

Title

A Town Like Alice

**By
Nevil Shute**

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About this eBook

“A Town Like Alice” by Nevil Shute

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How many loved ...

How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true;

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

W. B. Yeats.

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A Town Like Alice

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James Macfadden died in March 1905 when he was forty-seven years old; he was riding in the Driffield Point-to-Point.

He left the bulk of his money to his son Douglas. The Macfaddens and the Dalhousies at that time lived in Perth, and Douglas was a school friend of Jock Dalhousie, who was a young man then, and had gone to London to become junior partner in a firm of solicitors in Chancery Lane, Owen, Dalhousie, and Peters. I am now the senior partner, and Owen and Dalhousie and Peters have been dead for many years, but I never changed the name of the firm.

It was natural that Douglas Macfadden should put his affairs into the hands of Jock Dalhousie, and Mr. Dalhousie handled them personally till he died in 1928. In splitting up the work I took Mr. Macfadden on to my list of clients, and forgot about him in the pressure of other matters.

It was not until 1935 that any business for him came up. I had a letter from him then, from an address in Ayr. He said that his brother-in-law, Arthur Paget, had been killed in a motor-car accident in Malaya and so he wanted to redraft his will to make a trust in favour of his sister Jean and her two children. I am sorry to say that I was so ignorant of this client that I did not even know he was unmarried and had no issue of his own. He finished up by saying that he was too unwell to travel down to London, and he suggested that perhaps a junior member of the firm might be sent up to see him and arrange the matter.

This fitted in with my arrangements fairly well, because when I got this letter I was just leaving for a fortnight's fishing holiday on Loch Shiel. I wrote and told him that I would visit him on my way south, and I put the file concerning his affairs in the bottom of my suitcase to study one evening during my vacation.

When I got to Ayr I took a room at the Station Hotel, because in our correspondence there had been no suggestion that he could put me up. I changed out of my plus-fours into a dark business suit, and went to call upon my client.

He did not live at all in the manner I had expected. I did not know much about his estate except that it was probably well over twenty thousand pounds, and I had expected to find my client living in a house with a servant or two. Instead, I discovered that he had a bedroom and a sitting-room on the same floor of a small private hotel just off the sea front. He was evidently leading the life of an invalid though he was hardly more than fifty years old at that time, ten years younger than I was myself. He was as frail as an old lady of eighty, and he had a peculiar grey look about him which didn't look at all good to me. All the windows of his sitting-room were shut and after the clean air of the lochs and moors I found his room stuffy and close; he had a number of budgerigars in cages in the window, and the smell of these birds made the room very unpleasant. It was clear from the furnishings that he had lived in that hotel and in that room for a good many years.

He told me something about his life as we discussed the will; he was quite affable, and pleased that I had been able to come to visit him myself. He seemed to be an educated man, though he spoke with a marked Scots accent. "I live very quietly, Mr. Strachan," he said. "My health will not permit me to go far abroad. Whiles I get out upon the front on a fine day and sit for a time, and then again Maggie—that's the daughter of Mrs. Doyle who keeps the house—Maggie wheels me out in the chair. They are very good to me here."

Turning to the matter of the will, he told me that he had no close relatives at all except his sister, Jean Paget. "Forbye my father might have left what you might call an indiscretion or two in Australia," he said. "I would not say that there might not be some of those about, though I have never met one, or corresponded. Jean told me once that my mother had been sore distressed. Women talk about these things, of course, and my father was a lusty type of man."

His sister Jean had been an officer in the W.A.A.C.s in the 1914-18 war, and she had married a Captain Paget in the spring of 1917. "It was not a very usual sort of marriage," he said thoughtfully. "You must remember that my sister Jean had never been out of Scotland till she joined the army, and the greater part of her life had been spent in Perth. Arthur Paget was an Englishman from Southampton, in Hampshire. I have nothing against Arthur, but we had all naturally thought that Jean would have married a Scot. Still, I would not say but it has been a happy marriage, or as happy as most."

After the war was over Arthur Paget had got a job upon a rubber estate in Malaya somewhere near Taiping, and Jean, of course, went out there with him. From that time Douglas Macfadden had seen little of his sister; she had been home on leave in 1926 and again in 1932. She had two children, Donald born in 1918 and Jean born in 1921; these children had been left in England in 1932 to live with the Paget parents and to go to school in Southampton, while their mother returned to Malaya. My client had seen them only once, in 1932 when their mother brought them up to Scotland.

The present position was that Arthur Paget had been killed in a motor accident somewhere near Ipoh; he had been driving home at night from Kuala Lumpur and had driven off the road at a high speed and hit a tree. Probably he fell asleep. His widow, Jean Paget, was in England; she had come home a year or so before his death and she had taken a small house in Bassett just outside Southampton to make a home for the children and to be near their schools. It was a sensible arrangement, of course, but it seemed to me to be a pity that the brother and the

sister could not have arranged to live nearer to each other. I fancy that my client regretted the distance that separated them, because he referred to it more than once.

He wanted to revise his will. His existing will was a very simple one, in which he left his entire estate to his sister Jean. "I would not alter that," he said. "But you must understand that Arthur Paget was alive when I made that will, and that in the nature of things I expected him to be alive when Jean inherited from me, and I expected that he would be there to guide her in matters of business. I shall not make old bones."

He seemed to have a fixed idea that all women were unworldly creatures and incapable of looking after money; they were irresponsible, and at the mercy of any adventurer. Accordingly, although he wanted his sister to have the full use of his money after his death, he wanted to create a trust to ensure that her son Donald, at that time a schoolboy, should inherit the whole estate intact after his mother's death. There was, of course, no special difficulty in that. I presented to him the various pros and cons of a trust such as he envisaged, and I reminded him that a small legacy to Mrs. Doyle, in whose house he had lived for so many years, might not be out of place provided that he was still living with them at the time of his death. He agreed to that. He told me then that he had no close relations living, and he asked me if I would undertake to be the sole trustee of his estate and the executor of his will. That is the sort of business a family solicitor frequently takes on his shoulders, of course. I told him that in view of my age he should appoint a co-trustee, and he agreed to the insertion of our junior partner, Mr. Lester Robinson, to be co-trustee with me. He also agreed to a charging clause for our professional services in connection with the trust.

There only remained to tidy up the loose ends of what was, after all, a fairly simple will. I asked him what should happen if both he and his sister were to die before the boy Donald was twenty-one, and I suggested that the trust should terminate and the boy should inherit the estate absolutely when he reached his majority. He agreed to this, and I made another note upon my pad.

"Supposing then," I said, "that Donald should die before his mother, or if Donald and his mother should die in some way before you. The estate would then pass to the girl, Jean. Again, I take it that the trust would terminate when she reached her majority?"

"Ye mean," he asked, "when she became twenty-one?"

I nodded. "Yes. That is what we decided in the case of her brother."

He shook his head. "I think that would be most imprudent, Mr. Strachan, if I may say so. No lassie would be fit to administer her own estate when she was twenty-one. A lassie of that age is at the mercy of her sex, Mr. Strachan, at the mercy of her sex. I would want the trust to continue for much longer than that. Till she was forty, at the very least."

From various past experiences I could not help agreeing with him that twenty-one was a bit young for a girl to have absolute control over a large sum of money, but forty seemed to me to be excessively old. I stated my own view that twenty-five would be a reasonable age, and very reluctantly he receded to thirty-five. I could not move him from that position, and as he was obviously tiring and growing irritable I accepted that as the maximum duration of our trust. It meant that in those very unlikely circumstances the trust would continue for twenty-one years from that date, since the girl Jean had been born in 1921 and it was then 1935. That finished our business and I left him and went back to London to draft out the will, which I sent to him for signature. I never saw my client again.

It was my fault that I lost touch with him. It had been my habit for a great many years to take my holiday in the spring, when I would go with my wife to Scotland for a fortnight's fishing, usually to Loch Shiel. I thought that this was going on for ever, as one does, and that next year I would call again upon this client on my way down from the north to see if there was any other business I could do for him. But things turn out differently, sometimes. In the winter of 1935 Lucy died. I don't want to dwell on that, but we had been married for twenty-

seven years and—well, it was very painful. Both our sons were abroad, Harry in his submarine on the China station and Martin in his oil company at Basra. I hadn't the heart to go back to Loch Shiel, and I have never been to Scotland since. I had a sale and got rid of most of our furniture, and I sold our house on Wimbledon Common; one has to make an effort at a time like that, and a clean break. It's no good going on living in the ashes of a dead happiness.

I took a flat in Buckingham Gate opposite the Palace stables and just across the park from my club in Pall Mall. I furnished it with a few things out of the Wimbledon house and got a woman to come in and cook my breakfast and clean for me in the mornings, and here I set out to re-create my life. I knew the pattern well enough from the experience of others in the club. Breakfast in my flat. Walk through the Park and up the Strand to my office in Chancery Lane. Work all day, with a light lunch at my desk. To the club at six o'clock to read the periodicals, and gossip, and dine, and after dinner a rubber of bridge. That is the routine that I fell into in the spring of 1936, and I am in it still.

All this, as I say, took my mind from Douglas Macfadden; with more than half my mind upon my own affairs I could only manage to attend to those clients who had urgent business with my office. And presently another interest grew upon me. It was quite obvious that war was coming, and some of us in the club who were too old for active military service began to get very interested in Air Raid Precautions. Cutting the long story short, Civil Defence as it came to be called absorbed the whole of my leisure for the next eight years. I became a Warden, and I was on duty in my district of Westminster all through the London blitz and the long, slow years of war that followed it. Practically all my staff went on service, and I had to run the office almost single-handed. In those years I never took a holiday, and I doubt if I slept more than five hours in any night. When finally peace came in 1945 my hair was white and my head shaky, and though I improved a little in the years that followed I had definitely joined the ranks of the old men.

One afternoon in January 1948 I got a telegram from Ayr. It read,

*Regret Mr. Douglas Macfadden passed away last night please instruct re funeral.
Doyle, Balmoral Hotel, Ayr.*

I had to search my memory, I am afraid, to recollect through the war years who Mr. Douglas Macfadden was, and then I had to turn to the file and the will to refresh my memory with the details of what had happened thirteen years before. It seemed rather odd to me that there was nobody at Ayr who could manage the funeral business. I put in a trunk call to Ayr right away and very soon I was speaking to Mrs. Doyle. It was a bad line, but I understood that she knew of no relations; apparently Mr. Macfadden had had no visitors for a very long time. Clearly, I should have to go to Ayr myself, or else send somebody. I had no urgent engagements for the next two days and the matter seemed to be a little difficult. I had a talk with Lester Robinson, my partner, who had come back from the war as a Brigadier, and cleared my desk, and took the sleeper up to Glasgow after dinner that night. In the morning I went down in a slow train to Ayr.

When I got to the Balmoral Hotel I found the landlord and his wife in mourning and obviously distressed; they had been fond of their queer lodger and it was probably due in a great part to their ministrations that he had lived so long. There was no mystery about the cause of death. I had a talk with the doctor and heard all about his trouble; the doctor had been with him at the end, for he lived only two doors away, and the death certificate was already signed. I took a brief look at the body for identification and went through the various formalities of death. It was all perfectly straightforward, except that there were no relations.

“I doubt he had any,” said Mr. Doyle. “His sister used to write to him at one time, and she came to see him in 1938, I think it was. She lived in Southampton. But he’s had no letters except just a bill or two for the last two years.”

His wife said, “Surely, the sister died, didn’t she? Don’t you remember him telling us, sometime toward the end of the war?”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said. “So much was happening about that time. Maybe she did die.”

Relations or not, arrangements had to be made for the funeral, and I made them that afternoon. When that was done I settled down to look through the papers in his desk. One or two of the figures in an account book and on the back of the counterfoils of his cheque book made me open my eyes; clearly I should have to have a talk with the bank manager first thing next morning. I found a letter from his sister dated in 1941 about the lease of her house. It threw no light, of course, upon her death, if she was dead, but it did reveal significant news about the children. Both of them were in Malaya at that time. The boy Donald, who must have been twenty-three years old at that time, was working on a rubber plantation near Kuala Selangor. His sister Jean had gone out to him in the winter of 1939, and was working in an office in Kuala Lumpur.

At about five o’clock I put in a trunk call to my office in London, standing in the cramped box of the hotel, and spoke to my partner. “Look, Lester,” I said. “I told you that there was some difficulty about the relations. I am completely at a loss up here, I’m sorry to say. Provisionally, I have arranged the funeral for the day after tomorrow, at two o’clock, at St. Enoch’s cemetery. The only relations that I know of live, or used to live, in Southampton. The sister, Mrs. Arthur Paget, was living in 1941 at No. 17 St. Ronans Road, Bassett—that’s just by Southampton somewhere. There were some other Paget relations in the district, the parents of Arthur Paget. Mrs. Arthur Paget—her Christian name was Jean—yes, she was the deceased’s sister. She had two children, Donald and Jean Paget, but they were both in Malaya in 1941. God knows what became of them. I wouldn’t waste much time just now looking for them, but would you get Harris to do what he can to find some of these Southampton Pagets and tell them about the funeral? He’d better take the telephone book and talk to all the Pagets in Southampton one by one. I don’t suppose there are so very many.”

Lester came on the telephone to me next morning just after I got back from the bank. “I’ve nothing very definite, I’m afraid, Noel,” he said. “I did discover one thing. Mrs. Paget died in 1942, so she’s out of it. She died of pneumonia through going out to the air raid shelter—Harris got that from the hospital. About the other Pagets, there are seven in the telephone directory and we’ve rung them all up, and they’re none of them anything to do with your family. But one of them, Mrs. Eustace Paget, thinks the family you’re looking for are the Edward Pagets, and that they moved to North Wales after the first Southampton blitz.”

“Any idea whereabouts in North Wales?” I asked.

“Not a clue,” he said. “I think the only thing that you can do now is to proceed with the funeral.”

“I think it is,” I replied. “But tell Harris to go on all the same, because apart from the funeral we’ve got to find the heirs. I’ve just been to the bank, and there is quite a sizable estate. We’re the trustees, you know.”

I spent the rest of that day in packing up all personal belongings, and letters, and papers, to take down to my office. Furniture at that time was in short supply, and I arranged to store the furniture of the two rooms, since that might be wanted by the heirs. I gave the clothes to Mr. Doyle to give away to needy people in Ayr. Only two of the budgerigars were left; I gave those to the Doyles, who seemed to be attached to them. Next morning I had another interview with the bank manager and telephoned to book my sleeper on the night mail down to London. And in the afternoon we buried Douglas Macfadden.

It was very cold and bleak and grey in the cemetery, that January afternoon. The only mourners were the Doyles, father, mother, and daughter, and myself, and I remember thinking that it was queer how little any of us knew about the man that we were burying. I had a great respect for the Doyle family by that time. They had been overwhelmed when I told them of the small legacy that Mr. Macfadden had left them and at first they were genuinely unwilling to take it; they said that they had been well paid for his two rooms and board for many years, and anything else that they had done for him had been because they liked him. It was something, on that bitter January afternoon beside the grave, to feel that he had friends at the last ceremonies.

So that was the end of it, and I drove back with the Doyles and had tea with them in their sitting-room beside the kitchen. And after tea I left for Glasgow and the night train down to London, taking with me two suitcases of papers and small personal effects to be examined at my leisure if the tracing of the heir proved to be troublesome, and later to be handed over as a part of the inheritance.

In fact, we found the heir without much difficulty. Young Harris got a line on it within a week, and presently we got a letter from a Miss Agatha Paget, who was the headmistress of a girls' school in Colwyn Bay. She was a sister of Arthur Paget, who had been killed in the motor accident in Malaya. She confirmed that his wife, Jean, had died in Southampton in the year 1942, and she added the fresh information that the son, Donald, was also dead. He had been a prisoner of war in Malaya, and had died in captivity. Her niece, Jean, however, was alive and in the London district. The headmistress did not know her home address because she lived in rooms and had changed them once or twice, so she usually wrote to her addressing her letters to her firm. She was employed in the office of a concern called Pack and Levy Ltd., whose address was The Hyde, Perivale, London, N.W.

I got this letter in the morning mail; I ran through the others and cleared them out of the way, and then picked up this one and read it again. Then I got my secretary to bring me the Macfadden box and I read the will through again, and went through some other papers and my notes on the estate. Finally I reached out for the telephone directory and looked up Pack and Levy Ltd., to find out what they did.

Presently I got up from my desk and stood for a time looking out of the window at the bleak, grey, January London street. I like to think a bit before taking any precipitate action. Then I turned and went through into Robinson's office; he was dictating, and I stood warming myself at his fire till he had finished and the girl had left the room.

"I've got that Macfadden heir," I said. "I'll tell Harris."

"All right," he replied. "You've found the son?"

"No," I said. "I've found the daughter. The son's dead."

He laughed. "Bad luck. That means we're trustees for the estate until she's thirty-five, doesn't it?"

I nodded.

"How old is she now?"

I calculated for a minute. "Twenty-six or twenty-seven."

"Old enough to make a packet of trouble for us."

"I know."

"Where is she? What's she doing?"

"She's employed as a clerk or typist with a firm of handbag manufacturers in Perivale," I said. "I'm just about to concoct a letter to her."

He smiled. "Fairy Godfather."

"Exactly," I replied.