation, a condition that made him panic and "cease to seem real" to himself. "He howled and howled and howled," Jane remembers.

These howls "weren't a sound I'd ever heard anybody make before in my life and went on for what seemed like half an hour. I was holding him all the time. I had my arms around him, but I was absolutely desperate. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

"He said let's just go to bed, and he went to sleep but I didn't. The next morning he said nothing about it at all. By then he'd become extremely difficult for me to talk to, because he'd always say you're getting at me about drink."

Jane realised later what had probably brought on his fit. She was about to go off on an overnight trip and that meant he was going to have to spend the night in his bedroom alone.

Amis was also struggling with another problem - his drinking had put a damper on his notorious libido, not only with Jane but in general. For most of his adult life, Amis had been wildly promiscuous.

His constant and unabashed womanising had undermined his first marriage to Hilly, the girl he met at Oxford.

But now things were different. Jane thinks he had two brief flings during their marriage, a far cry

from the promiscuity of his earlier years.

In October 1976, Amis agreed to consult the first of several sex therapists in an attempt to revive his libido and his marriage.

Despite his gathering disaffection with Jane, he had not given up on the relationship and he made an heroic effort to deal with his loss of interest in sex by going to see Dr Patricia Gillan, who ran a sex therapy clinic at the Maudsley Hospital in London.

At the time, he was also seeing other therapists about other phobias (notably his agoraphobic fear of travelling) and in his memoirs he was typically dismissive about all of them.

He was often impatient and bored with his therapists, and particularly with what he saw as their tendency to state the obvious. But his sarcastic attitude does not square with the entries in his diaries, which show that he stuck with one particular therapist for as long as two-and-a-half years.

He also seems to have made efforts to follow his therapeutic regimen. A note in one diary reads: 'Make list of fears & intensities, links between fears. Count blessings when (at the) pub, going to sleep, etc. Booze record & dreams etc.'

His experiences with sex therapy were fuel for his novel, *Jake's Thing*. The treatments depicted in the story were 'pretty close' to his real-life sessions, according to Dr Gillan.

Like Jake, Amis had laboratory tests in which he was given 'pictorial pornographic materials' for stimulation (in the novel these provoke Jake's comparison of female genitalia to 'the inside of a giraffe's ear, or a tropical fruit not much prized by the natives') and had his erections measured by a machine called a plethysmograph.

At night he put on a 'nocturnal mensurator', a device for measuring 'penile tumescence'.

It is astonishing that Amis went through these procedures, but it was a mark of how serious he was about keeping his marriage going and recovering his potency.

When *Jake's Thing* was published in 1978, as if to defy biographical readings, Amis and Jane were photographed walking arm in arm in Hampstead (they had moved there from Barnet after the trauma of travelling in to London proved too much for him).

Understandably, the novel upset Jane. She was dismayed by the hostile things it said about women and by its overriding pessimism.

Jane had come to realise not only that Amis didn't love her but that he didn't like her. In the Hampstead years, she remembers, he went to sleep drunk most nights, was quarrelsome, and stopped sharing a bed because he claimed that when she turned over in bed it woke him and he couldn't get back to sleep.

At moments, however, he seemed to *want* to love and like her. She recalled a weekend away in the country, a trip suggested by one of Amis's therapists, when he was 'relaxed, affectionate, funny, communicative, said how much he was enjoying being with me.

"It was like old times - not the breathless beginning but something that held the promise of endurance, of an honest and companionable future."

There was a more ambiguous moment in their house in Hampstead when she was standing by the window of their bedroom looking out at the garden and feeling sad, like a heroine in one of her own novels.

"He came to me, put his arms round me and gave me a long, gentle kiss, and said 'I used to be so

much in love with you.' Before I could say anything, he turned and walked out of the room."

Amis was deeply unhappy, steeped in world-weariness and dismay. His friends commented upon his unhappiness and it was apparent in his work.

The poetry he wrote at this time was suffused with a sense of loss, and in a gloomily funny letter to Larkin he set down a litany of complaints, including being plagued by 'hideous memories' of 'behaving like a s***, p***ing on innocent people etc'.

'On my self-pity themes, don't tempt me, son. They include yearround hay fever, high blood-pressure so that I stream with sweat at the slightest exertion or upset, permanently-itching places on my scalp, increasing phobias that stop me travelling almost anywhere and make me dread and hate being alone.

'This along with a wife who puts herself first and constantly goes out to GROUPS and WORKSHOPS and crappy 'new friends', and total loss of sex-drive. I haven't had a f*** for more than a year.

'Nearly all my reading is comfortreading now, done while I wait for whisky and sleeping-pills to get me torpid enough to go to bed - alone, of course. Still, I've got my work, oh I say, thanks most awfully.'

In November 1980, Jane set off on a ten-day visit to a health farm. On the morning of her departure Amis was in the kitchen at home and when Jane said she was going he simply said 'I see' and didn't look up from his newspaper.

Ten days later, on the morning she was due back, a letter was handdelivered to him by Jane's solicitors. It read: 'This is to tell you that I'm leaving. You know that I have been - we've both been - unhappy for years.

I've thought about this for a long time and have come to the conclusion that there isn't the slightest hope of things getting any better. They simply get quietly worse.

'You are not going to stop drinking and I cannot live with the consequences. I tried to tell you that it was not the rows that were the worst things. It was the awful sterile desert in between them that I can't take any more.

'I'd rather live alone than the way we've been living. This has been the most agonising decision and I've taken all the trouble I know to be sure that it is the right one, but I have made it, and it is final.'

In his diary, Amis made a casual note - 'Jane off' - as if unmoved. In fact, according to his elder son Philip, he was 'visibly shaken, it shook him to the ground. He was absolutely petrified'.

Philip called his brother, Martin. "It's happened," he said, and Martin knew right away what he meant. They made immediate arrangements.

"It wasn't a question of two sons planning to console a father who had lost a wife," Martin recalls. "It was much more elementary. One or other of us had to be there all the time. Not round the clock but every evening, every night, every morning.

"He still had his housekeeper there, and her presence would help him get through the day; but only family or thoroughly trusted friends were any good to him through the hours of darkness.

"His needs seemed basic, almost animal: shelter, warmth, the heat of known beasts. My brother and I repeated what was most immediately necessary for him to hear. 'Dad, you won't spend a night alone. One of us will always be here'."

Philip remembers his father needing to be reassured each day: "Will you be back this evening? 'Yes, Dad, I'll be there.' 'Thank God. You don't know what it means to me'."

Serious 'Dadsitting' began, helped by friends of Martin such as James Fenton, Julian Barnes and Christopher Hitchens, who would arrive with booze and curry or take him out to the cinema.

But they could not take him out of himself. Amis, in Martin's phrase, was 'heartsick -romantically mortified' by Jane's departure and overcome by a sense of waste. He told a friend: 'By God she was hard to live with but living without her seems absolutely pointless. I had no idea she meant so much to me.'

For some months he tried to persuade her to return. He promised to drink less; she said he would have to give up entirely. He was 'absolutely furious', in part because it was presented as an ultimatum. "He would never stop drinking," Philip explains.

As negotiations faltered and positions hardened, Philip began to seek a more permanent solution to the question of who should take care of his father. He soon found one.

In a village in Buckinghamshire, in a tiny three-room cottage, his mother, Hilly, Amis's first wife, was living with her third husband, Alastair Boyd, the seventh Baron Kilmarnock, and their son, Jaime.

In Ali, Hilly had found a man who was charming, considerate and had perfect manners. What he didn't have was money. His title came without property or income, and business ventures they had started while living in Spain -a language school, then a bar - had failed.

Back in England, they had somewhere to live only because the cottage had been bequeathed to him by his nanny. He took up his seat in the House of Lords and attended regularly. When in London he boarded with friends, leaving Hilly alone in the country.

She found small jobs, even running a hot-dog van on a motorway layby, but everything was precarious. She was desperate: 'I was marooned. I missed the sun. It was freezing, always raining. We couldn't do anything. We had no money.'

It was at this point that Hilly received a call from Philip. After chatting a bit, he asked: 'How about looking after Dad?' Hilly's immediate reply was: 'Oh, God.'

Though she had only recently bought a copy of *The Lady* in search of jobs that 'offered a bungalow or something in exchange for looking after a couple of old people', she did not take the proposal seriously.

But when she talked to Ali, she recognised its advantages, chiefly that the family could live together in London. Then Philip called a second time, 'mentioning the magic word of £50 a week. I was lucky if I made £20 a week normally. Fifty pounds! And our keep and board. I thought, bloody marvellous.'

Hilly and Ali went for a trial weekend to Hampstead, taking their son, Jaime, with them. All went swimmingly - as Martin puts it, "my brother and I were exchanging complacent smiles. Everyone present was coming across as a model of flexibility and discretion".

Until, over dinner, eight-year-old Jaime reached for the fruit bowl, which contained oranges, apples, grapes - and a single peach. Amis roared 'Hey! That's my peach!'

Martin recalls: "It was hideously harsh, hideously sudden. Everyone reeled back, groaning, swearing. Jaime shrivelled up in his chair. I can't imagine how we survived the rest of the evening."

Somehow the episode was smoothed over and, a month later Hilly, Ali and Jaime moved in. Hilly made it clear to Amis that she 'was an employee. I was always very firm about that. I'm not your wife again, or anything like that, I'm employed here to look after you'. Ali's view was that he was willing to give it a try.

Amis told Larkin about the arrangement in a letter. 'Nay, stare not so,' he wrote. 'Well, you'd be justified in staring a bit, but it was their suggestion, the boys are much in favour, it's the only way for me to have a bit of family, all that.'

Already he felt his 'morale much improved. I started a new novel, and the day they came I got the plot of same sorted out'.

That the arrangement would be harder on Hilly and Ali than on him, he fully acknowledged. 'It did take great courage - on her part more than on mine,' he later recalled.

But he was happy to have not just someone he could talk to but someone who would understand. 'Hilly is not a third wife for me or a companion but someone whom I was with for 17 years, with a lot of shared experience.'

Eventually, after the Hampstead home was sold (as part of a very bitter divorce settlement with Jane) they all moved to a large house in Primrose Hill. The Kilmarnocks had a self-contained flat in the basement while Amis lived and worked above them.

Hilly's lot was not an easy one, mostly because Amis was not easy. Her duties were to run the house, prepare his suppers and weekend meals, clean, make his bed, and sit with him in the evenings in front of the television.

This last duty she found onerous. 'We weren't allowed to watch anything he didn't want to watch,' she remembers, 'and I was more or less trapped there. He wanted me to stay till he went to bed, which could be any time. But I'd always say good-night at 9pm.'

Ali and Hilly would stay in the basement except when doing chores for Amis or joining in on social occasions. The joining-in was infrequent, certainly on Ali's part.

When in Amis's presence, he was always formal and correct and never batted an eyelid, but Amis could express impatience, irritation, disdain. Hilly was 'on tenterhooks' at such times. 'On the surface we managed very well but I knew all the mutterings that Kingsley did when Ali wasn't there.'

Ali saw the relationship as amiable but distant. 'I was out practically all the time. Sitting in the Lords until late. The physical contact, apart from on the stairs and things, was really fairly minimal.'

But when Hilly was unwell or exhausted, Ali would take over her chores, including making Amis's bed. Amis would then mock him as 'the butler', though never to his face.

Julian Barnes remembers being invited over for 'a bite of supper' and Ali walking in, carrying a tray. 'Ali was barely out of the room when Kingsley said: "Not bad for a boy from Norbury [the London suburb where Amis grew up], eh? Get your dinner from a peer of the realm".'

Many found Ali's forbearance surprising. I once asked him if he hated Amis. 'I'm not the hating type,' he said, insisting that Amis 'was nicer underneath than he allowed himself to be on top; there were nicer impulses lying down below'.

So, though not without its tensions, the unconventional ménage worked - and carried on right until Amis's death in 1995.

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