

An extract from *Symposium* by Muriel Spark

The manservant, not long acquired from the Top-One School of Butlers, assisted by a temporary hand, a young graduate in modern history, are moving round the table in their white coats, serving quite impassively, but Ernst is troubled that they should overhear this talk of Lord Suzy's, and shows himself altogether relieved when Brian Suzy goes on to list the actual goods missing and damaged. 'I always say to Hurley', says Chris Donovan, 'that every time you turn your back on your stuff you should say goodbye to it. You never know, you may never see it again.'

Margaret Damien is a romantic-looking girl with long dark red hair, a striking colour, probably natural. She says, 'There's a poem by Walter de la Mare:

Look thy last on all things lovely
Every hour . . .'

Hurley Reed now raises his champagne glass. 'I would like us to drink to Margaret and William and their future.' William Damien smiles. Everyone toasts the newly married pair.

Hurley Reed, at his end of the table, is now conversing with Helen Suzy on his right. Helen looks uncomfortable since it is impossible to avoid hearing her husband's list.

'That was last week,' says Helen.

'Rape,' comes her husband's voice. 'It felt like rape.'

Helen looks at the plate of salmon mousse that has been softly and silently placed before her. She takes up her fork.

Hurley takes up his and, while passing the tiny rolls to Ella Untzinger on his left, continues his conversation with Helen Suzy. 'Have you ever heard', he says quietly, 'of St Uncumber?'

'Saint Un-what?'

'A medieval saint,' he says, 'to whom people, especially women, used to pray to relieve them of their spouses. She was a Portuguese princess who didn't want to get married. Her father found her a

husband. She prayed to become unattractive and her prayer was answered. She grew a beard, which naturally put off the suitor. Her father had her crucified as a result. She's depicted in King Henry VII's chapel in Westminster Abbey, with long hair and a full beard.' 'I'd better not pray to St Uncumber,' says Helen, whose husband at the other end of the table could not be hushed, but was continuing to lament his robbery; 'I might', says Helen, 'grow a beard.'

'Not at all likely,' says Hurley.

'Then I might try the Uncumber method,' says Helen.